

Editorial

Tskhinvali: Shock and Awe

Georgia's war

On 7th August 2008, President Saakashvili of Georgia launched an all-out military assault on the capital town of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali. The town was partly destroyed. Estimates of civilian deaths vary, between fifteen hundred and two thousand. Precise figures may become available quite soon, now that it is possible to recover and bury the dead*. Thirty-four thousand South Ossetians fled to the neighbouring territory of North Ossetia, which is part of the Federal Russian State, and they can all talk. They have been doing so incessantly, telling stories of untrammelled brutality.

Tskhinvali was left without water, electricity or gas. The bombardment was continuous, not only from the air, but also by salvoes of Katyusha type rockets based in lethal batteries close to the Georgian town of Gori. When the children of Tskhinvali thought that it was safe to crawl out of the basements into the streets, looking for food, all too often they were shot by Georgian forces. These had also killed many Russian peacekeepers who had been based in the town under the Treaty that settled the previous civil war, which broke out with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent abrogation of South Ossetian and other autonomies by the newly proclaimed Republic of Georgia.

On 21 August 1968, the armies of the Soviet Union and some of its allies in the Warsaw Treaty pushed into Czechoslovakia to terminate the Prague Spring, with its aspiration of 'socialism with a human face'. In London, the great Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, was scheduled to perform at a concert which excited some demonstrations on behalf of the Czechs. On the programme was the Cello Concerto by Dvorak. For many in the audience there was a profound symbolism in hearing this work performed at this time. They were wrung out by its passion. The maestro himself, while he played, was drenched in tears.

Forty years later, another musician, Valeri Gergiev, the Ossetian Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, journeyed to the ruins of Tskhinvali after the invasion by Georgian troops, to give another concert. His programme included the Leningrad Symphony by Shostakovich, wrought from the traumas of the Nazi siege of that city. The tears this time were those of a whole people.

*On 28 August 2008, South Ossetia's Prosecutor General reported that 1,692 deaths resulted from Tbilisi's August offensive. 'We have information of 1,692 dead and 1,500 injured as a result of the Georgian aggression,' Russian Interfax news agency quoted Teimuraz Khugayev as saying.

The population of South Ossetia was mainly Russian speaking, and identified more strongly with Russia than with Georgia. It had been located within the Georgian Soviet Republic as a result of the 1936 Stalin constitution, which no doubt reflected the needs of the Soviet power at the time. Once the Soviet Union was destroyed, now that the successors of Mr. Beria were gone, South Ossetian residents had no reason to trust a purely Georgian Government, which was, for them, under permanent suspicion of ethnic hostility. They had promptly been told by Georgia's first President, Ghamsakhurdia, that there would be no more autonomy for minorities in the new Georgia. 'Georgia is for Georgians,' he proclaimed. When they (inevitably) rebelled, the Russian Government of President Yeltsin understood their predicament, and resolved to issue Russian passports to all those in the disputed areas who wished to have them. Russian pension entitlements were superior to anything available locally, so that many older people would be influenced in their choice of nationality. Estimates vary, but it seems likely that by 2008 some ninety-five per cent of the inhabitants of the area had opted to hold Russian passports, rejecting Georgian ones. After Saakashvili's barbaric onslaught this August, the near unanimity of the South Ossetian public is assured.

The short war that was waged with such total ruthlessness was also brought to a paroxysm in the Western media, which bought all the lies dispensed by Mr. Saakashvili's propaganda machine as if they were the very milk of the gospel. Whilst the killing and burning was raging, the news media in the West found it impossible to be in any way specific about who was killing whom, who was applying the torch. Normal viewers of the TV channels were very likely to form the impression that it was the Russians who were responsible for all that destruction, all those deaths. A

The Kingdom of Georgia was shaped in the early eleventh century from the Kingdom of Iberia (which had adopted Christianity in the fourth century) and the Kingdom of Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece, which drew the Argonauts to the east of the Black Sea. Georgia thrived for a couple of centuries before fragmenting into various principalities and lesser kingdoms in the sixteenth century. Three centuries of Ottoman or Persian hegemony followed before piecemeal absorption in the Russian Empire. During that time Georgia had no independent existence. Briefly independent as a Menshevik republic from 1918 to 1921, during which it suffered British occupation of Batumi, and the incursion of various White armies, it was incorporated into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1921. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became an independent republic.

veritable wave of hysteria was launched, in which, for a short time, the real culprits succeeded in offsetting their responsibilities, laying all blame at the feet of their victims.

In the beginning, undoubtedly, the Georgian propaganda machine was in control of its lies. It was very effective, and its numerous friends in the Western media did their duty. But with the arrival of the Russian army to support their beleaguered citizens and murdered peacekeepers, everything rapidly changed. Firstly, there were Russian news media, widely suspect in the West, but, given a strong case, bound to penetrate the fog of what were clearly blatant lies. But secondly, the Georgian army did not expect to stand up to a proper army, one that might fire back, and after a brief indecision, it ran away. Indeed, it surpassed the Olympic runners. As it ran, the force of rumour became a tidal wave.

Meantime, the other contested province, Abkhazia, had seized the opportunity to drive out Georgian forces that had previously occupied the Kodori Gorge. So the Georgian army was in flight from several directions. As it ran, the news travelled that the Russians were coming. Perhaps the Russians were not coming. But the Georgians were certainly going. When they reached the town of Gori there were ferocious disputes about who would snaffle which vehicles. To whom would go the fastest cars? In fevered flight from non-existent Russians, all headed for the capital, Tbilisi. There they were advertised as the phantom Russians. It seems likely now that at least some of the deserting soldiers have taken off their uniforms and melted into the landscape. After all that excitement, the Russians did arrive. Their first action was to restrain Ossetian irregulars who had gone on the rampage, and seek to restore the civil authority of Gori's mayor.

Of course, part of the American trained Georgian army had been deployed in Iraq, where it comprised the third largest contingent of the occupation forces. The Americans obligingly flew them straight back to Georgia so that they could do their duty in defending Tbilisi and Mr. Saakashvili's regime. We do not know whether they got home in time to join their invasion, or whether they arrived a little later, during the rout. In either case, it cannot be excluded that they will join the backlash of Georgian opinion, which will probably hold their President responsible for a disastrous military adventure.

Saakashvili's helpers

But this disaster did not occur for want of careful preparation. For several years the Georgian Government had been energetically preparing for a war, lavishing millions on various kinds of weaponry, with the highest

average growth rate of military expenditure in the whole world, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. From \$18 million in 2002, this rose to \$900 million in 2008. This was accompanied by a prodigious diplomatic effort to build what they hoped would be military support. The support of the neo-cons in the United States was buttressed by the provision of a pro-Georgian lobby which placed one of its people in a close advisory role to Presidential candidate John McCain. His top foreign policy adviser, the neo-con Randy Scheunemann, is said to have had a long-term financial relationship with President Saakashvili, as a lobbyist for his American interests. According to the *Wall Street Journal*:

‘In 2005, Mr. Scheunemann asked Senator McCain to introduce a Senate resolution expressing support for peace in the Russian-influenced region of South Ossetia that wants to break away from Georgia, the records show.

Such resolutions of Senate support are symbolic but helpful to countries in their diplomatic relations. The Senate approved Senator McCain’s resolution in December 2005, and the Georgian Embassy posted the text on its Website.

Senator McCain has endorsed Georgia’s goal of entering Nato, a matter for which the country hired Mr. Scheunemann to lobby. In 2006, Senator McCain gave a speech at the Munich Conference on Security in Germany in which he said “Georgia has implemented far-reaching political, economic, and military reforms” and should enter Nato, a text of his speech on the conference Website shows.’

Writing in *The Nation*, Mark Ames reported:

‘Scheunemann ... also worked for recently-disgraced Bush fundraiser Stephen Payne, lobbying for his Caspian Alliance oil business. The Caspian oil pipeline runs through Georgia, the main reason that country has tugged the heartstrings of neo-cons and oil plutocrats for at least a decade or more.

In 2006, McCain visited Georgia and denounced the South Ossetian separatists, proving that Scheunemann wasn’t wasting his Georgian sponsor’s money. At a speech he gave in a Georgian army base in Senaki, McCain declared that Georgia was America’s “best friend”, and that Russian peacekeepers should be thrown out.’

There was another best friend. The Israelis established a private company called Defensive Shield, run by Gal Hirsch, previously a General in the Israeli army. This obtained a contract to train Georgian troops. Gal Hirsch arouses a particular interest in the Lebanon, where the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has kept a close eye on his progress since his downfall after the abortive Israeli onslaught on the Lebanon in 2006. Nasrallah might be forgiven a modest gloat when the Georgian armed forces came a similar cropper in 2008. ‘Israel exported failed generals in order to train the Georgian armed

forces', he said, comparing their victorious progress into and out of the Lebanon with that of their Georgian apprentices into and out of South Ossetia.

But the true story of Israeli involvement seems to be quite complicated. Misha Glenny maintains that:

'The Russians ... knew all about Defensive Shield and the tens of millions of dollars worth of Israeli military equipment that Georgia had been purchasing. Just over a week before the conflict erupted Putin put in a call to the Israeli President, Shimon Peres. His message, according to a Western intelligence source, was simple: pull out your trainers and weapons or we will escalate our co-operation with Syria and Iran.'

Glenny says that Peres does not suffer from the same illusions as Georgia's Ministers, 'and the Israeli set-up left Tbilisi within two days'.

But President Saakashvili denied on Wednesday 13th August that Israel had suspended its aid to the country. 'I have not heard anything about that', he told *Haaretz*. Saakashvili said that he was aware of difficulties with the supply of pilotless drones that had been ordered by his army, but not of the stopping of any other shipments of military aid. 'The Israeli weapons have proved very effective', he said. A reporter asked him about the Jews who had fled the fighting and gone to Israel. Saakashvili replied:

'We have two Israeli cabinet ministers, one deals with war, Defence Minister David Kezerashvili, and the other with negotiations, State Minister for Territorial Integration, Temur Yakobashvili, and that is the Israeli involvement here: both war and peace are in the hands of Israeli Jews.'

According to *Haaretz*, Yakobashvili is not actually an Israeli citizen.

'Saakashvili's statements are part of his Government's attempt to bring other countries into its war against Russia. During the briefing, he noted that he is in constant contact with US Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.'

Be all that as it may, none of it stopped the Russians from capturing very large numbers of Israeli weapons. They also seem to have impounded considerable stocks from Ukraine, to say nothing of those that had been provided by the Americans. There has been some speculation about what the Russians will do with these mountains of weaponry which have fallen into their hands, and which, it was said, they might destroy, or take back into South Ossetia. One Russian officer demurred from these proposals. We shall send them back home, he said, so that we can use them where they remain useful.

Thus, in short order, ended years of intensive preparations by President Saakashvili. Perhaps he will set off again to climb the same mountain: but his survival cannot be guaranteed, since it seems at least possible that the

Georgian people may tire of these dreams of military grandeur.

It being difficult for the Americans to find another expeditionary force to throw into the Georgian fray, diplomatic weapons have been chosen. Mrs. Merkel has been suborned into promising that Georgia can join Nato. But Georgia might seem a modest liability with no weapons, not much army left, and two festering military defeats. All these might well constitute an inoculation against the military contagion.

There hasn't been much the Americans could do about all this. True, President Bush decided to send a contingent of American troops to Georgia on Wednesday 14th August. The American military were to carry out a humanitarian mission. A C-17 transporter, said to be carrying medical supplies and tents for thousands of people displaced by the fighting, was the first American plane to arrive in Tbilisi from Germany. The second flight was due to arrive the following day.

Condoleezza Rice announced that she was going to visit Georgia after calling off in Paris for a meeting with President Sarkozy. She told Foreign Minister Lavrov on the telephone about the relief operation and said that the presence of American troops would not only help the aid mission, but also allow the Americans to monitor how far the Russians were honouring the ceasefire. Ms. Rice then called a news conference of considerable belligerence, telling the Russians that this was not 1968, when Russia could 'invade its neighbour, occupy a capital, overthrow a government and get away with it'. Apparently nowadays only America can do that. But the fact remains that the Russian Government is quite different from the Soviet Government of 1968, even if the Americans are seeking to persuade it to revert to type.

It is too early to say what is the meaning of this American humanitarian surge. Do they simply want to give tents to the victims of their proxy, who now find themselves homeless? Or are they looking for ways to provoke unpleasant reactions from their former 'partners' in Russia? All this rhetoric, whatever it means, has not gone unremarked in Moscow. Mr. Lavrov said: 'We understand that this current Georgian leadership is a special project of the United States. But one day the United States will have to choose between defending its prestige over a virtual project or a real partnership', with Russia.

What consequences?

But the Americans have speeded up their confrontational responses in other areas, starting in Poland with the installation of a missile interceptor programme, and some new Patriot missiles. The Russians have never been under any doubt about where all these will be trained, and nobody believes

that this programme has been installed to defend against non-existent Iranian missiles. Of course, if the confrontation between East and West continues, and continues to escalate, it is not inconceivable that the Iranians might be able to obtain appropriate missiles. But why they should want to do so has never been explained. Iran would prove incredibly vulnerable in a nuclear confrontation, and is likely to be wide open to the proposal for agreements about nuclear-free zones for a long time to come. But nobody in the West wants to make such sensible proposals. They do not suit Israel.

However, Iran might take some small comfort from the possibility that the Nato allies might come to revise their commercial relations with Iranian energy suppliers in the light of these heavy military engagements. The same thing applies to those Nato forces which are deployed in Afghanistan. Not so long ago, they concluded a deal on the transit of non-lethal cargo through Russian territory to their forces deployed in Afghanistan. The deal mainly concerned food and non-military supplies, but did include some kinds of military equipment. The supplies were to be transported across Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The Hindu reported on the 26th June 2008 that:

‘Two decades after it pulled out of Afghanistan, Russia is returning, at the request of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Moscow will allow land shipment of Nato supplies to Afghanistan across the Russian territory and will supply weapons to the Afghan army.

There is a rich irony in the fact that the US, which fought a proxy war against the Russian forces in Afghanistan from 1979-1989, is now asking Russia to help Nato combat the same mujahideen who were armed and trained by Washington to fight the Russians.

Russia promised to resume defence supplies to Afghanistan at a meeting of the Russia-US Working Group on Counterterrorism in Moscow last week. This will greatly boost Nato efforts to rearm the Afghan army and enable it to stand up to the Taliban. Russian weapons make up almost 100 per cent of Afghan inventory, and are far more popular with local combatants than western arms.’

Over seventy per cent of all Nato supplies to Afghanistan go through Pakistan with the rest flown in by air. The route has recently proved extremely hazardous with the Taliban stepping up attacks on the US and Nato convoys. ‘The Russian corridor will greatly reduce Nato dependence on the violence-plagued Pakistani route.’

No one in Nato knows for sure what will be the effect of the resignation of President Musharraf on the Pakistani supply routes. So it might be thought a hazardous engagement to place the newly agreed Russian route in jeopardy. But when he visited Germany in May 2008, Russia’s new

President Medvedev said that Nato should not jeopardise co-operation with Russia in Afghanistan by clinging to the inertia of bloc mentality. In Bucharest, at the April Nato summit, Mr. Putin said that the alliance could not achieve anything in Afghanistan without Russian help:

‘Is it possible to succeed in Afghanistan without Russia, given its vast capabilities in the region? Negative. That is why we are being constantly urged to open transit, provide aid, etc.’

Meantime, the nuclear dimension to all this continues to be aggravated. Indeed, its shadow has already fallen across Georgia: press secretary Dana Perino and Ambassador Jeffrey reported on Sunday 10th August 2008 that President Bush had been immediately informed ‘when we received news of the first two SS-21 Russian missile launchers (in) Georgian territory’. These launchers are capable of carrying warheads which are conventional, but it is not, from the military point of view, an optimal use to make of them. They are, of course, designed to carry nuclear warheads. The Americans did not have to spell this out to President Bush:

‘He immediately – this was at the Great Hall – he immediately met with President Putin. They had a discussion. The President then engaged with his national security staff continuously over the last two days. He has spoken with – again with Putin that evening. He then talked with President Medvedev yesterday evening, as well as President Saakashvili. Secretary Rice has spoken repeatedly with President Saakashvili, as well as with her Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Lavrov, and many European leaders.’

Subsequently, President Bush announced that there would be no American military intervention. Were the SS-21s a symbolic warning to the Americans? Were they intended to show that the Russians were serious, and meant business? Or were they real? Bush, universally derided as an impulsive hothead, wisely decided not to confront this matter further.

But immediately there followed the announcement about Polish deployment of an anti-missile system, and immediately thereafter, a flurry of lesser diplomats and presidents went to Tbilisi to announce the impending welcome of Georgia into Nato.

For their part, the Russians have not hesitated to escalate the nuclear deployments. There has been public speculation about fitting nuclear warheads to the missiles carried by the Baltic fleet. There has also been sustained discussion of the deployment of nuclear warheads in Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg, the Russian outpost at the entrance to the Baltic Sea. None of this may happen, but all of it might.

The ghost at this lunatic banquet, however, is not in all these endangered

territories. It is the giant threat of Ukraine, already a participant in the arming of Georgia, and a collaborator of President Saakashvili. President Yushchenko has already required the Russian fleet to report its movements in advance to their homeports, including Sevastopol, and they have already declared their lack of readiness to oblige. But of course, the outstanding applications for membership of Nato came both from Georgia and Ukraine. Perhaps there are some who doubt the significance of this. If Ukraine were to join Nato the minnow of Georgia would be replaced by a whale. If nuclear confrontation were to continue to escalate, would anyone be sure that we were not standing on the very brink of the Third World War? Can Russia possibly accept such a move? And Russia may not need to accept it, because although only one-third or less of the Ukrainian population are ethnic Russians, a vast proportion of the Ukrainian Orthodox population is closer to Russia economically and culturally than they are to Catholic Western Ukraine, and if that country were to break in two, as appears possible, then the anti-Russian part of the country may have no visible means of support.

Already this prospect has been borne in on Ukrainian leaders, so that we learn that President Yushchenko is seeking to explore how he might lay treason charges against fellow orange revolutionary, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Apparently she is alarmed by the virulence of Yushchenko's espousal of the Georgian cause, and has refused to allow the Ukrainian Parliament to adopt an anti-Russian stance or to condone the eviction of the Russian fleet from Ukrainian waters. She also declined to join an official delegation to Tbilisi on August 9th. Why? Well, clearly she understands that Ukraine is heading for a split which could either result in a reassertion of Russian hegemony, or a division of the country.

When one examines the paroxysms of threats and demagogic blustering that have attended Saakashvili's wars in Georgia, one is perhaps alerted to the very much worse consequences of an attempt to plant Nato in Kiev.

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