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Defense Ministry Vague on War's Toll

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Two years after a brief war with Georgia, the Defense Ministry still has not provided a final account of the casualties, while its reports of lost military hardware widely differ from estimates by experts.

By contrast, it took Georgia's Defense Ministry a month to compile a detailed list of its losses in the August 2008 hostilities and post it online.

Contacted last week, a Russian Defense Ministry spokesman referred all queries for similar information to the portion of the ministry's web site that runs news clips containing quotes from top military officials. According to the clips, the number of the Russian troops killed in the conflict varies between 48 and 74, differing from official to official and without any clear pattern.

In an interview published in the government's Rossiiskaya Gazeta on Aug. 8 last year, Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin said his agency, which led the investigation into the conflict, had counted 67 names of those killed. He would not add other

details about them other than claiming that 10 of them were Russian peacekeepers killed by their Georgian peers in the first hours of the conflict.

In a comprehensive study of the military conflict in Georgia called Tanks of August, which was released in English last week, the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, or CAST, an independent think tank, put the number of Russian military casualties at 65.

The center's experts based their list — detailing ranks, regiments and times of the death — on Russian and Georgian media reports, official documents and eyewitness accounts, said Ruslan Pukhov, the CAST head.

Every fourth death tracked down by CAST — or 17 of the 65 — was not directly related to combat. Soldiers and officers died from mishandling firearms, friendly fire and in traffic accidents on the treacherous mountain roads. Most of the others, or 32 Russian troops, were killed in the first two days of the conflict on Aug. 8-9.

The Defense Ministry has not commented on the CAST study.

As for hardware, the ministry has recognized the loss of only four military aircraft in the conflict: three Su-25 fighters and one Tu-22M3 strategic bomber.

Using open sources, CAST counted two more Su-24 fighters that went down during the hostilities. In addition, two helicopters, an Mi-8 and an Mi-24, crashed in South Ossetia shortly after the war.

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