

## **Eyewitness: Carnage in Tskhinvali**

**Author:** [Larisa Sotieva](#)

An Ossetian who was in South Ossetia during the Georgian assault tells her story.

High in the sky I saw five steel-coloured planes. As I was studying them, they formed a line like geese and plunged towards the ground. From their bellies they dropped bombs like eggs. Their insane whistle shook the mountain gorge and the ground shook like an earthquake. Having dropped their eggs, the planes flew on in the direction of Tskhinvali.

It was the morning of August 8 and I was next to the road to the northern village of Java in South Ossetia, having spent most of the night in the forest sheltering from bombardment by the Georgian army.

The night before had been the culmination of all our worst nightmares for many years.

The crisis that came to a head on the night of August 7 was one of many that have occurred since the early 1990s. But this summer broke all records. It seems South Ossetia and Georgia were also getting ready for the Olympic Games. Each side accused the other of breaking the ceasefire regime that has supposedly been in force since the end of the 1992 war, but no one properly investigated the incidents so as to say who had fired first. The parties called on each other to love one another and live in peace.

In early August, the ceasefire violations intensified. As always no one admitted to starting it.

I remember the day when Georgian workers from Gori who were finishing repairs on my sister's two-storey house went home to get a consignment of tiles for her balcony. They did not come back. The road was closed. The noises of war grew louder. An endless stream of private cars and buses with children started moving from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia.

Everyone who had relatives or houses in North Ossetia left. The part of the population which gets called "the summerfolk" – those who based themselves in the north after 1992 and only come back every summer – also left.

Everyone was glued to their television screens. They mostly believed it was just another of the regular attacks, if a bit more intense this time. They were waiting for the promised negotiations.

On the afternoon of August 7, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili announced on television that Georgia was declaring a unilateral ceasefire and would not respond to any firing from the Ossetian side. Everyone was delighted. People began rushing home across the mountains from Vladikavkaz.

A few hours later a massed Georgian assault began on the town. For 14 hours we were fired on without pause by every conceivable type of heavy weaponry, supported by the Georgian airforce. The city was fought over in hand-to-hand fighting and in a night of hellish metallic hail it turned into ruins. The hospital and ambulances were destroyed early on, so there was no way of giving proper medical help to the wounded.

The civilian population sheltered in cellars. Tskhinvali residents know these cellars well from previous experience and everyone ran to the ones they knew they were entitled to. Neighbours huddled together, without having time to bring food, water, medicine or warm clothing.

Generally the safest deep cellars designed for storing wine or winter stores are too small. My family sat in a cellar four metres square for three days and nights with 47 people inside. But even the strongest cellars could not withstand the bombardment and the walls and ceilings shook. People were choked and blinded by dust and soot. There were destroyed vehicles and torn bodies on the street. People brought in bodies from the street into the cellars –and waited for the world to react and condemn what was happening.

Zalina Pukhayeva, 32, and a friend, who preferred not to be named, told me she was in a cellar on Ulitsa Geroyev in a part of town which the Georgian troops captured. But they did not know that from their cellar. Then they heard a shout from outside in Ossetian, “Ma Tarsut, rakhiz ut!” – “Don’t be afraid, come out!”

Two neighbours in the neighbouring cellar gladly heeded the call, said Zalina, and went out. But then she and those with her in the cellar heard shooting. After a while, they heard a tank move on and she crawled out and found her two neighbours, dead in the street.

People counted the time not in days but in hours and minutes. Everyone waited for help from Russia.

Volunteers began arriving from the other side of the mountain in private cars. They were unarmed and waited in Java to be given automatic weapons in order to go and fight. But there were not enough weapons. Most of the volunteers are now sitting in Java.

My 20-year-old nephew signed up as a volunteer and in three days was transformed from a student into a soldier. His parents sat in a cellar and waited for short SMS messages from him every morning and evening containing the short but vital word “alive”. When they could not get through to him, they fell into despair but his friends are still sending them messages.

People in the villages mostly hid in the woods. I was there too, along with children, women and old people, hiding from aerial bombardment.

There was practically no telephone link to the outside world. It was only possible to send SMS messages. For the whole night of the assault I exchanged messages with a friend in Tbilisi. He said that the Georgian media was celebrating the fact that Tskhinvali had been captured. He advised me to leave and was very worried about me. But my mother did not want to leave my house and the grave of my father and I took the decision not to go, saying that it was safer to stay in the forest than travel a road being bombed.

In the forest it was frightening, cold and damp. Children suffered from diarrhoea, nausea, chills. In the morning, I desperately wanted coffee. I said that I needed to find a place where I could get a mobile telephone signal. But I could not get a signal. Risking being bombed, I went back into the city. I could see nothing but hellish fires burning. My part of the town had not been entered by the Georgian troops. I made coffee and brought it into the forest.

Then on the afternoon of August 8 after drinking my coffee I saw an endless column of Russian tanks heading for Tskhinvali and not on the roundabout route but straight through four Georgian villages.

After three days of war without food and sleep my nephew was allowed home for some rest - happy to still be alive.

The carnage of the last few days is the culmination of years of ceasefire violations. Small outbreaks of fighting occurred at night and in the morning the people of Tskhinvali exchanged information about who had been killed, whose house had been damaged. Then they got on with their lives. They bought fruit, vegetables and yoghurt from Georgians who had come to the town from the very same villagers where the firing came from the night before.

Ossetians felt frustrated that no one was telling the world about the situation they were in. Memories of the previous two wars made them increasingly nervous.

Living in a tiny confined space, cut off from the rest of the world and unable to travel, the South Ossetians waited to hear from Georgia and international officials. Instead, they felt, the only true information they heard came occasionally from Russian peacekeepers and journalists. As a result, they only watched Russian television to learn about the nightly exchanges of fire.

Of course it is naïve not to be aware that all truth is relative, especially in a situation between peace and war. But if you studied the figures and worked out what kind of human and material losses each side had sustained from these outbursts of violence, you could work out who had opened fire first and managed to keep firing until morning.

Ossetians hoped that the big cheeses whom they saw on their black-and-white television sets, sitting in New York and Moscow would not let this fragile peace be shattered. They got used to a continuation of the life of “no war, no peace” they had known since the beginning of the 1990s. It was a hard, gloomy life but at least it wasn't war.

The Georgians asserted that the Ossetians were their brothers and they had no problems with them, only with the South Ossetian authorities. The Ossetians said they did not wish to live, even with brothers, inside a state which had tried to destroy them four times within the past 100 years. They insisted there were a lot of problems. The international community preferred to pay attention to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

South Ossetians did not put their trust in international mediators. They preferred to deal with Russia via North Ossetia, where the majority of Ossetians live.

All these years since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia gave the South Ossetians a path to survival in exchange for loyalty. Several times Georgia sent in its tanks but also expected loyalty.

Larisa Sotieva is an Ossetian humanitarian worker.

**Location:** Stavropol  
South Ossetia  
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