

Russian Invasion of Georgia

Media and telephone intercepts confirm Russia started the war

Mounting evidence shows that Russian forces were first to move into the Georgian region of South Ossetia

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This document presents evidence gleaned from

- Publicly available Russian and western media sources and
- Telephone intercepts of the Georgian intelligence services, described as credible by Western intelligence agencies and not denied by Russia.

This document first presents a summary of the evidence. A second section follows listing the stories and their web links, reproducing extracts in the original language and, where necessary, adding a translation into English.

The intercepts and the stories confirm that units of the Russian 58th Army moved into South Ossetia first, forcing the Georgian Armed Forces to react.

The Evidence

Telephone intercepts

Early in the morning of August 7, at 3:41 am and 3:52 am, Georgian intelligence intercepted two mobile telephone conversations held by a South Ossetian border guard posted at the Roki tunnel by the name of Gassiev. His first name is unknown.

Georgia provided the intercepts to US and European intelligence agencies and senior American officials have already found them to be credible. The Russian Federation has disputed their importance, but has not denied their authenticity.

The New York Times independently translated and analyzed the transcripts. The full story appears in section 2.

At 3.41 a.m., Gassiev told a supervisor at the South Ossetian border guard headquarters that a Russian colonel had asked Ossetian guards to inspect military vehicles that “crowded” the tunnel. Mr. Gassiev said, “The commander, a colonel, approached and said, ‘The men with you should check the vehicles.’ Is that O.K.?” When asked who this commander was, Gassiev continued, “I don’t know. Their superior. The one in charge there. The BMPs and other vehicles were sent here and they have crowded there. The men are also standing around. And he said that we should inspect the vehicles. I don’t know. And he went out.”

At 3:52, Gassiev spoke to the supervisor again and informed him that armored vehicles had left the tunnel, commanded by a colonel he called Kazachenko.

The supervisor asked Gassiev, "Listen, has the armor arrived or what?" Gassiev replied, "The armor and people." Asked if they had gone through the tunnel, he said, "Yes; 20 minutes ago. When I called you they had already arrived." Supervisor: "Are they a lot, much military vehicles?"¹Gassiev: "Well, Tanks, armored carriers and that."

These intercepts show that significant Russian forces, enough to "crowd" the Roki tunnel, entered South Ossetia some 20 hours before Georgian forces counterattacked.

The New York Times reports that senior American officials find the intercepts to be "credible".

Significantly, Russia has not disputed the authenticity of the intercepts; merely their importance. The Russian explanation that these calls refer to a routine rotation of their peacekeeping troops is false. According to the peace agreement in force at that time, any rotation should have happened during daylight and all relevant parties should have been notified (i.e. the Georgian Government and OSCE) a month ahead of time. The previous rotation of Russian forces was in May 2008.

Furthermore, prior to the publication of these intercepts, the Russian side had never mentioned any rotation on August 7 in any of their communications (e.g. their timeline of events, public data or statements) and it insisted that its troops entered the region only at noon on August 8.

Western intelligence findings boost the credibility of these transcripts. Again according to the New York Times, the western services independently found that two battalions of the 135th Regiment moved through Roki either the night of August 7 or the early morning of August 8.

The New York Times story appears in the next section of this document.

Why is this evidence only coming to light now, a month after the war started?

The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs monitors mobile communications in South Ossetia carried over the Magti mobile network. Magti, which is one of Georgia's three big providers, has an excellent network across the South Ossetia region, covering the territory with 20 cell towers. The local alternative is Ostelecom, a provider backed by the Russian Megafon network. It has a much more restricted reach based on a system of 5 cell towers, mostly serving the high density areas around Tskhinvali. Crucially, it does not reach deep into the countryside. For that reason, Magti is widely preferred in the territory, especially by people who need to roam rural areas, such as officials, militia, border guards, truck and taxi drivers etc. They widely use Magti despite instructions by the separatist government to use Ostelecom.

The Georgian Interior Ministry seeks to monitor all communications between officials in the territory. In line with legal requirements, the Ministry of Internal Affairs monitored the

¹The term used to refer to military vehicles is "техника". This is Russian slang, meaning military vehicles.

conversations of a significant number of officials of the paramilitary structures of the de facto authorities involved in illegal activities

Georgia's Interior Minister received a report on the intercepts from Georgian counter-intelligence within hours of recording. He relayed the information to the President and other members of Government.

The file with the recordings was lost during the war when the surveillance team moved operations from Tbilisi, the capital, to the central city of Gori. Georgian intelligence officers later sifted through 6,000 files to retrieve copies.

Media stories

The evidence gleaned from the telephone intercepts is corroborated by stories that have appeared in both Russian and Western media.

These are summarised here; the next section lists links and the Russian originals.

1. In a story from August 4, life.ru describes the relocation of units of the Russian 58th Army and of a regiment of the Pskovbased 76th Airborne Division to the Georgian border, adjacent to the northern entrance to the Roki Tunnel:

Several battalions of the 58th Army of the NorthCaucasus Military District, with permanent bases in the territory of North Ossetia, have been brought to the border of South Ossetia. Soldiers and military hardware have been moved to the end of the Roki tunnel, the only route that connects the two Ossetian republics.

As was reported to LIFE.RU sources in the republic, the movement of military units started on the night of 2nd to 3rd August. Reportedly, convoys of military forces began moving out from their bases in the Kirov region of North Ossetia (in Elkhotovo village) and from Ardone. The relocation of Russian hardware to the proximity of the Roki tunnel means these troops can support the Peacekeeping Forces as quickly as possible.

2. In a story from September 11, newsru.com analyses the movements of the 58th Army and concludes as follows :

“On August 7, the Russian regiment received an order to move towards Tskhinvali. It was set on alert and before nightfall reached the positions prescribed. By midnight it was possible to see the outbreak of shelling in Tskhinvali from where regiment was located.”

Between the Roki Tunnel and Tskhinvali there is only one such place [to see the shelling of Tskhinvali] : the village of Djava. So, the 135th regiment entered South Ossetia before the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali.”

3. In an interview with the Russian Ministry of Defence's publication Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star), Russian armed forces Captain Sedristyi confirms his unit was ordered to Tskhinvali on August 7:

"We were at the exercises," captain Sedristyi starts his story. "It is not so far from the capital of South Ossetia, Lower Zaramakh—a nature preserve in North Ossetia. That's the place where we had our camp after the exercises, but on 7 August we were ordered to move towards Tskhinvali. We were raised on an alarm – and sent on a march."

Krasnaya Zvezda changed the date in its story from August 7 to August 8 following questions from Western media. Captain Sedristyi, it was explained, confused the dates because of an injury sustained during the fighting. According to the New York Times, Captain Sedristyi cannot be reached. The extract of the story in the next section quotes the original; the links to the doctored story and the original, kept in a Google cache, are given.

4. On August 15, the daily Permskie Novosti, reporting about the war, quotes a conversation between a soldier and his mother:

"I have very little time, the kid went on. – Look: we are here since 7 August. Well, the whole of our 58th army."

5. On August 17, Komsomoskaya Pravda quotes Sergeant Alexander Plotnikov of the 693rd regiment of the 58th Army, who was interviewed in Rostov after being wounded in the fighting:

"The gossip that the war would start soon went around in our regiment in the beginning of August. Nobody spoke about it officially. We understood everything, though, after two companies of our regiment were sent to the mountains, not far from Tskhinvali."

6. On September 2, Vadim Rachkovsky, a journalist for Moskovskiy Komsomolets, wrote on his blog:

"As to the tank column. I see nothing particular about that. Attention! This is verified and nobody makes a secret from the fact that the battalion tactical group of 693rd regiment of 58th army used to regularly move towards South Ossetia for military duty. And that's from where they moved to Tskhinvali. Maybe this happened on August 7, maybe even earlier. This was not for the first time. Each time tension was rising, our tanks advanced to this direction. So, in this case Saakashvili says the truth."

7. According to BBC Monitoring World Media Monitor, on August 7, the Abkhaz separatist leader Sergei Bagapsh told Rossiya TV that a Russian battalion had entered the conflict zone:

Abkhaz leader says Russian troops deployed in South Ossetia

The president of the selfproclaimed republic of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, has said that a Russian military battalion has entered the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia. His remarks, made at a meeting of the Abkhaz security council, were broadcast by the Russian stateowned TV channel Rossiya on 7 August. "I have spoken to the president of South Ossetia. It [the situation] has more or less stabilized now. A battalion of the North Caucasian [Military] District has entered the area," Bagapsh said.

Source: Rossiya TV, Moscow, in Russian 1600 gmt 7 Aug 08

8. As the Russian military was preparing for the invasion, the Russian media was preparing to cover it. Said Tsarnayev, a freelance journalist working for Reuters, arrived in Tskhinvali on 7 August. In an article published on the website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Tsarnayev is quoted as saying:

"At the hotel we discovered that there were already 48 Russian journalists there. Together with us, there were 50 people," Tsarnayev said. "I was the only one representing a foreign news agency. The rest were from Russian media and they arrived three days before we did, as if they knew that something was going to happen. Earlier at the border crossing, we met one man who was taking his wife and children from Tskhinvali."

Conclusion

The telephone intercepts, their analysis and the Western and Russian media stories all indicate that the Russian armed forces entered the territory of Georgia in South Ossetia many hours before Georgia decided to counterattack at Tskhinvali. Some had progressed at least as far as Djava before nightfall on August 7.

The Georgian Armed Forces received intelligence on August 7 that Russian troops north of the border had received orders to roll into Georgia. They received this information hours before Georgia conducted its military operation in response to the Russian invasion.

Military necessity dictated the choice of Tskhinvali as the objective for the Georgian counterattack, as any topographical map makes clear—it was the only way the Georgian army could move from its core territory to meet the advancing Russian columns. The counterattack aimed for military targets and did not significantly damage the town of Tskhinvali itself, as a study by the UN using satellite pictures makes clear. (See

[http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia_ConflictAug08/UNOSA T GEO Village Damage Summary Tskhinvali 19aug08 Highres.pdf](http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia_ConflictAug08/UNOSA_T_GEO_Village_Damage_Summary_Tskhinvali_19aug08_Highres.pdf).)

Moreover, the media stories and analyst reports support the view that the Russian military designed its exercises of July 2008 to prepare Russian troops for an invasion of Georgia. A leaflet entitled Know Your Enemy, which was distributed to participating

soldiers confirmed this view (see annex). The leaflet makes the target of the exercise clear, detailing the composition and main armaments of the Georgian Army.