

WikiLeaks exposes US cover-up of Georgian attack on South Ossetia

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Leaked State Department documents provide further evidence that United States authorities knew that the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia, a key ally of Washington in the Caucasus region, initiated the August 2008 war with Russia.

Cables from US diplomats in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, were released through the whistleblower website WikiLeaks. They show that Washington was well aware that the Georgian government was intensifying its military build-up near the breakaway province of South Ossetia in the weeks before the outbreak of full-scale hostilities.

South Ossetia has refused to acknowledge Tbilisi's authority since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and Russian peacekeepers have been stationed in the province since then.

Prior to the attack on South Ossetia by Georgian forces, a cease-fire was in place between Tbilisi and South Ossetian separatist militants.

The diplomatic reports from the American embassy record that the US was aware that Georgia's armed forces were "deploying troops to positions in Georgian territory to the south of the Zone of Conflict [the disputed boundary between Georgia proper and the secessionist territory]" and that Tbilisi's forces were operating on "a heightened state of readiness in order to show their resolve."

A cable records that US embassy observers witnessed 30 government buses "carrying uniformed men heading north" towards South Ossetia the day of the Georgian attack.

The Georgian assault on South Ossetia, launched August 7, involved the shelling of the main city of Tskhinvali followed by a ground invasion by 1,500 troops. The operation destroyed hundreds of civilian properties and claimed the lives of an estimated 160 South Ossetians and 48 Russian military personnel.

Despite this knowledge of Georgian military preparations, once the war began, US ambassador John Tefft simply relayed the claims of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili that Russia was the aggressor.

The *New York Times*, which has received the State Department

documents so far released by WikiLeaks, commented on Wednesday that these reports by the US embassy in Tbilisi were not based on any field intelligence but rather solely relied on information from sources within the Georgian government.

"The cable contained no evidence that the Ossetian attacks after the cease-fire had actually occurred and played down the only independent account, which came from military observers in Tskhinvali from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe," the *Times* reported.

In a subsequent statement to an international inquiry into the conflict, former British army officer Ryan Grist, the senior OSCE representative in Georgia when the war broke out, said that the Georgian attack was "completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation" by the South Ossetians.

Aware that the August 7 attack on South Ossetia, with its Russian garrison, would trigger a major conflagration, Tefft counseled Georgia's foreign and defense ministers "to remain calm, not overreact, and to de-escalate the situation," the documents on WikiLeaks record.

The extent to which Washington was forewarned or even complicit in the attack on South Ossetia ordered by Saakashvili remains unknown, though WikiLeaks has only issued a fraction of the State Department documents in its possession. A Russian magazine has claimed it has information indicating that many of the leaked US State Department files still to be released relate to the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

The Georgian government enjoyed very close ties to Washington leading up to the 2008 war. Saakashvili came to power on the back of the so-called "Rose Revolution" in 2003, a US-backed coup that ousted Georgia's long-time president Eduard Shevardnadze and ushered in a staunchly pro-Washington and pro-NATO regime in Tbilisi.

Under Saakashvili, Georgia received billions of dollars in US military and civilian aid, and American armed forces were heavily engaged in training their Georgian counterparts as a prelude to proposed membership of NATO for the ex-Soviet state.

When Moscow reacted to the attack on its forces in South Ossetia with an overwhelming armed response on August 9, Washington swung into full propaganda mode in an effort to portray Russia as the aggressor and Georgia as an innocent victim.

Another cable from the US embassy in Tbilisi, sent shortly after the Russian counterattack, reported, “President Saakashvili told the Ambassador in a late morning phone call that the Russians are out to take over Georgia and install a new regime.” The report, again, provided no independent verification of this claim.

Based solely on accounts from the Georgian side, the US embassy cabled back to Washington a series of reports describing “bombed hospitals,” Russians “shooting local Georgians and raping women/girls,” Moscow’s helicopters “dropping flares on the Borjomi national forest to start fires,” and Russian troops targeting “civilians in Gori.”

The only acknowledgement by the embassy of the unreliability of their Georgian sources came in a cable, issued days after the war broke out, stating, “It is increasingly difficult to get an accurate analysis of the military situation because of the fog of war and the fact that the Georgian command and control system has broken down.”

Documents allegedly given to the magazine *Russian Reporter* by a WikiLeaks volunteer may provide further evidence that there was a deliberate policy of deception coming from the US embassy. According to the Moscow-based weekly, a cable from Ambassador Tefft to the State Department after the war broke out insisted that a coordinated position should be prepared to respond to those unsure of “Georgia’s absolute innocence.”

The pro-Saakashvili position of Ambassador Tefft was of a piece with the stance adopted by the Bush administration. Following Russia’s August 9 counterattack, then Vice President Richard Cheney warned that, “Russian aggression must not go unanswered,” adding that Moscow’s actions would have “serious consequences” for relations with the United States.

A few days later a US Navy detachment sailed for the Black Sea coast of Georgia in a clear effort to deter the Kremlin from capturing Tbilisi and toppling Washington’s placeman, Saakashvili.

Chiming in, then-Senator Barack Obama, campaigning for the presidency, denounced Russian “aggression” and parroted the claims of the Bush administration that Georgia had only acted in self-defense.

The US press corps and the television news outlets quickly adopted the official line, denouncing the Russian invasion of Georgia while studiously ignoring claims of Tbilisi’s initiation of the conflict.

This unified position on the war, flowing from the Saakashvili

regime, through the US embassy in Tbilisi to Washington, stands in stark contrast to the one thousand pages of evidence amassed by the European Union’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia.

That investigation, headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, issued its report in September 2009—to near complete silence from the US government and its media allies. It stated that “None of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities in order to provide some form of legal justification for the attack” were valid.

“In particular, there was no massive Russian military invasion under way, which had to be stopped by Georgian military forces,” Tagliavini confirmed.

“The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia,” the EU report stated.

“There is the question of whether the force by Georgia during the night of 7/8 August was justifiable under international law. It was not ... it is not possible to accept that the shelling of Tskhinvali with Grad multiple rocket launchers and heavy artillery would satisfy the requirements of having been necessary and proportionate,” the investigators found.

The further release by WikiLeaks of many more State Department cables on the US role in the Russia-Georgia War can only confirm the dishonest and conspiratorial character of Washington’s role in that conflict. This, and the other crimes of US imperialism recorded by its diplomats, is why the Obama administration is so determined to silence the whistleblower website.



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