



NEWS REVIEW

HOLIDAY NIGHTMARE
IMOGEN STUBBS
ON THE DAY
HER DAUGHTER
NEARLY DIED P7



A South Ossetian militiaman interrogates ethnic Georgian prisoners



THE NEW COLD WAR HOTS UP

Riding to war in Georgia alongside a bloodthirsty and vengeful gunman, Mark Franchetti saw at first hand how one small conflict in a faraway country led to a superpower confrontation

Vadim, a South Ossetian militiaman, raced through the deserted Georgian streets, a Soviet Makarov pistol in one hand and a Kalashnikov in the other. Dishevelled, unshaven and wild-eyed, he was searching for someone to kill. For the first time in 10 years he had crossed the border from his secessionist province and reached Gori, a town well inside Georgian territory, hours after it had been taken by Russian soldiers. Wounded in the fighting, he had a gaping bullet hole in his upper thigh; but the pain only fuelled his thirst for revenge.

As I sat by his side, he drove his battered Lada at high speed through Gori's bombed-out centre, often screeching to a halt to scour the side streets and buildings in search of defeated Georgian soldiers.

"This has been building up for years," he said. "I knew it would happen and I've been waiting for this moment for a long time. If I see a Georgian soldier I'll shoot his brains out. They're dogs."

As heavy artillery rounds exploded on the edge of town, we came across other civilian cars and minivans with Russian numberplates crammed with Vadim's fellow South Ossetian militiamen.

Like Vadim, who was in a tattered camouflage uniform and white trainers,

they looked wild and menacing. They wore white armbands to identify them to the Russian army as friendly forces. Some hid their faces behind black balaclavas.

It was the day after Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, had called an end to military operations in Georgia. American humanitarian aid was flowing in. Yet the Russians still occupied about a third of Georgia with impunity and Vadim and his cohorts were on the rampage in horrifying scenes that evoked the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Not only had America and its Nato partners been shamed by the invasion of a country that had been welcomed into the western embrace, but they had also

shown themselves incapable of sending home the Russians and their henchmen.

This humiliation raises far-reaching questions about American power, Russian revanchism and Europe's sometimes craven relationship with the Kremlin. However, the most important question is one that Washington seems unable to answer: what is its long-term purpose in relations with Russia?

Does America want Moscow as a global partner, particularly in the war on terror and in repressing Iran's nuclear ambitions? Or is it pursuing a strategy of containing the Russian bear by close alliances with neighbouring countries that were once Kremlin satellites? "Realist"

diplomats from Henry Kissinger downwards are pointing out that America can't do both because a contained Russia won't be a co-operative Russia.

However, if Georgia were to join Nato, the consequence could be a much more serious confrontation with Moscow, as the alliance works on the understanding that an attack on one member is an attack on all. Is the invasion of Georgia the first step towards an armed confrontation between America and Russia? On Friday, Russia even threatened Poland with nuclear retaliation for agreeing to host US rockets as part of its anti-missile shield.

Not that Vadim cared about the geopolitical picture. He shouted obscenities

at a frightened young woman as we drove by in a side street. "Wouldn't mind f---ing one of these Georgian girls," he said.

When the history of the conflict comes to be written, it may be that a small incident on the road linking Georgia to Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, will be identified as the starting point of war.

The US State Department's internal timeline of the crisis pinpoints the explosion on August 1 of two roadside bombs, believed to have been planted by South Ossetian separatists sympathetic to Russia, as a decisive moment.

Five Georgian policemen were injured, one severely. That night Georgian forces

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We can't let this happen, says Putin

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foreign minister, who told him Russian tanks were advancing on South Ossetia in what appeared to be preparations for an attack. Fried warned her to avoid war but the message did not sink in, sources say.

Ariel Cohen, a Russian expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, said there should have been direct talks with Saakashvili. "They needed to be at a very high level, not at the level of Mr Fried. The American position should have not just been clear, but imperative."

A few hours after the call to Fried, in the early hours of Friday August 8, Georgia launched its offensive in South Ossetia, killing many civilians; and Russia responded with a huge show of force, bombing Georgia and invading a sovereign country for the first time since it seized Afghanistan in 1979.

TSKHINVALI lay in ruins last week, bearing evidence of both the Georgian attack and the Russian counterattack. The remains of Georgian armoured vehicles lay upside down close to the central square.

Witnesses told of cars filled with fleeing Ossetian refugees being shelled by Georgian tanks. They claimed that in one incident Georgian soldiers finished off the wounded by pouring fuel over them and burning them. Independent human rights observers confirmed that civilian targets had been repeatedly hit, including basements where terrified residents had sought refuge and were trapped for days.

Moscow has claimed that some 2,000 people died at the hands of Georgian forces — including 15 Russian peacekeepers. However, Human Rights Watch, the American group, said that Russian estimates were "suspicious". Doctors at the main hospital said that 44 dead had been brought to the city morgue.

Whatever the final death toll, few dispute that the city suffered destruction and that civilians were hardest hit. Nor is there any doubting Albina Shanazarov's tragic fate. A 13-year-old girl, she sought to flee the city with her mother and three sisters. They set off with other civilians in a bus, which was ambushed by Georgian forces as they tried to reach Russia.

"A bullet smashed right into the steering wheel. I had to stop and we scattered around the highway," said Gura Melyev, the bus driver. "It was dark and I was hoping they wouldn't see us as we hid but they must have been using night-vision goggles because the Georgian sniper fired pretty accurately. Albina was terrified and ran towards me. That's when she was hit by a bullet that smashed right through her chest. She died almost at once."

The survivors managed to escape but had to abandon Albina's body. It was recovered a day later by her father, Charshanbe Shanazarov, a colonel in the South Ossetian police, who said he came across two shattered taxis filled with civilians who had been killed as they tried to flee. He also found more bodies along the road, in all counting 15 dead civilians, including two children.

He buried his daughter in his garden because reaching the town cemetery was still too dangerous. "They murdered an innocent 13-year-old girl. For nothing. They took her away from me for ever. Why?"

Each side blames the other for starting the fighting, but a western diplomat who has had extensive contact with the Georgians, said: "Whatever the truth, the Russians have done everything they could to provoke the Georgians into doing something. Saakashvili appears to have fallen straight into their trap and frankly I imagine Putin could not believe his luck when he received the first report of fighting."

A western mediator, who knows Saakashvili well, said that the West should have insisted on more checks and balances

being introduced to control the Georgian leader's hot temper. "He is high maintenance — very emotional — and can get carried away," said the source. "He likes confrontation. The other problem is that he makes decisions with a kitchen cabinet of only four or five people sitting in his office at Sam, determining the fate of the nation. Decision-making is bound to suffer."

"The Russians have been provoking him big time and he has been held back many times. On this occasion he failed to keep his cool and did exactly what the Russians wanted him to do — over-react."

America had sleepwalked into a foreign policy disaster and its response was slow and uncertain. With Bush tarrying in Beijing watching the Olympics while Putin executed a war, Americans were reminded uncomfortably of Hurricane Katrina — another occasion when Bush hesitated before eventually getting around to sending humanitarian aid.

Ralph Peters, a former military intelligence analyst, said last week at a symposium on Georgia at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute: "The image for me will be the president going to a basketball game and flirting with the beach volleyball team."

He added: "Vladimir Putin is the most effective leader in the world today. Nobody comes close. In contrast, President Bush is looking like Jimmy Carter when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. It's tragic."

Bush had thought he had Georgia in his pocket. Saakashvili is surrounded by US civilian and military advisers and is so close to US politicians that John McCain, the Republican nominee, claimed last week to be in daily telephone contact with him. However, he is regarded as "mercurial" — a polite way of saying that the Americans lost control of their client.

Washington apparently tried to persuade Sarkozy not to go to Moscow

to talk to Russia's leaders face to face. Bush warned him: "You'll arrive at the Kremlin when the Russians are firing missiles at Tbilisi."

Sarkozy went anyway and was apparently told by Putin at a working lunch in the Kremlin on Tuesday: "It's just like in the films — there's a good cop and a bad cop", referring to himself and Medvedev.

Even so, the "nice" Medvedev did not mince his words. In a press conference later that day he referred to Saakashvili as a madman. "The difference between madmen and normal people," he explained, "is that madmen, when they smell blood, it is very difficult to stop them."

Despite the rhetoric, Russia accepted an EU-sponsored accord. "For the first time in a major international crisis, it is the Americans who are on the touchline and it is the European Union that is being called upon to sort things out," crowed a French presidential aide. Well, perhaps the Russians might have agreed to a deal but they had not yet delivered it.

GORI is a town of more than 50,000 people, 40 miles north of Tbilisi. When I entered it on foot last Wednesday, five days after the Russians' invasion, their troops were advancing rather than withdrawing.

A few hours earlier a column of Russian armoured personnel carriers, mounted with large calibre machineguns and carrying hundreds of troops, had crossed the border despite assurances from Moscow that it would not stay in Georgia proper. They took Gori without fighting, as Georgian troops fled in their thousands. Plumes of black smoke rose on the edge of town as Russians took up position on a ridge, setting fire to the surrounding fields.

As I walked by the roadside towards the city, armoured vehicles packed with soot-covered Russian soldiers cradling AK-47s and grenade launchers rumbled past, their tracks crushing the asphalt. One came to a halt and its commander offered me a lift. I jumped on the back and rode a couple of miles towards the town centre.

"The Georgians asked for it," Sergei, a soldier from Siberia, yelled over the engine. "They came into Tskhinvali, destroyed it and killed a hell of a lot of civilians. What did they expect — for Russia to sit back? As far as I'm concerned we should go all the way to Tbilisi and take the city. We should wipe them out and teach them not to mess with Russia."

"We haven't eaten in three days; do you have any bread? Please help," said an elderly woman dressed in black who was too scared to try to leave the town. A small group of men huddled in a yard, looking shellshocked and incredulous at the sight of Russian tanks taking up positions a few hundred yards down the road. Koba, a 35-year-old worker, said they had spent much of the past two days hiding in their cellar for fear of Russian bombing.

Exhausted villagers from Dvani, a village north of Gori, were terrified to stay and I couldn't leave without him. The past few days have been terrifying. I never thought I would live to see such a day. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined seeing Russian tanks rumbling through our town.

I reached Gori's main square, famed for its imposing statue of Stalin, the thud of artillery shells filled the air and sent a bearded priest in a black robe and a small family carrying a few possessions running for cover. A few days earlier a Russian shell had killed at least eight civilians as they were being given bread and water. A minivan carrying half a dozen heavily armed South Ossetian militia men sped across the main square, coming to a halt when they spotted me. The gunmen, some in masks, asked me if I had seen any Georgian soldiers. One insisted on giving me a handful of chocolates before the group raced off. Minutes later Vadim, the militiaman, pulled up. "Jump in. Have you got any bandages?" he asked. "I'm wounded."

He took me to a nondescript single-storey house. He said he had intelligence that it had been used as a Georgian arms depot. Limping because of his wound, he walked up to the heavy metal gate, handed his Kalashnikov to me before I could decline and tried in vain to break its lock with a hunting knife he kept strapped to his side. He then grabbed his AK-47, cocked it and fired 10 rounds at the lock from only a few yards away but, despite shattering it, was unable to enter the building. He later enlisted the help of two regular Russian soldiers in a heavy truck, who were stopped by an angry officer as they prepared to ram the vehicle into the building.

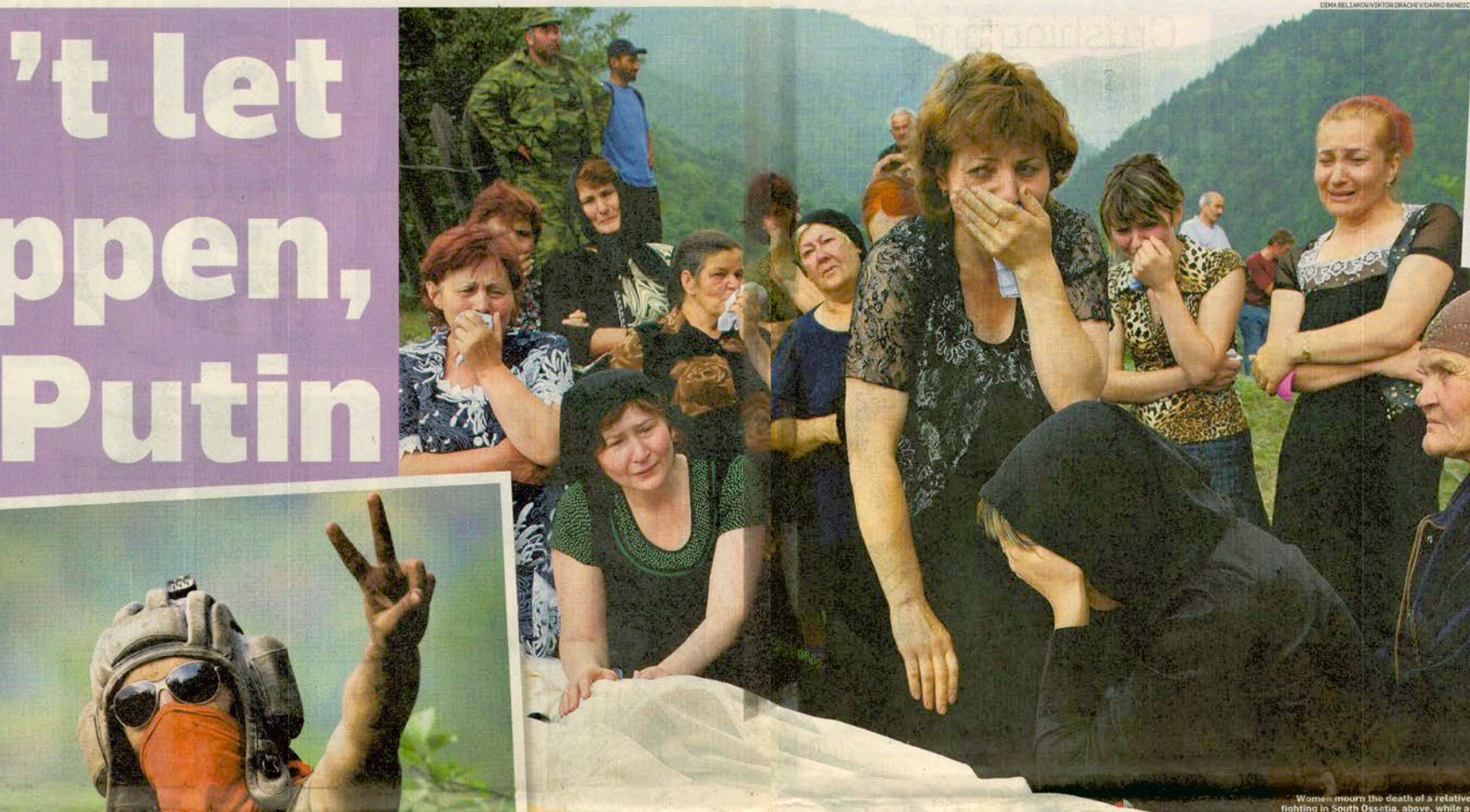
When I laboured up the stairs, as I made my way out of the town on foot, he was making advances to a middle-aged Georgian woman as she collected water from a hose in her yard. I did not witness any serious abuse of civilians in Gori, but there were numerous witness accounts pointing to a paramilitary campaign of revenge attacks against Georgians in South Ossetia.

A group of militiamen held a Georgian soldier prisoner in the back of a truck, his mouth covered with a filthy T-shirt to block out the stench of two rotting corpses lying beside him — fellow Georgian soldiers dead in Nato camouflage uniforms. "I didn't kill anyone. I didn't kill your woman and children. I swear," he said, pleading with his captors to spare him. Inal, a militia sergeant, was in no mood for concessions. "You're going to be dumping your comrades' bodies soon, you faggot, where you only bury stray dogs. And that's where you are soon going to join them."

The prisoner was made to drag the dead men off the truck and to bury them in a ditch with the corpses of eight other Georgian soldiers. Some were stripped naked and charred. One had his mouth still open in a grimace of terror and pain.

Tell us the f***ing truth. Where is your weapon? Where are your documents? If you don't tell us the truth, we'll shoot you dead," Inal, 47, yelled at the prisoner, who claimed to have been responsible only for food and transport. Inal was unconvinced. "We'll talk to you properly back at the base. Then we'll see if you are telling the truth."

The road to the military base deep inside Russian-controlled South Ossetia was scattered with rotting Georgian corpses. Inal paraded two more prisoners — both middle-aged men. One, with a scar across his nose and broken lips, was shaking in fear as Inal



Women mourn the death of a relative killed in the fighting in South Ossetia, above, while a pro-Russian militiaman claims victory, far left, a Russian soldier stands guard, left, and residents survey the destruction of the provincial capital, above right



They murdered a 13-year-old girl for nothing. They took her away from me for ever. Why?

Georgia village in South Ossetia, gathered by the roadside, desperate to hear whether loved ones had managed to escape. They had walked 11 miles in searing heat. "They are coming to our villages, burning our houses and killing people — so we had to escape," said Vano Bezhanishvili, 37, who said he had been lucky to make it out alive when paramilitaries who entered Dvani on two trucks began shooting, in one incident killing a man when he looked out of a window and shouted at them. Most disturbing were reports that in some incidents the paramilitaries had taken young women as sex slaves. "A car with a family fleeing their village was stopped by the militias," said Georgy, a Georgian army commander. "They grabbed the man's two young daughters and dragged them away at gunpoint. Their father could do nothing to stop them. We have no idea what's happened to them. They have disappeared."

In South Ossetia itself, vengeful militiamen were moving into deserted ethnic Georgian villages on what they said was a mopping-up operation to "find Georgian saboteurs and looters". As they advanced they carried out widespread looting and burnt houses in an apparent ethnic cleansing campaign to ensure locals did not return. A group of militiamen held a Georgian soldier prisoner in the back of a truck, his mouth covered with a filthy T-shirt to block out the stench of two rotting corpses lying beside him — fellow Georgian soldiers dead in Nato camouflage uniforms. "I didn't kill anyone. I didn't kill your woman and children. I swear," he said, pleading with his captors to spare him. Inal, a militia sergeant, was in no mood for concessions. "You're going to be dumping your comrades' bodies soon, you faggot, where you only bury stray dogs. And that's where you are soon going to join them."

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pro-Russian militiaman claims victory, far left, a Russian soldier stands guard, left, and residents survey the destruction of the provincial capital, above right

According to Gardiner, "The whole episode has demonstrated to eastern Europe that America and Nato won't protect it. It sends the message that it is open season on any of the border states and that the West doesn't have the stomach to protect them."

The rapid conclusion of long negotiations between America and Poland to situate American missile defences on Polish territory last week showed the gravity of the crisis for countries that used to be behind the Iron Curtain.

"Poland and the Poles do not want to be in alliances in which assistance comes at some point later. It is no good when assistance comes to dead people," said Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister.

The historian Leon Aron, an expert on Russia, said: "The next target of opportunity is Ukraine — not the entire country, but the Crimean peninsula and Sebastopol, which is home to the Black Sea fleet."

There is talk about suspending Russia's membership of the G8 or boycotting the 2014 winter Olympics, which will be in Sochi, in southern Russia; but the Bush administration has preferred to utter general warnings about Russia's imperilled standing in the world rather than to deliver specific threats to curb its behaviour.

"Will Nato and the EU draw the conclusion that we should stay away from the former Soviet states in order not to be drawn into a conflict, or will they decide that they ought to offer them the protection of membership? I'm not optimistic," said Aron.

Bush has barely five months of his presidency left — not enough time for a tired administration, still grappling with Iraq, Iran and the intractable Palestinian problem, to come up with a coherent policy on the resurrection of Greater Russia.

It seems certain that Vadim and his ragtag cohorts will be celebrating the events of August 2008 for years to come. Dmytri Beliaukov in Tskhinvali, Sarah Bazzy in Washington, Matthew Campbell in Paris and Nicola Smith in Brussels contributed to this report

America now has to decide how to contend with the newly resurgent Russia and with a self-confident Vladimir Putin. Whether he is called president or prime minister is immaterial. He is "Tsar Vladimir" or, as the Wall Street Journal put it, "Vladimir Bonaparte".

Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, ruled out the use of force last week to compel Russia to return to the status quo ante. For now the two breakaway provinces are back in Russia's orbit, and a question mark hangs over the future of Georgia and other former Soviet satellite states.

Some American commentators believe that their country's performance has been shameful. Nile Gardiner, director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at the Heritage Foundation, said: "The Iron Lady would never have stomachached this sort of behaviour by the Russians. She would have issued an immediate statement condemning Moscow, summoned an urgent meeting of the Nato command and demanded that the Russians halt their advance and withdraw their forces or face the consequences."

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(No we haven't been on the Sherry.)

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THE PROSPECT OF ANOTHER ARMED CONFLICT — SEEMED TO LIFT HIS MOOD. AND IT MAY LIFT HIS RANKINGS.

ANDREW SULLIVAN, 64

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