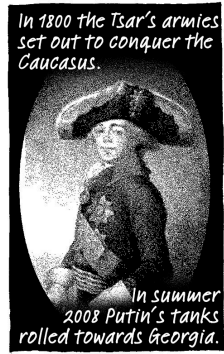


Twice, Russia has crossed these mountains and changed the geopolitical landscape.



In summer 2008 the Tsar's armies set out to conquer the Caucasus.



A border was newly drawn. The east-west blocs shifted. NATO expansion was stopped.

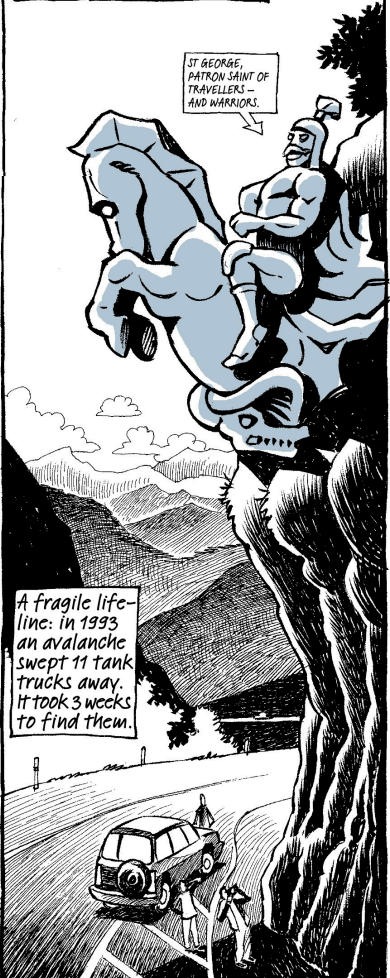
All that took place in Tskhinvali, the capital of the mini-State of South Ossetia.

TSKHINVALI

A REPORT BY CHAPPATTE

HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE IT?

One year later, I took the same route as the Russian army, a mountain-top corridor. This is the only access route, until recently closed to foreign visitors.



ST GEORGE, PATRON SAINT OF TRAVELLERS AND WARRIORS.

A fragile life-line: in 1993 an avalanche swept 11 tank trucks away. It took 3 weeks to find them.



You first have to fly from Moscow to Mineralnye Vody, 1,400 km. Then by car through Kabardino-Balkaria into North Ossetia. There, you leave the Grozny motorway and head due south towards the mountains.



At the border post, the tone is set - the customs officer is drunk.



Roki tunnel, where the columns of armoured vehicles crossed the white line of the Caucasus. And the red line of international politics.



On the other side, it looks like Switzerland: through mountain villages, a road winds its way down into the valley.



The Tskhinvali suburbs are no place for tourists - kilometres of flattened, uninhabited Georgian villages.

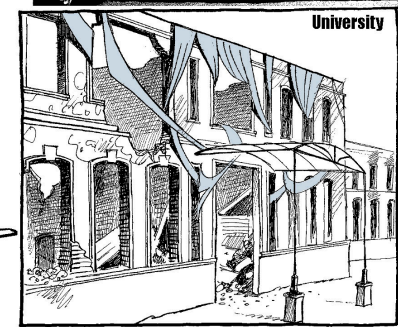


Independent Republic of South Ossetia

Surface area: 3,900 km²
 Population: 30,000 in capital: 18,000 (estimated)
 Languages: Ossetian, Georgian, Russian
 Industry: virtually non-existent (1 mineral water plant)
 Currency: rouble

Tskhinvali, capital of scars. Half the 4,300 houses damaged. 900 destroyed completely. Ten months later, only 400 roofs have been repaired. Public buildings? In ruin.

NOTHING'S BEEN REBUILT



University



Town centre

Instead of an independence monument, a Georgian tank turret adorns a crossroads.

Recent history

The Ossetians, who have settled on either side of the Caucasus, long for the unification denied them by Stalin: the south became an autonomous province of Georgia, while the north became an autonomous Soviet republic. With the end of the USSR, free Georgia tightened the noose on its own minorities. Outcome: South Ossetia declared independence in 1990. It paid for that with 3 Georgian wars of reconquest, 1991-92 (1,000-2,000 dead; between 50 and 100,000 fled to North Ossetia), 2004 and 2008 (approx. 600 dead). The last two wars were orchestrated by President Saakashvili, the hero of the Rose Revolution.

War of August 2008

In the night of 7 August 2008, Georgia attacked. The capital, Tskhinvali, was bombed. On 8 August, Russian military intervention to repel the attack and occupation of part of Georgian territory. It did not withdraw fully from Georgia until 2 months later. Nearly 4,500 Russian soldiers and border guards were stationed in the Republic of South Ossetia, whose existence is recognized by two countries only: Russia and Nicaragua.