

## **An Uneasy Peace**

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The legacy of the 1992 Ingush-Ossetian conflict casts a long shadow over villages in the disputed Prigorodny region

Chermen is a village divided. Situated in the Prigorodny region of North Ossetia, Chermen was one of the flash points of the 1992 conflict between local Ossetians and Ingush militants.

Demolished homes and smallholdings still stand as a chilling reminder of those terrifying days.

Chermen originally bore the name of its founder, Bazorkin, an Ingush nobleman. Bazorkino was renamed in 1944 when the Ingush population was accused of collaborating with the Nazis and was deported en masse to Central Asia. Chermen is the name of a popular Ossetian dramatic hero.

In the years that followed, the Soviet government allowed ethnic Ossetians to settle in the homes vacated by the deportees. The seeds of tension were first sown when the Ingush were rehabilitated in the 1950s and began to return to their homeland.

Chermen's strategically important position - 7km from Vladikavkaz and 6km west of Nazran - meant that it became the first settlement in the Prigorodny region to face a direct assault by Ingush partisans.

The Ingush first captured and neutralised a Russian military outpost, then staged a bomb attack on the local police station. Police officers were dragged out of the building and summarily shot.

Although Chermen escaped any major military action, hundreds of homes were burned down and a total of 40 Ossetians were killed by the marauders. Others fled the village, finding refuge in nearby Ossetian settlements or with sympathetic Ingush families. The pre-1992 population of 8,000 dropped by a quarter.

Many of the ruined houses have since been rebuilt by the Vladikavkaz government but the legacy of the 1992 conflict still remains. For five or six years after the fighting, sporadic shooting was a nightly occurrence and it is only recently that the local population has known a measure of peaceful co-existence.

The village is divided strictly along ethnic lines. The centre is dominated by Ossetians while the outskirts are exclusively Ingush. Two schools are attended by Ossetian children; the third has only Ingush pupils.

In another disputed village, teachers attempted to mix children from both ethnic groups. The experiment resulted in angry clashes between pupils from the two warring sides. Now only the younger children attend mixed classes whilst the seniors are kept well apart.

The Chermen authorities have never even discussed this option - an indication that passions are still too high for any attempt at rapprochement.

Repeated efforts have been made to bring Ingush refugees back to their former homes in the Ossetian sector but, on each occasion, local Ossetians have threatened violent resistance.

One of the village elders, 78-year-old Alikhan Dudiev, can always be found at the forefront of such protests. He argues that the Ingush have no moral right to return to the settlement and continue living amongst the Ossetians as if nothing had happened. And, in North Ossetia, the younger generation is still guided by the opinions of their elders.

The Ingush, on the other hand, have little objection to their erstwhile Ossetian neighbours returning to the Ingush part of Chermen. Few Ossetians, however, have taken the opportunity, reasoning that their government failed to protect them in 1992 and lacks the resources to do so in the future.

Chermen stands on the main road between Nazran and Vladikavkaz but there is no through traffic. In the absence of any local industry, the Ingush go to work in Nazran and the Ossetians travel to their capital.

The rich black soils around the village which were once the pride of North Ossetia remain untilled and agricultural production has effectively been abandoned.

Only one activity thrives in Chermen - drug-dealing. The settlement has become the centre of the North Ossetian drugs trade with hundreds of addicts and traffickers visiting Chermen every day from Vladikavkaz and other parts of North Ossetia.

But life goes on in Chermen, despite the uneasy peace and the constant threat of violence. And, to some extent, the drugs are seen as a cure rather than a symptom.

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