

## **Armenia: Fading Fortunes of 'Little Russia'**

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Armenia's Molokans, who have endured many upheavals in their time, are struggling to cope with the country's post-Soviet transition.

Two hours north of Yerevan, against the backdrop of the Lori-Pambak mountain range, lies a little piece of the Russian countryside. Blonde-haired, blue-eyes kids run around the cabbage fields and beet patches. Many of the men sport bushy Tolstoyan beards.

The Russian-speaking population in this northern Armenian village of Fioletovo is one of the last remnants of the country's dwindling Molokan community - descendants of a Christian sect driven from the heart of the Russian Empire in 1830.

At the beginning of the 1990s, there were around 50,000 Molokans in villages scattered across northern Armenia. Just 5000 remain, continuing the traditions of their Russian ancestors.

After deportation from Russia, resettlement, and the persecution of the Soviet years, the Molokans became victims of the painful transition period to uneasy democracy.

Within a couple of years of Armenian independence, they lost their right to free education and subsidised transportation, on which they depended for selling their produce.

With little hope of circumstances improving, the last remaining Molokans are likely to leave the land their ancestors settled in just 170 years ago.

The Molokans' defiance of the Orthodox church led Tsar Nikolai I to ban the community from settling in central Russia in 1830, urging them to move instead to the Transcaucasus - many turning up in Armenia.

Two thousand feet above sea level, the land they settled on was far from ideal, but they set about farming the sort of crops which could endure the harsh conditions: cabbage, beet, carrots.

The community, though, soon found themselves bearing the ill-will of the Soviets who came down hard on their religious beliefs and sense of communal identity.

Indeed, for people in Fioletovo, the sole surviving purely Molokan village, life is divided into two periods: "before" and "after" the 1988 earthquake which devastated Armenia - a period they associate with the demise of communism.

"Before the earthquake it was really hard," said Ivan. "They prosecuted us and did not let us believe in God. Now we can believe the way we want and we can perform our rituals."

They may have been granted freedom to live and worship as they pleased, but in the economic turmoil that followed, the area's basic infrastructure broke down and almost destroyed the sole means they have of supporting themselves - export of cabbages and sauerkraut.

The lorries which ferried their surplus back to Russia and Ukraine no longer came, air travel became too expensive, the railways never seemed to run. "All that remains now," said Tatiana Mechikov, "is to sell our cabbage to Tbilisi and Yerevan."

At the same time, a language law was passed, cutting off support to non-Armenian schools. Although Fioletovo managed to retain its school, graduates were unable to continue their studies.

With their economic prospects in tatters and little hope of their children finishing their education, families upped sticks and left, many trying their luck in the West, especially the United States and Canada.

The remaining Molokans don't want to leave. A practical people by nature, they have done their best to cope, working as repairmen and in the construction trade - many in Yerevan.

Their neighbours would like them to stay. Over the years, they have built up strong ties with the local population. "We've always lived in harmony," says Akop, from the village of Vanadzor. "It would be a shame if they went."

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**Location:** Stavropol  
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North Ossetia  
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**Focus:** Caucasus

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