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How Villages Are Erased From the Georgian Map

By Paul Rimple

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Type Tamarasheni, Georgia, into Google Maps and you will see the vestiges of a typical Georgian village. People tilled their soil, played dominoes under the shade of beech trees and gossiped with neighbors as children romped in the orchards and fields. Families celebrated saints' days and birthdays and commemorated death days. Then the Ossetians arrived.

Scroll northward and the obliteration continues: Kurta, Kekhvi, Zemo Achabeti, Kvemo Achabeti and Eredvi in the east. These were the largest of the dozen settlements Ossetian marauders "cleansed" of their Georgian inhabitants while the Russian army turned a blind eye. Remember the names.

On Aug. 14, South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov announced plans to "clean up" the ruins of these villages to make way for "agriculture and industrial development" so that they will never be settlements again. "There is no need to keep the names," he said.

Tibilov, head of South Ossetia's KGB during the 1990s, became South Ossetia's leader this year after the 2011 elections were annulled following the victory of Alla Dzhioyeva, who ran on an anti-corruption platform. She had not been President Vladimir Putin's choice. Although at odds with former South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, Tibilov shares his vision of unification with North Ossetia and endorses ethnic cleansing.

Both Georgia and South Ossetia accused each other of genocide in the 2008 war, yet neither side demonstrated "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular group of people," as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Both traded ethnic cleansing charges, but it was South Ossetia that drove over 17,000 peaceful Georgians from their homes. Some were murdered outright for being Georgian.

Kokoity conceded that his people and Russian forces had forced the ethnic Georgians out of these villages and would not allow them to return. Using force or intimidation to remove people of another ethnic group from a given area is ethnic cleansing, according to the United Nations' definition, while the International Criminal Court stipulates that the forcible deportation of a population is a crime against humanity.

Before the 2008 war ended, Georgia filed a hasty suit against Russia for 20 years of ethnic cleansing in the two breakaway provinces. The International Criminal Court ruled that it had no jurisdiction and tossed out the claim. Now, with Russia's blessing, South Ossetia is finishing its job of erasing Georgian traces from the map.

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