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Reporting from Ossetia: On the Ground with Russian Forces in Georgia

Pio d'Emilia

Pio d'Emilia, Far East correspondent for Sky TG24 Italy and a veteran contributor to the daily Il Manifesto has just returned from Georgia, where he was "embedded" with the Russian army. The experience gave him a very different perspective on the way the conflict between the Russian Army and a Western-backed ally was reported by the Western and Japanese press. Japan Focus posts his account of the assignment and a short interview on why he thinks much of the media got it wrong on Georgia.



Correspondent Pio D'Emilia (center) with Russian troops in Georgia

Tell us about the situation when you arrived in Georgia: "We were staying at the Marriott Hotel in Tbilisi (Georgia's capital). Well you know it took a few days to understand what was happening and be able to move around on your own. The Georgian police were blocking the roads outside Tbilisi because they said it was dangerous. In the hotel we were bombarded by the propaganda of the Georgian media amplified by the international media, through the (news) wires. The first day was reporting from the bar of the hotel, talking to people including Mr. (Patrick) Worms (a PR consultant hired by the Georgian government).

"Those of us who persisted were allowed to go out and found that it wasn't really dangerous outside the city. I was with people who had covered Kosovo, Palestine, the Balkans; they said the situation didn't seem even comparable. It was important to get out. There, the picture, little by little became clear, and it was completely different. Most of the people I was with were in agreement in saying that most of what we saw contradicted earlier reports of mass destruction, ethnic cleansing, rape and pillaging by the Russian Army. We talked to people freely, there were no Russians. Not once did we find a person who could confirm that, you know, a drunken Russian soldier had broken in and raped a civilian or something like that. And we spent two days looking.

Where do you think those reports come from? "Well, the journalists set off with some report in their heads: Big Russia is invading small, pro-Western Georgia, for instance. Once you arrive with the idea that you're going to see something, for a while you are bound to fall into this view of reality. Even myself: My first reports were very anti-Russian because I saw the tanks advancing toward Tbilisi even as the Russians were saying they were pulling out.

"The big newspapers, when it comes to writing the news, they rely on the newswires. The wires set the tone. Even at Sky, I was ready to do a standup (dispatch) in front of the Russian tanks, and the wires had just announced that the Russians were retreating. My editor called and said, 'Are you sure they're still there?' I said 'you can see them!' So I asked the Russians to move their tanks so that we could see they were tanks and not a Ferrari. They were very cooperative. Sometimes you even get a call from an editor afterwards who says 'Oh, that's not like it was on Reuters or AP (the Associated Press) or whatever.

Embed Time in Ossetia

When the call came through, I had just reached my hut in Italy's Dolomite Mountains. It was my editor, asking if I would give up my summer vacation to cover the conflict in Georgia. I had mixed feelings: regret for my children, who don't see much of me all year; doubt, because I didn't know much about the Caucasus; and pride, because my editor had asked me.

The request said to me that my editor does not consider me – as I always suspect – merely a specialist in an increasingly normal and thus irrelevant island nation. Georgia is a lead story, and being asked to cover it was an honor, a challenge and an irresistible tonic after years of covering boring, colorless topics in Japan. So pride won, and the prize was a bullet-proof vest. I was told to wear it for insurance reasons, but I had to wonder why I was not also issued a helmet. Eventually, I got one from a kind Russian MP – a nice and unexpected gesture.

Crossing into nearby Austria, I drove to Vienna, where I met up with Edoardo Adinolfi, the very brave, talented cameraman with whom I had covered North Korea in 2006 following its nuclear test. We chose the wrong day to fly to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi: Aug. 10, the one day Georgia's main airport was closed to commercial flights. So we diverted to Erevan, Armenia, where we negotiated a ride with a local driver. And here we had a piece of luck. At Erevan Airport we bumped into Claudio Gugerotti, the Apostolic Nuncio (read: Vatican Ambassador), a veteran of the diplomatic corps in Georgia. As he also needed a ride, our five-hour trip to Tbilisi was enlivened by the wise, witty and at times controversial comments of the nuncio.

It was Gugerotti who first alerted us to the possibility the Georgians may have sold the Western media an incorrect version of events. "President (Mikhail) Sakaashvili loves to say the Russian tanks now occupying Georgia are the same ones that invaded Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. They are not," the nuncio declared. One month later, that statement is much less an eye opener. But in early August the whole world was consumed with outrage at big, bad Russia's invasion of poor, defenseless little Georgia. We soon realized what Gugerotti meant when he cautioned us against being "overwhelmed by the Georgian government's propaganda machine."

Half of the lobby of Tbilisi's Marriott Hotel had been "informally" but efficiently appropriated by a bizarre "detached government press center." This was headed by one Patrick Worms, a partner in Aspect Solutions PR, an international agency that specializes in, among other things, "conflict management." With outsourcing so prevalent nowadays, perhaps we should not have been surprised by this. But this was the first time I had seen a sovereign government at war hiring a foreign company to "deal" with the international press. It used to be said, "History is written by the winners." Today the job can be outsourced to spinners!

Worms introduced himself to reporters as a "personal adviser and consultant." But as a Google search confirms, Worms is a man of much wider experience. Among other gigs, he worked for the EU Commission in Pakistan and China promoting the rights of China's Uighur minority. With every journalist's first name memorized, Worms was there to greet us in the morning and buy us beers at night. He would summon up whatever was needed: interpreters, drivers, interviews and briefings.

With such hospitality, how could one not sympathize with Sakaashvili and his poor country invaded by the evil-smelling Russians? Especially when the Russian troops -- showing a complete lack of *savoir-faire* -- sometimes aimed their fire directly at the foreign press. Still, Worms' efforts were often counterproductive. The offer of an exclusive interview with Richard Holbrooke, mastermind of the Dayton accord on Bosnia, went badly awry. After the American statesman expressed unexpected skepticism about Georgia's actions, the meeting ended with Holbrooke publicly insulting the spinner.

But Worms' biggest debacle unfolded in the Marriott bar, where he told European journalists, "I've arranged for the French ambassador to come and tell you an awful story -- on the record." The narrative was supposed to relate how, at a military checkpoint, Ambassador Patrick Fournier had been insulted and robbed at gunpoint. The soldiers were wearing Georgian uniforms -- but of course they weren't Georgians, they were actually Russians who had stolen Georgian uniforms. Three European national TV networks and several print journalists were ready to swallow the story. But it fell apart when the ambassador arrived to declare the tale a fabrication. After expressing shock and outrage that the diplomat was not sticking to his own tale, Worms left the room in a huff. Fournier stayed and explained to us, off the record, why Georgia should never join NATO.

Each day we would commute from Tbilisi to Gori and the front lines to see the battlefield firsthand. And on these forays we would often encounter Russian troops. So a few of us began working on the Russians. We told them that even if they were winning on the ground, they were losing the battle for international public opinion -- the "propaganda war." Communication became easier once we stopped relying on local interpreters, who were too terrified to be useful. On Aug. 18, thanks to a Russian-speaking German colleague, we finally got the message through to the Russian commander, Gen. Vyacheslav Borissov. "The longer you keep us out, the more the world will speculate whether Russia is committing or at least allowing genocide, looting and such. If you want to show you're bringing peace and not pillaging, then let us in!"

It took a few days, but eventually they did let us in. It was easier for the Moscow-based correspondents, who already had Russian accreditation, but what about the rest of us? Where should we apply for Russian accreditation -- in Georgia? But why should we need Russian accreditation at all if we are still in Georgian territory? "Because you are in Russia!" was the sarcastic response we got from Lt. Sergei Ivanov, the military policeman who one day appeared at Gori's Russian checkpoint. After days of dealing with frontline Neanderthals ("just like the U.S. troops in Iraq," as one colleague wryly noted) we took this flash of irony as a good sign: for an MP, Ivanov turned out to have quite a sense of humor.

The Russians were moving on to "embed" us -- although to call it a "bed" is a stretch. With the Russian army you don't get helicopters or air-conditioned buses. And you don't get to just slip between the sheets. To get on the list, we had to use every ruse we could imagine. I resorted to invoking the name of Totti, the Italian soccer player who, as I discovered, Borissov reveres. Finally we got an SMS message: "Meet under Stalin's statue in Gori at 11 a.m. We'll take you to (the South Ossetian capital of) Tskhinvali." Coming from Sasha Mechevsky, a Kremlin press officer, it seemed to hold some authority.

It was good we chose to set out from Tbilisi early in the morning, because we were held up at a new Russian checkpoint, well short of Gori, that had mushroomed overnight. "No Russian accreditation, no access," this new pack of Neanderthals told us. We showed them the SMS message, but still no go. We asked them to check with the Gori checkpoint or the Kremlin press office. "Nyet!" Luckily, someone had a mobile phone number for Sasha the press officer. And after many tries someone named Misha finally answered. "Yes, no problem, we'll pick you up there. Where are you?"

Following this question came a whole new set of problems. Just for the Russians to explain over the phone where we were standing took at least 10 minutes. But that was obviously not good enough for the first driver sent to fetch us, because he got lost. By late afternoon, after hours in the hot sun, we were all getting desperate. But with the call that finally reassured us we would be picked up came a puzzling promise: "Don't worry, you'll still be on time for the concert!" Concert, what concert?

When the bus finally arrived at sunset there was not enough room for all of us who had stuck it out through six hours in the sun -- especially with a number of uninvited guests aboard. "They are farmers and they need a lift. I can't leave them on the road," Sasha the press officer explained. So 62 of us crammed into a 24-seater Hyundai minibus. After one war-savvy colleague suggested they might accidentally spew bullets at random, with every bump we nervously eyed the two armed Kalashnikovs slung casually over the front seat.

At long last, around 6 p.m. we reached the "cruelly and cowardly bombed" city of Tskhinvali, which used to have a population of some 70,000 but now hosted less than half that number. Most inhabitants are Ossetians who speak a unique language of Persian origin. But most also speak Russian. They hold Russian passports and are covered by the Russian national health and pension systems.

We found that Tskhinvali had, in fact, not been destroyed. Although many buildings had clearly been hit directly or damaged, it was hardly an apocalyptic scenario. But our arrival coincided with the start of a Russian offensive. Finally realizing that in focusing on the shooting war they had neglected the propaganda front, the Russians counterattacked with gusto worthy of the Roman emperors: "Panem et circenses" -- bread and circuses. Sadly, the Russians forgot the bread, but the circus was a coup!

Arriving in the central square, we could hear the first, tentative notes of the concert. It was a surrealistic scene. Ordinary people, journalists and soldiers were hanging all over the tanks, everyone seeking a good vantage point. Valeri Gergiev, the internationally renowned -- and Ossetian -- conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, had been brought in for a concert billed as "historic." And we all felt the emotional power of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony and Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7*, which was dedicated to the defenders of Leningrad during the World War II Nazi siege of that city.

On an embedded military tour you expect tight, obsessive security and control. But our Russian handlers surprised us by sending us out with some simple cautionary advice: "You can walk around freely; just be advised there are still Georgian snipers around. Freedom of information is important, but life is more

important.” We all went out to take pictures and interview people. There were no official interpreters and the discreet distance maintained by soldiers following us showed they were there to protect more than control us.

As Ossetians have for years seen Georgians as aggressors, it was no surprise the people we met spoke bitterly of Georgia's assault. “Why did they do this? They tore my house down,” protested Gennady Kokoiev, professor of economics at Tskhinvali University. “Only my vineyard survived. Do you think we could ever forget this? What this fascist guy named Sakaashvili achieved is that we are now going to declare our full independence. There is no way we can ever again live under Georgian sovereignty.”

Looking back on the experience, despite the despair and destruction we witnessed I came away from Georgia and Ossetia with a certain optimism. First, odd and difficult as it may be to accept, given what happened in Chechnya and other conflicts, what I saw indicated to me that Russians troops can “behave.” The Russian tanks I saw did not remind me of that crushed Prague Spring or the invasion of Afghanistan. The impression I came away with is that this time Russia showed guts and political coherence by “intervening” in South Ossetia – the victim of an unprovoked attacked by the Georgian government.

By contrast, NATO and the West come out of this looking glib and hypocritical, exactly like they did in (Hungary) 1956 and (Czechoslovakia) 1968, when they didn't dare challenge the Yalta postwar order and didn't help the people of Hungary and Czechoslovakia as they were crushed under Soviet tanks. Secondly, as a European, for once I am happy to see Europe responding with prudence and diplomatic skill – instead of tanks and indiscriminate bombings – to defuse a potentially explosive situation, without simply bowing as usual to U.S. foreign policy.

An earlier version of this report appeared at No. 1 Shimibun in Tokyo. Posted at Japan Focus on October 18, 2008.

See in addition Herbert P. Bix, [The Russo-Georgia War and the Challenge to American Global Dominance](#)