

Special Report: Last Days of the Georgian Dukhobors

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Squeezed out by their neighbours in southern Georgia, the religious sect is returning to the land of its forefathers.

A large loaf of white bread, which our hostess had just pulled out of the old Russian stove, was lying on the table surrounded by cheese, tomatoes and sour cream. Suddenly a bottle of “samogon”, strong Russian homemade alcoholic brew, appeared from nowhere as if by magic.

“Oh no, don’t pour me any,” 75-year-old Aunt Niura protested in embarrassment but took the glass and immediately pronounced a toast. “To your health! If your health is strong, then everything else will follow. But if not...”

She was interrupted by her neighbour Nastya, “I just wish that God keeps at least a handful of people here. Because if everyone leaves, what will become of all of this?”

“Let’s drink to our dear little corner, to our mountains...”

That little corner is the village of Gorelovka in the mountains of southern Georgia, home to some of the last members of the Dukhobor sect to remain in the country. Sadly, they may not last long. Almost all have close relatives in Russia and almost all are planning to emigrate.

Only fifteen years ago Dukhobors inhabited eight villages, but today the community, which once boasted some 7,000 people, shrank to less than 700.

Dukhobors (the Russian word means “spirit wrestlers”) are ethnic Russians, representatives of a rare Christian Orthodox sect expelled to the Caucasus in the mid-nineteenth century.

They do not recognise the church or priests, but believe that each man’s soul is a temple. Dukhobors do not worship the cross or icons and they reject the church sacraments. They believe that Jesus Christ transmigrated into God’s chosen people – the Dukhobors. The life of every Dukhobor should serve as an example for others because love and joy, peacefulness and patience, faith, humility and abstinence, reign in each believer.

In the late 19th century, having become acquainted with the ideas of the great writer and pacifist Leo Tolstoy, the Dukhobors refused to serve in the Russian Tsar’s army. And in 1895 they famously collected together all their weaponry and set fire to it.

“The Dukhobors put all the weapons into one big pile and lit it up,” said Tatyana Chuchmayeva, leader of the Dukhobor community in Georgia. “When the government called in the Cossacks, they stood around the fire holding each other’s hands and sang psalms and peaceful songs. All the time the Cossacks were flogging them with whips.”

Many of those who burned the weapons were punished and around 500 families were exiled to Siberia. However, Tolstoy managed, with the help of English Quakers, to organise the resettlement of Dukhobors to Canada where they were spared military service.

Many others stayed in Georgia and survived all the tribulations of the 20th century.

However, life under independent Georgia has proved the biggest test. Two censuses conducted in 1989 and 2002 show that of 340,000 Russians that lived in Georgia in 1989 less than ten per cent – about 32,500 people – remained there thirteen years later. Other ethnic minorities also left.

Fyodor Goncharov, chairman of the Gorelovka village council, said that the first wave of emigration occurred in 1989-1991 when the extreme nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia was leader of Georgia. About half of the Dukhobor population left the region.

In the late 1980s, the Merab Kostava Foundation was set up in Tbilisi with the stated aim of making Georgians the dominant ethnic group. They focussed strong attention on the southern province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where over 90 per cent were ethnic-Armenians and the rest, with few exceptions, were Russian Dukhobors.

The Merab Kostava Foundation bought about 200 of the Dukhobors' houses and gave these to Georgians. Clothes and funds were provided to the new arrivals.

However, the experiment failed. "They could not endure our living conditions and ran away from here after one year," said Konstantin Vardanian, a journalist from the local town of Ninotsminda. "During the first winter they heated their houses with coal and firewood that the foundation had left for them. Then, after they ran out of coal, they lived in one room of the house and pulled up floors in the other rooms and burnt them in stoves. When spring came they all left."

Local Armenians were alarmed by the Merab Kostava project and one result was that the Armenian Javakh Committee, founded to fight for Armenian rights in Javakheti, also began to buy houses from Dukhobors – just to keep them out of Georgian hands. "It was some sort of competition, really," Vardanian said, with Armenians and Georgians vying for the same houses in Dukhobor villages.

At first, Armenians enjoyed being neighbours to the Dukhobors. "Akhalkalaki people always preferred to buy butter, cheese, curd cheese and other dairy products from Dukhobors," remembers Karine Khodikian, a well-known Armenian writer originally from the local town of Akhalkalaki. "It was a sign of respect for them, their cleanliness and tidiness."

But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenians got envious of the Dukhobors and their apparently orderly, calm lives. "Armenians saw that the Dukhobor community in Gorelovka was self-sustaining, they said that Canadians Dukhobors helped it," Vardanian said.

Armenians from mountain villages, where living conditions were much worse than in Gorelovka, began to move into the houses purchased by the Javakhk Committee and to buy land. They were joined by immigrants from Armenia who used to live in the city of Gumri and its neighbouring villages – a region almost entirely demolished by the 1988 earthquake. Relations between the Dukhobors and these newcomers was far worse than with their old neighbours.

Enterprising Armenians opened small shops and started producing sour cream, butter and cheese, traditional Dukhobor products. They purchase milk from the Dukhobors, but the latter are very unhappy

with the buying prices.

“Armenians buy milk in our village,” said Goncharov. “Then they make cheese out of it, take it to Tbilisi and sell it. They pay us only 30 tetri for a litre (about 15 cents), while we have to pay 70 or 80 tetri just for one litre of fuel.”

Dukhobor villager Sveta Gonachrova said that her neighbours were frightened by the incoming Armenians, “You step outside and get punched in the face.”

Vardanian believes that antipathy between the Dukhobors and Armenians is not the only reason Dukhobors are leaving, but “it contributed”.

This new wave of emigration has found help from the Russian authorities.

In December 1998, Russia’s then-prime minister Yevgeny Primakov signed a decree on assistance to the Georgian Dukhobors and the Russian parliament, the State Duma passed a special resolution on the group. The International Organisation for Migration helped with the resettlement, while Georgia’s emergencies ministry provided buses.

In January 1999, community leader Lyuba Goncharova led a large number of her community on a journey whose final point of destination was the Bryansk region of Russia. Many of those left behind are now seeking help from the Russian embassy in Tbilisi to go and join them.

The remaining Dukhobors say they are worried by Georgia’s new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, whom they see as a Georgian nationalist. There are also rumours in the community – denied by Georgian officials – that all non-Georgian schools will be closed.

“Saakashvili’s rise to power scares everyone,” said Chuchmayeva. “Everyone is panic-stricken. People see what is happening in (South) Ossetia and feel scared,” she added in a reference to Saakashvili’s attempts to restore central authority to that breakaway region.

“Now they are talking about making all schools switch to the Georgian language... And that scares people. They are terrified that main subjects in schools will be taught in Georgian from 2006 and our children will not be able to study.”

Georgia’s minister for refugees and migration, Eter Astemirova, told IWPR that “the main reason they are leaving, as far as I know, is due to problems with the local Armenian population. There is no basis to their worries about the Georgian language or schools”.

Astemirova said the Georgian state was entirely neutral in the affair. Dukhobors are not helped “to leave or to stay”, she said. “If there is a problem, we will try to address it. ... So far, I don’t know, because we have no information about Dukhobors.”

The cultural attaché of the Russian embassy in Tbilisi, Vasily Korchmar, said another reason for the Dukhobors’ desire to leave is the difficult economic situation in Georgia and its tense relationship with Russia.

Gonachrova agreed that tradition counted for nothing as this community made up its mind. For young people in particular life is better in Russia than in Gorelovka, "We are sorry to leave, but what can one do? There are [proper] conditions for young people in Russia. Discos and all sorts of amusement. We have nothing."

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