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August 15, 2008

Mikheil Saakashvili: War Criminal

A politician's hubris causes untold human suffering

Amid all the geopolitical analyses and ideological posturing on the occasion of the Three-Day War between Russia and Georgia, we are losing sight of the very real human costs of this conflict: **thousands** of civilians killed and grievously wounded, a city, Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, in **ruins**, and the hopes and dreams of the inhabitants of this largely overlooked backwater dashed on the rocks of a politician's hubris.

That politician is **Mikheil Saakashvili**, the all too glib president of Georgia, whose slickness is so apparent that it seems to leave an **oily residue** on every word he utters. The decidedly apolitical, non-ideological Web site Reliefweb **put it** this way:

"The place that has suffered most is South Ossetia which is home to both ethnic Ossetians and Georgians, the latter accounting for about a third of the population. The destruction there has been appalling and it looks as though many hundreds of civilians have died, in the first place as a result of the initial Georgian assault of August 7-8. Gosha Tselekhayev, an Ossetian interpreter in Tskhinvali with whom I spoke by telephone on August 10 said, 'I am standing in the city center, but there's no city left.'

"Ossetians fleeing the conflict zone talk of Georgian atrocities and the indiscriminate killing of civilians."

They may be talking of Georgian atrocities, but we in the West have not heard them – nor will we, given the bias of our media, which is in thrall to **the Georgia lobby** and its U.S. government sponsors. The "mainstream" has already settled on a **narrative** to explain events in the Caucasus, and nothing short of a South

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Mikheil Saakashvili:
War Criminal
8/15/2008

'Poor Little Georgia' – Not!
8/13/2008

The Real Aggressor
8/11/2008

The Anthrax Follies and the Bizarro Effect
8/8/2008

Bruce Ivins: The Movie
8/6/2008

The Patsy
8/4/2008

Joe Klein Speaks Truth to Power
8/1/2008

Is the Surge Working?
7/30/2008

The War Party's Credo: Power Before Profits
7/28/2008

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7/25/2008

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7/23/2008

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7/21/2008

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Ossetian holocaust will wake them from their hypnotic state. The Russians, in their view, have *got* to be the bad guys, i.e., the aggressors. Anything that doesn't fit into that storyline is cut from the script. Yet, as Reliefweb reports:

"On August 7, after days of shooting incidents in the South Ossetian conflict zone, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili made a speech in which he said that he had given the Georgian villagers orders not to fire, that he wanted to offer South Ossetia 'unlimited autonomy' within the Georgian state, with Russia to be a guarantor of the arrangement.

"Both sides said they were discussing a meeting the next day to discuss how to defuse the clashes.

"That evening, however, Saakashvili went for the military option. The Georgian military launched a massive artillery attack on Tskhinvali, followed the next day by a ground assault involving tanks.

"This was a city with no pure military targets, full of civilians who had been given no warning and were expecting peace talks at any moment."

As if to underscore the utter indifference of Western media to the suffering of anyone politically incorrect enough to be pro-Russian, CNN broadcast **footage of war-torn Tskhinvali** even as its news announcer solemnly "reported" that the Russians were wreaking devastation on a city in Georgia proper, a classic case of the Orwellian media manipulation techniques that pass for journalism in the West. An unintended irony: the footage was a few feet from the spot where Russian peacekeepers had been slaughtered, the first victims of the Georgian assault. Or was it intended?

The tragicomic aspects of this media-induced cognitive dissonance came to the fore on Fox News the other day, when the announcer was **interviewing** a 12-year-old American girl who happened to be sitting in a café in Tskhinvali when Georgian bombs started raining down on her head. The announcer's eyebrows shot up when the girl thanked the Russian soldiers. After the girl and her aunt finished their recounting of Georgian atrocities, the announcer capped off his report by intoning: "There are gray areas in war."

The matter of attacking civilians is no doubt a moral "gray area" for the neocons at **Fox**, but what about the rest of the media – or is there no longer much of a difference, at least when it comes to the Russian question?

The Georgians were the **aggressors** here, and not only that, it was a particularly vicious sneak attack, undertaken while "peace talks" were supposedly taking place. As Reliefweb put it:

"The attack looked designed to take everybody by surprise – perhaps because much of the Russian leadership was in Beijing for the opening of the Olympic Games. It also unilaterally destroyed the negotiating and peacekeeping arrangements, under the aegis of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, that have been in place for 16 years. Russian peacekeeping troops based in South Ossetia were among those killed in the Georgian assault."

Coercive 'Diplomacy'
– Prelude to War
7/18/2008

Amber Alert!
7/14/2008

Iran and the Photoshop Threat
7/11/2008

The Shift
7/9/2008

Fake Flip-Flop Flap
7/7/2008

Who Planned the Anthrax Attacks?
7/4/2008

Don't Wait for World War III
6/30/2008

Is War Good For the Economy?
6/25/2008

Imperial 'Justice'
6/23/2008

The Welfare-Warfare State
6/20/2008

Enough Already!
6/18/2008

You Want Change?
6/16/2008

The Revolt of the Liberated
6/13/2008

'Faster, Please!'
6/11/2008

Obama Capitulates
6/6/2008

Will Obama Stand Up to the War Party?
6/4/2008

Reclaiming the American Right
6/2/2008

Standing Up Against the War Party
5/30/2008

Into the Bosnian Quagmire, Part 3
5/28/2008

Into the Bosnian Quagmire, Part 2
5/26/2008

Into the Bosnian Quagmire
5/23/2008

No Rest for the

The Georgian offensive provoked a massive exodus to the north. Thousands fled, and with good reason. As the *Guardian* reports:

"Many had traveled in their nightclothes on rocky roads through the mountains and gave bloodcurdling accounts of Georgian atrocities. 'I came in the boot of a car. Georgian snipers were firing at us from the forest. My brother stayed to fight. Our grandparents' home was reduced to rubble. We don't know where they are. Nothing is left of their village. It was totally destroyed by rockets and tank fire,' Alisa Mamiyeva, 26, a teacher in Tskhinvali, said from the safety of Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia."

The South Ossetians claim **1,400 dead**, thus far, most of them victims of the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali, and Vladimir Putin went so far as to accuse the Georgians of launching a "genocide." According to **the BBC**, however, "Russia failed to back up its claims of Georgian atrocities." Not that the West is all that interested in airing the evidence. As *Variety* put it in **a piece** on how this war is being reported,

"Coverage in the U.S. and Europe is leaning heavily toward reports on the Georgian casualties of Russian bombing over the weekend. Few details are being given about the thousands said to have been killed when Georgia attacked Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, on Thursday and Friday."

The blatant media bias displayed by the "mainstream" news organizations is more than matched by the shameful cover-up of Georgian atrocities by the mainline "human rights" organizations, first and foremost Human Rights Watch. In the most brazen display of willful ignorance since **Walter Duranty** overlooked the Soviet gulags, HRW spokeswoman Anna Neistat told the *Guardian* that Ossetian claims of Georgian atrocities were **"suspicious"**:

"The figure of 2,000 people killed is very doubtful. Our findings so far do not in any way confirm the Russian statistics. On the contrary, they suggest the numbers are exaggerated."

Neistat avers that no more than 44 were killed and around 200 were wounded in the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali. Perhaps she should talk to International Red Cross spokeswoman Anna Nelson, who reports area hospitals **"overflowing"** with the dead and the wounded.

The voices of the Ossetians are barely reaching the West, but when they do – as in **this** Australian Broadcasting Corp. news report – they underscore the sheer ugliness of HRW's appalling apologetics::

"One woman told how a family of four including two children tried to flee from a Georgian tank but it 'fired on their car and they were all burned' to death, said Angela, who like all the refugees only gave her first name. In another incident, a woman eight months pregnant and two family members fleeing from the city under attack were hit by tank fire and 'nothing remained of them,' Angela said.

"She saw the Georgian tanks roll into Tskhinvali, the soldiers shouting 'Hail Saakashvili,' who is the president of Georgia. 'They destroyed the city,' added Inna, 33, who said she could not understand how the Georgian troops 'could do that to civilians.'

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5/21/2008

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5/19/2008

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Interesting Times'
5/16/2008

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Lobby
5/14/2008

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5/12/2008

The Silenced
Majority
5/9/2008

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of Hillary?
5/7/2008

Assassins of Peace
5/5/2008

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Demonize
5/2/2008

Is War With Iran
Imminent?
4/28/2008

Pollard's Ghost
4/25/2008

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US Foreign Policy,
Part 2
4/23/2008

The Middle East:
Turning the Page on
US Foreign Policy
4/21/2008

What We're About
4/18/2008

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Captured the Right
4/16/2008

Bob Barr: Wrong
About Colombia
4/14/2008

Israel Loves Mugabe
4/11/2008

Endless Enemies
4/9/2008

The Barr Factor
4/7/2008

A Tragi-Comic
Cavalcade of
Chicanery
4/4/2008

NATO Marches
Eastward
4/2/2008

Is Another 9/11

"You see your friend's home burning and there's nothing you can do. You just watch and cry, it's a genocide," Inna said. An old woman among the refugees said all she had left was the dress she was wearing. 'My house is destroyed,' she said."

More important than the hypocrisy and ideology-induced moral myopia of the "human rights" crowd, however, is the very **real** human suffering that is being pointedly overlooked. These are real **people** being killed and rendered homeless, people who now live in terror and uncertainty while we in the West sit around discussing the geopolitical implications as if individual human beings were pieces on a chessboard.

The U.S. is now delivering "**humanitarian**" aid under the aegis and protection of the U.S. military, a gesture that underscores the **Bizarro World** absurdity of a foreign policy that has us **arming** the Georgians and then paying to clean up the damage done by our proxies. This is truly an odd sort of "humanitarianism," one inextricably linked to the **inveterate sadism** of our foreign policy.

This "humanitarian" gambit is just that: a device designed to legitimize our growing intervention in the region. While Defense Secretary Robert Gates is **clearly** not at all thrilled by the prospect of U.S. soldiers entering the battle zone, it seems unavoidable, at some point, since we'll be supervising "humanitarian" flights and relief efforts. (Not to mention future military joint exercises involving U.S. and Georgian forces, such as **the ones** that concluded shortly before the war commenced.) With Russian troops **intent** on staying in Ossetia, **Abkhazia**, and other regions such as **Adjara** eager to take this opportunity to break free of the Georgian central government, the likelihood of renewed fighting is high.

To Antiwar.com's audience, and regular readers of this column, none of this – Saakashvili's folly, the Ossetian question, the volatile immediacy of the crisis – is anything new. As I wrote in November 2006:

"Russian 'peacekeepers,' OSCE 'observers,' South Ossetian troops, and the U.S.-trained-and-equipped Georgian military are facing off along ill-defined borders, with renegade 'rebel' bands supporting one side or the other running wild in the no-man's land in between. This is a recipe for disaster, and an armed confrontation is bound to occur, with the distinct possibility of escalating into all-out warfare. The Russians would soon be drawn in, and the U.S. could not escape being dragged into this particular vortex – with fateful consequences all 'round.

"I can just hear McCain barnstorming the country in '08, denouncing 'Russian imperialism' and demanding that we 'stop Putin' in the Caucasus before Russian troops cross the Bering Straits."

We at Antiwar.com have been **warning** of the dangers of Russophobia, which seems to have run rampant on the neoconservative right in recent days. It was *always* present (at least since the **Kosovo war**) as an animating force on the "humanitarian interventionist" left, i.e., **George Soros & Co.** As much as I hate to say "I told you so," in this case, it seems unavoidable, albeit not in very good taste. Yet there's no time for such niceties, these days. It is time to be blunt and get right to the point.

Inevitable?
3/31/2008

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3/28/2008

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3/26/2008

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3/24/2008

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3/17/2008

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Justin Raimondo is the editorial director of Antiwar.com. He is the author of *An Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray N. Rothbard* (Prometheus Books, 2000). He is also the author of *Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement* (with an Introduction by Patrick J. Buchanan), (Center for Libertarian Studies, 1993), and into the Bosnian Quagmire: The Case Against U.S. Intervention in the Balkans (1996).

He is a contributing editor for *The American Conservative*, a Senior Fellow at the Randolph Bourne Institute, and an Adjunct Scholar with the Ludwig von Mises Institute, and writes frequently for *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*.

Antiwar.com is fighting a war on two flanks: a constant struggle against the disinformation dumped daily into the airwaves, most of it originating in the Washington offices of the War Party, and another battle on another front – a war for our very survival.

The rising costs, human as well as financial, of carrying on this campaign for truth are exacting a heavy toll. Our tiny staff is grossly overworked, we're cutting corners left and right, and we don't know where the money to make it through the next quarter is going to come from. And that's where you come in.

Look, you're being dunned daily on the main page of the site, and I don't want to hector you much more. All I can say is that Antiwar.com has *earned* your financial support, and then some. We've been waging a pretty effective fight against the War Party, giving them tit for tat and giving our readers a far more realistic perspective on world events than any "mainstream" outlet. Yet the War Party still poses a deadly danger, and they're always up to new tricks. More importantly, we don't have the resources they can mobilize at a moment's notice, and we don't have any hopes of doing so. But we don't need all that moolah. We just need to reach the American people with our message, and we can do that quite effectively via the Internet. They have mega-millions, but we have something they can never match: the credibility our brand name has built up over the years.

Since 1995, we've been in the front lines of the battle, breaking the real news and fact-checking government officials within an inch of their lives – and we need your help to keep going. Once again, we're swimming against the tide on this South Ossetia-Georgia story, debunking the official media narrative and bringing our readers a commodity more precious than gold: the truth.

That's why it's so important that we continue our work, but we can't do it without your support. We depend on the generosity and acute awareness of our readers, who know how important it is to win the battle for hearts and minds. We have the War Party on the run, but we need your support to keep going. Your contribution is 100% tax-deductible, and you can give online or via mail. **Contribute today.**

~ Justin Raimondo

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