

*Ossetia is a mountainous Caucasian enclave split between Russia and Georgia. The Ossetians are ethnically the descendants of Iranian Alans who mixed with local Caucasians when forced to move into the mountains by Turkish and Mongol invaders centuries ago. South Ossetia has long been part of Georgia, yet the majority of Ossetians have favored Russian rule since the brutal separatist Georgian-Ossetian war of 1991-1992. Babchenko, who fought in both Russo-Chechen wars, entered the region soon after the fighting began in August 2008.*

## **A Little, Victorious War**

Arkady Babchenko

The South-Ossetian War did not begin on the night of August 7-8, 2008, as is commonly thought, but roughly a week earlier. Exchanges of fire – rifle fire – began in the countryside on the 1st or 2nd. It should be noted that Georgia employed a tactic of restraint and tried as much as possible not to respond to the provocations. Escalation occurred on the 6th, when a Georgian armored vehicle containing six policemen was blown up. The Ossetian side claimed that the armored vehicle drove over a mine (one day earlier, an Ossetian car, a Zhiguli, exploded after turning into the very same field). The Georgians were certain that the armored vehicle was attacked, most likely in retaliation for the Zhiguli.

Irregardless, on August 7, Georgia advanced its tank columns on Southern Ossetia. This was related to me by journalist Dmitry Steshin, who was on the Georgian side of the border, photographing the passing columns until his camera's flash card filled up. At 23:30, the mass shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali began.

Moscow, for its part, had also prepared for war well in advance. Primarily, of course, in Abkhazia. The Russian railway troops which closed the route to Sukhumi – clearly in order to transfer equipment down the line – were stationed there long before the war began. But even Tskhinvali was not forgotten. For our part, some forces were concentrated in Nazran as early as 2007. All that was needed was a sufficiently weighty pretext for sending troops into the region.

And, without question, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili obliged Moscow.

In the words of Deputy Chief of the General Staff Anatoly Nogovitsyn, war losses on the Russian side were 74 dead, 171 wounded and 19 missing in action. These figures, in my view, are close to accurate. Was it a lot or a little for the grandeur of Russia and the absence of NATO near our soft underbelly? I don't know. You decide.



Nocturnal Vladikavkaz is tranquil. There are few people on the streets, and hardly any military equipment, although checkpoints are set up at crossroads. There are also no refugees in sight. The cafes and restaurants are operating in the usual fashion. The fact that a war is raging just on the other side of the mountains is only evident in the exorbitantly skyrocketing airfares – it is extraordinarily difficult to get on a plane. And then there is the doubling of the flight's length – almost four hours instead of the usual two – due to letting through military flights over Beslan.

I was met at the airport by Alan. A 25-year-old guy. We were hooked up by Olga Borova, my colleague, who had flown into Georgia. They had gotten to know each other in Beslan – Alan carried children from the school.<sup>1</sup>

En route he explained that the tunnel somehow had not yet been destroyed or occupied, but that Georgian planes controlled the airspace, attack planes chasing down vehicles with irregular troops in them. It was possible to get to Java, but the road was closed beyond. His father had returned today from Tskinali. He had gone there with a sniper's rifle and returned with 13 ears. I had a hard time believing this.

The government building was seething. Every window was lit and full of people; a meeting was being held on the square. 500 people. All women. Several on the verge of hysterics. I ask Alan what they want. They want war.

I waylay an advisor to the Deputy Chairman of the Parliament of Northern Ossetia, Izrayil Totoonti. He describes the situation:

“At present, draftees are being rounded up. One could call it a mobilization of reservists – not a compulsory one, but voluntary. We are collecting people through the military enlistment offices. We are taking far from everyone. We are trying to put a stop to spontaneous movements. There is an age qualification: 20-45, and everyone must have a military service card and a military specialization.

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<sup>1</sup> On September 1, 2004, Chechen terrorists occupied a school in the Northern Ossetian town of Beslan, taking 1,100 hostages, including 777 children. During the rescue attempt, some 334 hostages were killed, including 186 children.

If someone comes in, we issue an order for his mustering. Instructions for mustering in came from the Russian Ministry of Defense. I have not myself seen the order, but believe it to be so. It was done in order to ensure social guarantees: if, God forbid, something should happen, the family will receive all the usual compensatory payments and privileges. These people are given a uniform in Vladikavkaz, but they receive their weapons in Java. As of Saturday morning we had dispatched some 1500 persons. Now they are sending ammunition and guns – machine guns, automatic weapons, grenade launchers. As to the number of dead, we don't have any exact figures, but I think it is several hundred. Aside from officially called-up reserves, there are also volunteers. They are not included in the Ossetian units. About 300 Chechens have turned out, and we might be able to sign them up through the North Ossetian military enlistment office. There are volunteers from Volgograd, veterans of the Afghan war. Some 3000 Dagestanis are awaiting an official decision; their representative is here now, in the government offices. I cannot say how easy it is to cross the border, but reservists are for now getting through without any problems.”



On the morning of August 10, at the muster point for volunteers, the usual muddle reigned. Those wishing to be sent to Tskhinvali were fewer than expected, just 200. In general, one gets the impression that, in Vladikavkaz all sorts of people support Southern Ossetia – by the way, no one here divides Ossetia into North or South, they simply say Ossetia or Alania – yet they are not very eager to fight. No mass movement was apparent. And most people who volunteer don't go through enlistment offices, but on their own, although one cannot talk about any sort of unified movement.

I change into a uniform and sign up as a volunteer in the third platoon. I am number 20 on the list. The last. Just four platoons have been mustered. The rest will be sent off later, likely tomorrow.

According to Zilim Vatayev, chief of the public headquarters, for now the enrollment of volunteers to be sent to Tskhinvali has been halted. The order to this effect came down last night. We are now officially a “rescue brigade.” We are being sent to provide aid to the civilian population, to evacuate refugees and to reconstruct the city's infrastructure.

The volunteers are mainly Ossetians, although there are a few Cossacks with swords and a few Russians. Three or four have their own weapons, Kalashnikovs. The general mood is that we are going to fight for the Motherland.

The most noteworthy personality is a Russian peacekeeper with a black eye. He sports a *telnyashka*, [striped sailor's shirt] a beret, gaudy camouflage and the stink of hangover. He was away on vacation and is now trying to get back to his post. Foreign journalists buzz around him like bees to honey. He gladly gives interviews. He is, one might say, the face of Russia.

At the headquarters, they look at him askance, but they don't hide him from the journalists. Film all you like, we are open to the press. For me, as a journalist, this speaks volumes. If people do not dodge questions, it means they feel they are in the right.



We depart in the second half of the day. Five or six buses. They are constantly on the move: taking into Ossetia volunteers, bread and (most importantly) water, bringing back women and children. It is our driver's second trip of the day and surely not his last.

Ossetia is rather beautiful. The mountains are not as high as in Chechnya, and therefore not as severe. Life here somehow has more, well, peaceableness. Everywhere it is green. Everywhere it is sunny.

At the border, they let everyone through, not asking anyone to present a passport. The singular question is whether one is carrying a weapon. Not in order to take it away from them, but because weapons will not be allowed back out again.

Beginning from Alagir, the road is full of military equipment. The 58th army is here. All of it, I think. The column stretched for 100 kilometers, if not more. Lots of broken down vehicles. Same as always: the equipment is in crappy condition. I count 10 overturned vehicles. Two Urals fell off a cliff together. Their cabins are flattened. Thus, there are already non-combat losses.

Just before Chertov bridge is a rocket unit. From a distance, it is not apparent if this is an Iskander, a Tochka-U, or something else, but they are serious rockets.

Roki tunnel<sup>2</sup> is plugged up. Traffic jams on both sides. Whenever the army is moving, civilian traffic is halted. Yet our column is let through without any difficulties. The three-kilometer long tunnel is practically unventilated. The dust and fumes are such that you cannot make out the road, even with headlights. There is nothing to breathe. Two broken-down SAUs<sup>3</sup> are stuck in the tunnel. The crews fiddle with the engines. They won't last long here, that is certain. The tragedy at Salang, where over 500 died from exhaust fume inhalation, has taught no one anything.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the mountain pass, the road is decisively transformed into an endless multi-kilometer-long traffic jam. We stand more than we move. For Alani-ans there are no rules of the road. Each pushes through any fissure that opens up, tightly choking up the road. Some sort of officer disburses cars along the shoulder – a column of ambulances approaches us from the opposite direction. Injured and refugees. Twenty five vehicles. All crammed with people. But, as far as I could see, they all contained refugees. Bringing them out in whatever was available. Practically every car is missing its windshield, blown into fragments. People are hanging from trucks like bunches of grapes.



If it is true that every war has its radius of dissemination, then the South Ossetian war begins in Java. It is the first large village after the tunnel, the base station for the mountain pass. It is here that you get the impression that you've reached the end... you have crossed over a line, entered the circle.

The entire territory of the town is full to bursting of bundles, televisions, tanks, couches, goats, armored vehicles, cars, irregulars, soldiers, taxi drivers, sheets... in short, Shanghai. Everyone is yelling, running, wanting to get to somewhere or from somewhere, pushing their way onto a bus or armored vehicle to get to somewhere or from somewhere, negotiating, sitting in a state of shock, sleeping, or simply staring off into space.

In a store, three soldiers are buying a sack of onions and a sack of tomatoes. They are excited and mean spirited. They call Ossetians “ossetri,” with the stress on the “i.” Georgians are “*gryzuni*”<sup>5</sup> They explain that they have just come from the city. They retrieved their comrades from cellars. The front line units attempted to enter Tskhinvali last night. The city has not yet been re-taken. There are localized skirmishes.

*Dushariki*<sup>6</sup> are collecting apples from gardens. They are dirty, barely awake, hungry. Draftees. They are egged on by curses spewing from armored vehicles.

<sup>2</sup> A 3600 meter long tunnel, at an altitude of 2000m, and the only road joining North and South Ossetia.

<sup>3</sup> самоходная артиллерийская установка – self-propelled artillery installation.

<sup>4</sup> In November 1982, a fuel tanker in a military convoy collided with another military truck, in Afghanistan's 1.7-mile-long Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush mountains. Press estimates put the total number of deaths at between 500 and 600.

<sup>5</sup> осетры (osetry) is close to осетрина (osetrina) = “sturgeon,” the correct word is осетин; грызуны (gryzuni) = “rodents,” the correct word is грызуны (gryzuni).

<sup>6</sup> Young, first-year army recruits.