



# GEORGIA: The War Russia Lost

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*The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department, or the U.S. Government.*

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PHOTO: A statue of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin is reflected in a bullet-ridden window in central Gori, Georgia, 19 August 2008. A small column of Russian tanks and armored vehicles left the strategic Georgian city of Gori, the first sign of a Russian pullback of troops from Georgia after a cease-fire intended to end fighting that reignited Cold War tensions. (AP Photo, Mikhail Metzel)

**T**HE RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR that broke out in August 2008 already shows all the earmarks of being a watershed event in world affairs. It is already reshaping policies and governmental calculations throughout the world. The most striking aspect of this war is Russia's unrelenting, aggressive unilateralism. By early September 2008, less than a month since the war began, Russia had refused to abide by its own cease-fire, expanded its occupation zone, looted Georgian territories under its control, demanded an arms embargo and regime change in Georgia, unilaterally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and issued repeated ultimatums to America to not rearm Georgia and to stop providing humanitarian assistance. Russia has also threatened Poland with nuclear strikes, told America it may suspend its cooperation with regard to Iranian nuclear nonproliferation and preventing Iran's purchase of air defense missiles, announced its intention to complete Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor, and threatened Turkey with retaliation for keeping the Bosphorus Straits open for humanitarian relief shipments.

In addition, on 31 August President Dmitri Medvedev announced that Russia would fight American unipolarity, adopt a Nazi-like doctrine that states Moscow has the right to protect ethnic Russians as well as those to whom it grants citizenship beyond its borders, and claim a Russian sphere of influence encompassing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other nations beyond the CIS with which it has "privileged relations."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Moscow seeks to challenge the entire structure of contemporary international relations. These stated political principles are hallmarks of a regime that is out of control, consumed by its own arrogance and swagger, and a clear and present danger to all of its neighbors and interlocutors.

Yet, while Russia won the war in tactical and operational terms, it is fast becoming clear to Moscow—as it should have been before the war—that Russia's strategic losses are mounting and will in time eclipse the gains Russia obtained through the use of force. In spite of operations with an estimated cost of \$2.5 million a day, Russian leaders profess lack of concern about the economic impact of the Georgian campaign.<sup>2</sup> Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has dismissed concerns about possible sanctions against Russia.<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, unlike President Medvedev, believes that the potential cost to Russia will be negligible and that the financial crisis currently afflicting Russia has little or nothing to do with Georgia.<sup>4</sup> Putin is unwilling to accept the fact that the war in Georgia and the ensuing international anger

with Russia are in any way connected to the Russian stock market crash or the ruble's weakness.<sup>5</sup> Such strategic unrealism imitates that of the Georgian leadership.<sup>6</sup> Russia also does not seem upset that it has now lost any possibility of joining the World Trade Organization and thus millions of dollars in revenues and investments.<sup>7</sup> Yet, closer examination suggests that here again Putin's, President Medvedev's, and their officials' confidence is misplaced.

There is no doubt Russia's drastic, unilateral military operations have triggered these negative economic events. A limited Russian peace enforcement operation (to use U.S. terminology) to expel Georgian forces from South Ossetia would have sufficiently proven Russia's point, thwarted Georgian policy, discredited the Saakashvili regime, and provoked little response. Instead, blinded with a desire to show the world who is boss in the CIS, to humiliate and overthrow Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, and to demonstrate that Russia is still a great power not to be trifled with, Putin went for broke. His personal hatred for Saakashvili and his revanchist and resentful feelings against America are the underlying causes of the invasion—and prove who is the real power behind the throne. There is abundant evidence that the war was a Putin-led provocation from start to finish, designed to achieve the geopolitical and personal goals listed above, and perhaps inspired by a need to show President Medvedev that he does not actually control Russia and cannot dislodge members of the security services from power.<sup>8</sup> If nothing else, the size, scope, and speed of Moscow's combined arms response and continuing occupation and Russification of Georgian territories in defiance of its own cease-fire suggest as much.<sup>9</sup> But now the costs of such operations are beginning to make themselves felt.

By early September 2008, the Russian stock market had fallen considerably, foreign investment was fleeing the country, the EU halted its work on a new partnership agreement with Russia, and leading EU members raised the idea of sanctions against Russia. In return, Russia threatened to cut energy shipments to its customers.<sup>10</sup> It even became necessary for Russia to intervene in its markets to rescue the falling value of the ruble. While much of this economic weakness was and is attributable to a global recession and to the economic pathologies of Russian governance, the situation in Georgia—



Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili chairs a government session in Tbilisi, Georgia, 12 September 2008.

AP Photo, Irakli Gedenidze

along with the breakdown of ties with the EU and America—contributes significantly to investors' fears about Russia's future economic health. The geopolitical costs of the Georgian adventure are beginning to come in, and even in their early stages, they amount to substantially negative results for Russia. To compound Russia's problems, America, like the EU, is considering sanctions against Russia, has withdrawn the nuclear treaty with Russia that would have earned Russia hundreds of millions of dollars, announced a reassessment of its Russian policy, and is considering suspending arms control talks.<sup>11</sup>

The consequences of that last action, if it occurs, are immense. If both sides do not reaffirm their intention to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) by December 2008, it will expire in 2009, leaving both sides without any means of verifying each other's strategic programs. Given the current impasse over treaty extension and missile defense, this could mean no reductions in strategic arms before the Nonproliferation Treaty Review conference in 2010. A failure now to extend START would all but doom the 2010 conference and

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DOD, LCDR John Gay

**Banners hung from buildings and walls in Tbilisi, Georgia, protest Russian military occupation of Georgia, 31 August 2008.**

possibly open the door to proliferation in Iran and North Korea, an event that would benefit no one and further exacerbate global and regional tensions even in regions unconnected with Georgia. Meanwhile, NATO is beginning to rethink its members' low levels of defense spending and consider committing more resources to territorial defense.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Putin has threatened to suspend Russia's minimal and grudging cooperation with America over Iran to sell S-300 air defense missiles to Tehran if Washington ever acts against Moscow.<sup>13</sup> Iranian and Chinese missile capabilities have already so alarmed Russia that it wants to either walk out of the 1989 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty or globalize it, leaving Moscow to gain nothing from a suspension of contacts with Washington, other than heightened threats against it by its supposed allies.<sup>14</sup> A Russian withdrawal from the INF treaty, while perfectly legal, is utterly counterproductive, because it will stimulate missile production in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East at a pace that Russia cannot match.

A purely Machiavellian American administration might actually take up Putin's threat, leaving him alone among these threatening neighbors as the

United States builds missile defenses in Europe and the Middle East to block the Iranian threat Russia permitted. We can see Moscow's lack of strategic compass in this crisis in its swaggering ultimatum to Washington, that it either support Moscow and ditch Georgia or suffer the consequences.<sup>15</sup> This misplaced swagger will surely be to Russia's detriment. No U.S. government will accept such ultimatums, and they are beyond Russia's capability to enforce without serious costs.

Other notable political costs to Russia are also already visible. The CIS has proven to be worse than useless in reaching a position of support for or opposition to the war. Ostensibly indicating disapproval, The CIS remained silent about the war and Russia's efforts to rearrange Georgia's integrity and sovereignty. Belarus only joined the chorus of approval for the war after Moscow warned Minsk that it did not appreciate such silence. However, Belarus had previously indicated its interest in improving ties with Europe and America by releasing dissidents from prison.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Kazakhstan called for negotiations and refused to fully support the operation, thus lending cover to Kyrgyzstan, which was clearly unhappy about the

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forcible truncation of Georgia's sovereignty in the name of a Russian doctrine of extra-territoriality to justify intervention on behalf of Russian minorities. Indeed, its government waited for over a month before endorsing Russia's campaign.<sup>17</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has refused to support Moscow's actions to dismember Georgia and recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. China, too, has intentionally remained silent, indicating its ambivalence, to say the least, about Russia's actions. Obviously, all its actions to date have only served to isolate Russia, especially on the issue of claiming a sphere of influence over the CIS after the SCO demonstrated that it did not accept such a claim.

The SCO's refusal to ratify Moscow's war and support the dismemberment of Georgia indicates the SCO is not the rubber stamp Moscow wants it to be, and shows the limits of Chinese support for Russia.<sup>18</sup> Although Beijing has not opposed holding the winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 and thus has tacitly blessed the military action, no Chinese government can openly support a great power's independent decision to take over disputed provinces and then put its military bases there. The parallels to Taiwan and to the mounting unrest we have just seen in Tibet and Xinjiang are all too strong of reminders to China of the ultimate vulnerability of its claims to sovereignty over those provinces. President Hu Jintao probably resented Moscow's timing with Georgia, raining as it did on his Olympic parade by competing with it for news coverage, and dimming the global spotlight he had hoped would have been focused solely on China. The SCO's carefully hedged posture on this war and the engineered secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia suggests that China has more influence in the SCO than Moscow would like it to have. Central Asian governments will not support a doctrine that

diminishes their sovereignty for Moscow's benefit, despite Russian efforts to bribe states like Tajikistan.<sup>19</sup> Russian officials' oft-displayed contempt for the sovereignty of these and all the other CIS and post-Soviet states, including those in Eastern Europe, has long been a matter of public record, and while the Central Asian states depend on Russia, they cannot support so public a diminution of their own legitimacy and authority.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Russia's ongoing military operations suggest further costs and future liabilities that Moscow should have foreseen. One set of costs is external, pertaining mainly to Russian relations with the CIS, and the other is internal. Externally, it is clear that Russia's unilateral effort to diminish Georgia's sovereignty and integrity by force is creating a condition that allows Georgia to regard these provinces as the equivalent of Alsace-Lorraine in Franco-German wars, that is, as a perpetual site of conflicting claims and revenge. Moreover, the SCO, the EU, and others will not recognize Russia's forceful redrawing of Europe's map on the basis of phony charges and provocation. This produces a situation in which Russia cannot translate its power into legitimate authority. In other words, Russia is sowing the seeds for another future conflict in the Caucasus, quite possibly a violent one. Furthermore, international agencies are rushing to rebuild Georgia. America is providing it with \$1 billion in aid, the IMF is lending it \$750 million, and the executive board of the Asian Development Bank has voted unanimously to lend Georgia money for reconstruction.<sup>21</sup> All these actions signify disapproval of Russian policy and a determination to resist any efforts to destroy Georgia's economy and capacity for independent self-government, an objective that may well have figured prominently in Russian plans.

The North Caucasus remains aflame. Disturbing signs of breakdown of public authority abound and even police officers have reportedly fled from terrorist attacks there. Indeed, the ongoing war in the North Caucasus and Moscow's visible failure to terminate it has caused the leading American analyst of those wars, Gordon Hahn, to call Russia a failing state.<sup>22</sup> The crisis in Chechnya and the North Caucasus required 250,000 troops to occupy those areas as of 2006, and Russians question Moscow's own rule in these provinces.<sup>23</sup>

Once again, Russia has regressed to a neo-Tsarist autocracy, with elements of both the Soviet and Fascist systems and an inherent tendency to military adventurism. For the fourth time since 1993, Russia has unilaterally chosen to use *force majeure* over and above that necessary to resolve internal succession struggles and revise post-1991 territorial agreements.

Europe can no longer assume a peaceful Russia. Russia's national security policy presupposes conflict with NATO and sees the United States as its primary enemy—a designation Russia will soon enshrine in new defense doctrine. Its basic nuclear policy rests on the corollary that for Moscow to be secure, no other European capital can be secure. Russia wants to return to the Cold War politics of intimidation with tactical nuclear weapons, short-range, inter-continental, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Perhaps the greatest or longest lasting external political cost to Russia from this adventure is the shattering of European complacency about Moscow. Even the pro-Russian German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has called this war a turning point.<sup>24</sup> The realization that Russia will not honor its own political commitments such as cease-fire agreements will only harden European opinion against Russia. The EU and NATO may be divided on some issues, and Russia may try to use its considerable abilities to bribe, intimidate, blackmail, and otherwise subvert European unity, but a military-political-economic reaction against Russia is already taking shape.

That reaction certainly goes beyond sanctions. Its most visible element is the U.S.-Polish agreement on missile defense signed days after the war began and directly as a result of Russia's demonstration of its offensive policies. That treaty not only secures the introduction of U.S. missile defenses in Poland, it actually places U.S. troops there to defend Patriot air defense batteries. Clearly intended against Russian threats, it provides a mutual security guarantee above and beyond the current NATO agreements, and can be invoked even before action from NATO occurs. This threatens to trump Moscow's ability to intimidate Europe with Russian nuclear weapons and may generate a continent-wide arms race that could be economically ruinous to Russia. Worse yet, the Ukrainian government announced its readiness to associate itself with Western missile defenses

and early warning systems, suggesting another very dangerous situation for Moscow, especially if Ukraine does join NATO.<sup>25</sup>

The issue of missile defenses had proven, even before the outbreak of this war, to be one that could effectively reorder Europe's security agenda because of the threats Moscow made against Poland and the Czech Republic previous to the Polish-American agreement. Russia's nuclear bluster and belligerently anti-American policy caused the Pentagon to respond even before the war to ensure the quality and responsiveness of America's nuclear deterrents.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the Navy is considering deploying Aegis warship patrols in the Baltic or Black Seas to protect missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic from being the first targets in a phased enemy attack. However, such a naval deployment would be a violation of the Montreux Convention of 1936, and even Ankara would never allow it in peacetime, let alone Moscow.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates now appears to be calling for an increase in missile defenses because of the Russian strategic nuclear force. Certainly, this is how Russia interprets his remarks, using them, as it does, to substantiate its charge that the United States is hostile towards Russia.<sup>28</sup> Now, in the aftermath of the war with Georgia, the U.S. government is reassessing its policies towards Russia, and many military leaders are warning about Russian military capabilities.<sup>29</sup>

What is particularly dangerous about this trend is that Russia's invasion of Georgia, the resulting weak Western response, and the rising tone of Russian assertiveness and willingness to accept international isolation, could mean a return to a period of heightened tension in Europe, although not necessarily another Cold War. Putin's and Medvedev's boasts that they are not afraid of another

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Cold War do not stand up to scrutiny because they know full well that Moscow cannot accept that outcome or sustain it. Moreover, if an arms race does break out across Eurasia, it is likely to be a nuclear arms race. Due to Russian conventional forces' continuing failure to modernize, and the failure of its defense industry to provide weapons in sufficient quantity and quality, Moscow has fewer viable actions and may once again rely upon possible first-strike nuclear attacks.<sup>30</sup> But even this desperate option has problems. Russia cannot produce enough nuclear weapons by 2015 to obtain anything more than a state of minimum deterrence. Thus, in spite of all the boasting about long-range bomber patrols, claiming territory in the Arctic, buzzing American ships, and possibly basing long-range nuclear-capable bombers in Cuba, it seems that Russian military options are merely empty rhetoric designed for domestic consumption. In fact, Russia's defense industry cannot meet the demand for sustained, quality production of high-precision conventional weapons. Combine that with an army which refuses to become truly professional and (except for some niche specialties) cannot conduct high-tech operations and use modern equipment for optimal effects, and the result is an army not suited to contemporary large-scale operations or to counterinsurgency. The only form of the latter that seems to work for Moscow is the traditional tactic of "making a desert and calling it peace" while finding a Quisling- or Petain-like leader who will accept Russian rule and divide local elites.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, any arms race with Russia is more likely to involve nuclear arsenals rather than conventional arms.

Yet, Moscow may well try to restore its conventional capabilities if it believes them necessary. There is good reason to believe that this war has mortally wounded the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. Russia unilaterally suspended its participation in this treaty in 2007 at least in part to free itself for action in the Caucasus. We now see the consequences of that rash decision. However, in this atmosphere of heightened threats and ever more belligerent rhetoric, we cannot rule out the



AP Photo, Natalia Kolesnikova

**Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, left, listens to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov at a meeting with business leaders in Moscow, 15 September 2008. Medvedev warned that any sanctions imposed on Russia over the war in Georgia would backfire.**

possibility of a conventional arms race due to this war, at least in Eastern Europe.

Moscow's consistently belligerent but possibly empty responses to all these challenges, such as its formal announcement of a doctrine of extra-territoriality and its demand for an undefined sphere of influence, suggest that it was unprepared to act on its provocations. Initially confronted with only weak political resistance to its invasion of Georgia, Moscow's leaders evidently believed that they could respond with ever-greater displays of verbal belligerence. Once again, Russian ministers thought that they could wage a small victorious war to secure their power at home and abroad at little or no cost, and once again, they miscalculated the true consequences.

## Lessons to Ponder

Notwithstanding Russian policy, there is a profound lesson here for us as well, one that we should have learned as a result of Iraq and its international consequences. As Liddell Hart observed, the objective of war should be to create a better peace—a positively transformed political situation that engenders a stable, enduring, and legitimate postwar order. Force, to be successful, must soon give way to or create authority, a stable and legitimate order. The use of force must create conditions where force itself is no longer necessary after a war's military-political goals have been achieved, and the defeated side accepts the new status quo.<sup>32</sup> But Moscow does

not seem to have learned that lesson, as it has not brought a better peace or a legitimate order. Rather, it has shattered order, opening the way to arms races, military buildups, and greater rivalries throughout the region. Some may see easy comparison between this situation and that in Iraq. Nor are the repercussions confined only to Eurasia. North Korea quite probably chose this time to announce its suspension of cooperation with the Six-Party agreements of 2007 because it saw weakness in the initial European and United States replies to Russia.

However, Moscow should not take comfort from its military performance in Georgia. Almost immediately after the invasion, critical articles depicting all kinds of military failures have appeared in Russian and foreign presses and electronic media.<sup>33</sup> Some of these were obvious signs of an undisciplined force: public drunkenness and primitive looting of occupied areas, for example.

Statesmen have always attempted to gauge the benefits of going to war against the costs of doing so, while simultaneously weighing the benefits and costs of refraining from war. The present war suggests that in the case of the Russo-Georgian War, both sides failed to do so. Georgia catastrophically failed to reckon the benefits and costs of either line of policy. Indeed, its leadership seems to have ignored the possibility that Russia would retaliate in force to an initial Georgian operation, even if it were the result of a Russian provocation.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, Russia seems to have thought only in terms of the short-term consequences. Russia reckoned that with America tied down in Iraq, divided from its European allies (themselves divided and frequently dependent on Russian oil and gas), it could safely reassert its prominence in the CIS by force and provoke Georgia into rash action. To that degree, though, Russian calculations seem to be correct.

Even so, dizzy from success, Moscow overreached and attempted not just to teach Georgia a lesson, but to redraw the foundations of the contemporary international order with limited means of maintaining that new order. Here it succeeded only in multiplying the costs to itself because it failed to recognize that, as much as Russia resents it, its security depends upon that order. The current Russian threat assessment presupposing an adversarial relationship with the West and charging that it is being encircled by NATO is in many respects a phony threat assessment

designed to enhance the role of the armed forces and police at home and to cement the stability of an inherently unstable political system in the belief that *Nas ne lyubyat*, “nobody loves us.” The reality is, since 1991, Russia has enjoyed living with the least dangerous set of external threats in its long history. NATO does not even have contingency plans for an attack against Russia. Only now is it beginning to discuss drafting such plans, and the allies are showing the first signs of greater cohesion than in the recent past.<sup>35</sup> Neither can Russia afford intense geopolitical competition with the West while maintaining a petro-economy based on an inherently sub-optimal economic model of Muscovite Tsardom.<sup>36</sup>

If a nation uses a limited war to revise the international order, and if that nation makes demands it cannot enforce, not only is international order destabilized (the same international order that protected the belligerent nation to begin with) but also there may not be a viable organizing principle for the new system to operate from or to legitimize the belligerent nation’s security demands. Russia has singularly failed to translate its military achievement into legitimate authority and social order.

In the future, those who might commit their governments to war, in a world as densely interconnected as this one is, must not only weigh the benefits and costs of war, but grasp a fundamental lesson of our times: in wars of choice, the benefits obtained from an unprovoked use of large-scale force appear to be diminishing, while the costs to both the user of force and the victim of force are growing and have worldwide effects. This interconnection multiplies the primary, secondary, and tertiary costs of military adventures, like the one in Georgia, to primary combatants and to innocent bystanders. In Georgia’s case, these bystanders are not only its CIS partners and neighbors, but also the

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Ukraine, Belarus, Central Asia, and even Europe and the United States. The reactions of these states to this war suggest that they, too, have “lost” the war in crucial ways and now are beginning to bear its political-strategic costs.

When everybody loses in a war, the cause of peace and of a just order in international affairs

loses too. Ostensibly, those who threaten the use of force, or actually use force, may initially crown themselves victors in such conflicts. Moscow may convince itself that it has won a war in Georgia, but it has actually opened a Pandora’s Box of cascading negative effects merely to gratify its own imperial fantasies of resentment and revenge. **MR**

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36. On the Russian model see, Richard Hellie, “The Structure of Russian Imperial History,” *History and Theory*, no. 44 (2005): 88-112. Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York: Scribner’s, 2005), 417; Steven Rosefielde, *Russia in the 21st Century: The Prigal Superpower* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Marshall T. Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Stefan Hedlund, *Russian Path Dependence* (London: Routledge, 2005); Emil Pain, “Will Russia Transform into a Nationalist Empire,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, III, no. 2 (April-June, 2005): 71-80, Stephen Kotkin, “It’s Gogol Again” (paper presented as part of the project *The Energy Dimension in Russian Global Strategy*, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, Houston, 2004). These are only a few of the authors who now see the vitality of the tsarist metaphor as a means of explaining Putin’s Russia (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC: Praeger, 2004), passim; Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner’s, 1975); Stephen Blank, *Rosoboroneksport: Its Place in Russian Defense and Arms Sales Policy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007); Harley Balzer, “Confronting the Global Economy After Communism: Russia and China Compared (paper presented to the annual convention of the International Studies Association, Honolulu, HI, 1-5 March 2005); Vladimir Shlapentokh in collaboration with Joshua Woods, *Contemporary Russia as a Feudal Society: A New Perspective on the Post-Soviet Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Shlapentokh, “Early Feudalism—The Best Parallel for Contemporary Russia,” *Euro-Asia Studies*, XLVIII, no. 2 (1996): 391-411; Peter Stavrakis, *State-Building in Post-Soviet Russia: The Chicago Boys and the Decline of Administrative Capacity*, Occasional Papers of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, no. 254, 1993; Peter Stavrakis, “The Russian State in the Twenty-First Century” (paper presented to the VIII Annual Strategy Conference of the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 22-24 April 1997); Eugene Huskey “The State-Legal Administration and the Politics of Redundancy,” *Post-Soviet Studies*, XI, no. 2 (1995): 115-43.