

A damning admission on the Georgian war

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The *New York Times* on Friday carried a front-page article headlined “Accounts Undercut Claims by Georgia on Russia War.” The article cited a report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a multinational association of 56 member states whose monitors were in Georgia when the fighting broke out, which demolishes the official US account of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, according to which the war was an act of Russian aggression.

The OSCE concluded that the conflict began on August 7 when US-trained Georgian troops shelled Russian peacekeepers and civilians in the capital of Georgia's breakaway province of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali.

According to Friday's *New York Times*, “the accounts suggest that Georgia's inexperienced military attacked the isolated separatist capital of Tskhinvali on August 7 with indiscriminate artillery and rocket fire, exposing civilians, Russian peacekeepers and unarmed monitors to harm.” The newspaper added, “Georgian artillery rounds and rockets were falling throughout the city at intervals of 15 to 20 seconds between explosions, and within the first hour of the bombardment at least 48 rounds landed in a civilian area.”

After an initial bombardment around 6 PM on August 7, Georgian troops declared a unilateral ceasefire, during which they apparently moved rockets and artillery into better positions. At 11 PM, Georgia announced that Russian troops were shelling Georgian villages in South Ossetia and declared an operation to “restore constitutional order” there.

OSCE monitors refuted Georgian claims that Georgian forces were responding to a Russian attack. The *Times* wrote, “monitors have also said they were unable to verify that ethnic Georgian villages were under heavy bombardment that evening, calling to question one of [Georgian President] Mr. Saakashvili's

main justifications for the attacks.”

The newspaper quoted ex-British army officer Ryan Grist, who was the senior OSCE representative in Georgia when the war broke out, as saying, “It was clear to me that the [Georgian] attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation.”

As was explained later, particularly in the European press, Georgia hoped to rapidly overrun South Ossetia and seize the Roki Tunnel, the main transport corridor through the mountains separating Russia and South Ossetia. In the case of a weak Russian response—the attack took place with top Russian officials away at the Beijing Olympics—Georgia could hope to present Russia with a fait accompli. In the event, the Georgian offensive bogged down in Tskhinvali and Russia sent in reinforcements, rapidly chasing Georgian troops out of South Ossetia.

US government and media reporting at the time turned reality on its head, denouncing Russia in chorus for its “aggression.” As Russia sent reinforcements to South Ossetia and expelled Georgian forces, President Bush denounced Russia's response as “disproportionate.” Vice President Dick Cheney said, “Russian aggression must not go unanswered,” adding that its continuation would have “serious consequences” for Russia's relations with the United States.

In its August 12 editorial, the *Times* wrote, “Moscow claims it is merely defending the rights of ethnic minorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been trying to break from Georgia since the early 1990s. But its ambitions go far beyond that. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin [...] appears determined to reimpose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with.”

In its Friday article, the *Times* implied that the findings of the OSCE was new information about which the newspaper was previously unaware.

However, its own account contradicts this self-serving depiction of its role in spreading disinformation about the Georgian-Russian conflict. The article notes that OSCE representative Grist last August “gave a briefing to diplomats from the European Union that drew from the monitors’ observations and included his assessments. He then soon resigned under unclear circumstances.” There can be no doubt that the *Times* (as well as the US government) was aware of Grist’s report soon after it was given to EU officials.

The *Times* article concluded that the discrepancy between OSCE testimony and the official position of the US government and media put “the United States in a potentially difficult position. The United States, Saakashvili’s principal source of international support, has for years accepted the organization’s conclusions and praised its professionalism.”

In fact, the OSCE report completely refutes the US line, which was shot through with inconsistencies. While seeking to place the blame on Russia, the US media also spread claims that Georgian forces had acted without US knowledge—even though the US kept over 100 military advisors in Georgia in the run-up to the invasion, which followed soon after a major exercise with US forces entitled “Immediate Response 2008.”

Washington seized on the Russian-Georgian conflict to place missile defenses and troops in Poland and the Czech Republic, raising the specter of a direct military clash with Russia. It dismissed Russian claims of Georgian aggression out of hand.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain telephoned Saakashvili and told him, “Today we’re all Georgians.” Then-Democratic candidate Barack Obama issued a statement from Hawaii, where he was on vacation, denouncing Russian “aggression.” Later, in ceremonies for the seventh anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the candidates joined forces to issue calls for “national service,” with Obama saying, “If we are going to war, then all of us go, not just some.”

Definite political conclusions must be drawn from a situation that created the potential for global war. First and foremost is the utter unreliability of the US political establishment and media, which expressed hardly any dissenting views, even as more critical accounts emerged in the European press in sharp

contradiction to their accounts.

The prominence the *New York Times* gave to its account of the OSCE report—the article was the front-page lead and continued to a full-page article in the inside pages—suggests a deliberate operation to prepare public opinion for a shift in US policy in the region. With President-elect Obama committed to increasing the US military presence in Afghanistan and the US facing a major economic recession, an attempt seems to be underway to repair relations with Russia, possibly at Saakashvili’s expense.

In Tbilisi 10,000 protestors marched against Saakashvili yesterday, marking the one-year anniversary of his violent repression of demonstrations supporting rival nationalist Irakli Okruashvili.

The US also announced plans yesterday to open negotiations with Russia over nuclear weapons and the controversial US nuclear missile defense shield aimed at Russia. The talks would aim to revise the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and assuage “Moscow’s growing opposition to a US missile-defense system for Europe,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

A State Department official told the *Journal* such negotiations would not conclude under the Bush administration, but would rather “help get the ball rolling” for President-elect Obama.

Alex Lantier



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