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Frederic Labarre

THE BATTLE FOR GEORGIA

Defense Reform, NATO Doctrine, and
Military Effectiveness.

A Critical Assessment of the 2008 War

With a foreword by Armando Marques-Guedes

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 BDCOL Georgian officer RB (2008–2009)
 BDCOL Georgian officer ZJ (2008–2009)
 Alan Parastayev (2009)
 RED Georgian Staff Officer (2023)
 WHITE Georgian Staff Officer (2023)
 BLACK Georgian intelligence officer (2023)
 BLUE Georgian General Staff Officer (2023)
 YELLOW Georgian civilian MOD analyst (2023)
 Lt. Col. Robert Hamilton (GTEP and GSSOP 2023)

List of acronyms

ANP	Annual National Plan
ABM	Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Council
BDCOL	Baltic Defence College
BMP	Armored personnel carrier (Russia)
BRDM	Light armored reconnaissance vehicle (Russia)
BTR	Infantry fighting vehicle (Russia)
C2	Command and Control

1 Interview notes from the 2023 Tbilisi interviews have been taken, and confirmed by the interviewees. Since none of the Georgian respondents deigned to give their name or be recorded, a color was assigned to each respondent and each was given the opportunity to check their statements after the interviews. The WHITE Respondent, a Georgian Staff Officer, was interviewed on 26 June 2023. Another staff officer, RED, was interviewed on June 27, 2023. The Georgian BLUE, YELLOW, and BLACK respondents, respectively a member of the General Staff, a civilian ministry of defense analyst, and an intelligence analyst, were all interviewed on June 30, 2023. The author is familiar with the names of WHITE and RED. The names of BLUE, YELLOW and BLACK were never disclosed to the author.

CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CCMR	Center for Civil-Military Relations
CFE	Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CIR	Commander's Information Request
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CISS	Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCAF	Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces
DIB	Defence Institution Building
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAPC	Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council
EUCOM	European Command (U.S.)
FAS	Federation of American Scientists
FPC	Foreign Policy Concept
G7	Group of 7 Most-Industrialized Nations
GAF	Georgian Armed Forces
GAZ	Gosudarstvenniy Avto-Zavod (Russian national automaker)
GRU	Russian military intelligence
GSSOP	Georgia Sustainability, Stabilization Operations Program
GTEP	Georgia Train and Equip Program
HQ	Headquarters
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IFK	Institute für Frieden und Konflikt (Austria)
IIFMCG	International Independent Fact-finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (Tagliavini Commission)
IMF	International Monetary Fund

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IPAP	Individual Partnership Action Plan
IPB	Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield
ISAB	International Security Advisory Board
JFCOM	Joint Forces Command (U.S.)
JPKF	Joint Peacekeeping Force
JUOO	Joint Urban Operations Office
KFOR	Kosovo Peace Enforcement Mission (NATO)
MANPAD	Man-Portable Air Defense
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MOI	Ministry of the Interior
MRD	Motorized Rifle Division
MRR	Motorized Rifle Regiment
NAC	North Atlantic Committee
NACC	North Atlantic Cooperation Council
NDC	NATO Defense College
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NMC	NATO Military Committee
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
NPT	Non-proliferation Treaty
NRC	NATO-Russia Council
NSC	National Strategic Concept
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPORD	Operational Order
OSCE	Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe
PAP	Partnership Action Plan
PARP	Partnership Action Review Plan
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo

RPG	Rocket-propelled Grenade (launcher)
RTO	Research and Technology Organization (NATO)
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
STANAG	Standardization Agreement (NATO)
START	Strategic Arms Treaty (Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Arms)
UDI	Unilateral declaration of independence
UNOMIG	UN Observer Mission in Georgia
UNOSAT	UN Satellite Imagery Agency
USECT	Understand, Shape, Engage, Consolidate, Transition

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Acknowledgements

Those of us cursed with a good memory have nevertheless the pleasure of duly acknowledging those who, by their active support or mere presence, facilitate the production of such a study.

I do not claim that it is worthy of any prize, and in any case, I would view such honors with a healthy dose of doubt. The pleasure I have had in working on this topic is reward enough. Credit must befall those who in my view deserve it, in this lengthy eulogy. First and foremost, my gratitude goes to Lieutenant Colonel (CAF ret.) Doug Green, who planted the idea of a PhD in War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. I will not mention those who made such an academic endeavor so difficult the first time around save to say that, had I then persevered, my dissertation would never have had the relevance it now has for our most difficult times.

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my comprehensive exams and dissertation defense. I think since then, they call it an offense, not a defense.

The topic and professional outlay of this study is however much more ancient, going back to the beginning of my “career” (a word which translates to “*carrière*” in French, which can also mean “quarry” — a place where one digs a bottomless hole). That is where my real Education took place: in the momentous moment of authority provided by the post-Cold War. Thank you, Heli Tiirmaa, for facilitating my employment at the Estonian MOD, where I met luminaries such as Erik Männik, Jaan Murumets, and Harri Lahtein. Through them, I was exposed to mentors who shaped my thought on the subject of defense reform, and democratic transition. Those are Thomas-Durrell Young, recently retired from the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, Lieutenant-Colonel (UK ret.) Tim Park, and Lieutenant-Colonel (UK ret.) Glen Grant. I am proud to consider them friends, and also proud of what we accomplished together a quarter of a century ago, in Tallinn.

I thank all those in Georgia who, although nameless for the purpose of this acknowledgement, know who they are. I salute their courage in facilitating the interview process in 2008–2009 as well as recently, in 2023, at the Georgian MOD. Should they read the present work, they might bristle at what seems criticism. I hasten to add that criticism does not mean contempt. It denotes affection, whereas indifference is the mark of contempt.

I can name, however, Maia Sherazadishvili, who graciously verified the translation of some documents from Georgian to English.

Naturally, I cannot overlook Andreas Umland, general editor of this series, and Christoph Ohlwärther, Jana Dävers, and all the unseen magic-makers at Ibidem Verlag for bringing this work to the eyes of you, the Reader.

It is to you, the Reader, that the final homage falls. Thank you.

*Frederic Labarre,
Bad Bayersoien,
16 December 2025*

Foreword

My encounter with Dr. Frederic Labarre emerged through the seemingly random pathways that characterize modern academic discourse, yet proved to be anything but accidental. I discovered his doctoral thesis—a comprehensive examination of the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict—that immediately captivated my attention. This study is based on that thesis. This serendipitous discovery was particularly meaningful as it occurred nearly two decades after I had completed my own book, “The Five-Day War: The Invasion of Georgia”, published in 2009, barely a year after Russia’s invasion of Georgia on 7–12 August, 2008.

The intellectual resonance between our works was immediately apparent, yet this study possesses a sophistication and depth of analysis that reflected not only the passage of time, but also his access to military data and documentation that was simply unavailable in the immediate aftermath of the conflict in 2008–2009. Both of us had grappled with the fundamental questions raised by Georgia’s military defeat despite years of Western military assistance and training. But this perspective is enriched by the conduct of interviews with key military personnel, and the analysis of operational data that provide insights into the doctrinal shortcomings that characterized the Georgian experience.

This research is distinctive by its significant academic contribution going beyond from mere historical narrative. Where my 2009 analysis necessarily relied on

open sources, press reports, and the limited documentation available in the immediate post-conflict period, Dr. Labarre's study benefits from an in-depth look into the Tagliavini Commission's report published after the war as well as evidence which, although sometimes anecdotal, give color to the events of August 2008. His privileged access to a wide network of personal sources allowed him to construct a far more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the doctrinal contradictions that led to Georgia's defeat. This is unique among similar works.

To fully understand the significance of this contribution, one must first appreciate the historical trajectory of Georgian military development following the country's independence in 1991. Georgia was one of the first former Soviet republics to join the NATO Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in 1994 and Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2004, seeking to bring her military in line with NATO standards. This aspiration was formalized when, in 2006, the Georgian parliament voted unanimously for a bill calling for the integration of Georgia into NATO, followed by a non-binding referendum on 5 January, 2008 – in which 77% voted in favor of joining the organization (Asmus 2010).

Let me break it up. The Georgian military transformation cannot be understood without reference to American assistance programs that began in earnest following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Georgia joined the Global War on Terror and in 2002, the U.S. initiated the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) which assisted Georgian security forces with internal