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## Arkhonskaya: A Terek Cossack Community

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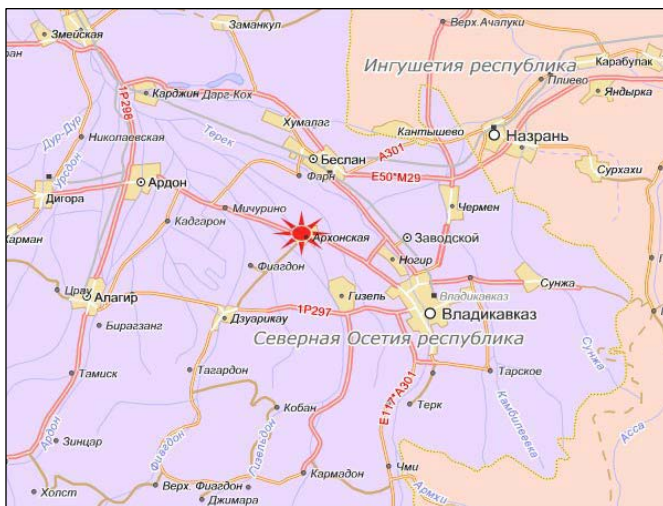


## Arkhonskaya: A Terek Cossack Community

Stephen R. Bowers, Anna Chekashkina, Oleg Abzaletdinov, S. Reed Bowers

Few images are more associated with traditional Russia than that of the Cossacks. Often described as defenders of the frontiers of the Russian Empire, the Cossacks fortunes took a turn for the worse as the Czarist regime collapsed. Long associated with the Czarist system, the Cossack forces refused to defend that order in 1917 when it was challenged by a revolutionary movement. While Cossack soldiers initially fought to preserve Kerensky's provisional government, they were demoralized by the continuation of Russian units in combat against the Germans. Thus, later that year, when called upon to oppose the Leninist forces the Cossacks rejected their orders and Cossack inaction made possible a second Russian revolution. Relations with the Bolsheviks, however, were even more contentious and, even though some Cossacks supported the Reds during the Civil War, the victorious Bolsheviks set out to destroy the Cossack brotherhoods and strip the Cossacks of all their possessions.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the Soviet period was a time of oppression for the Cossacks and many fled to the West and others simply abandoned their Cossack identity. While some features of the Cossack identity were restored during World War Two, Stalin's "Cossack units" of even less substance than his embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was simply part of an effort to identify an unpopular Bolshevik regime with the forces of Russian tradition. At the war's end, the Soviets returned to their anti-Cossack



Arkhonskaya is indicated by the red star on the map.

<sup>1</sup> Lester W. Grau, "The Cossack Brotherhood Reborn", *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1993

policies. It was not until the collapse of the Soviet state that there was a genuine Cossack revival. <sup>2</sup>

With the Cossack revival, Cossack communities and military units appeared throughout the former Soviet space. In some cases, such as Moldova during the Moldovan war of 1992, Cossack units played an active military role. In others, their communities emerged as part of the social fabric and Cossack soldiers assumed a variety of peaceful tasks in the area of police and security services. Whatever function they performed, the Cossack were recognized as a coherent and organized political force whose support was sought by politicians hoping to gain political power as the post-Soviet political structure assumed an organizational form.

Arkhonskaya, a small town in the Prigorodny area of North Ossetia, is a typical Cossack community. This settlement, which has a population of 8,000, is located nine miles from Vladikavkaz and sixteen miles from Nazran, Ingushetia. Vladikavkaz has a population of 315,000 and Nazran's population is approximately 275,000. <sup>3</sup> It enjoys the benefits of a moderate climate and is located near the Terek River which is one of the main streams flowing from the

northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains into Russia. The Prigorodny district, which has a population of just over 100,000), was once a part of Ingushetia and still has a significant Ingush minority. Arkhonskaya is identified as a *stanitsa* which implies that it is bigger than a "village" but smaller than a town or a city. Usually they are more urbanized in that they have greater commercial diversity. In



Unpaved, irregular streets are common in many Arkhonskaya residential areas

this regard, one would note that Arkhonskaya has a variety of types of enterprises. Its main street features places such as a beauty salon, a pharmacy, a window shop, a cosmetology office, and even a mini-mall. These are features not generally associated with a village but rather with a town or small city. Many of the neighborhoods, by contrast, have unpaved streets more characteristic of a village in the Caucasus region.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> [www.WolframAlpha](http://www.WolframAlpha).

Arkhonsksya is situated on Highway P-295 which is a direct route for traffic from Vladikavkaz toward the northwestern part of the North Caucasus. Arkhonsksya's convenient location is highlighted by the fact that five roads lead into the village. Its proximity to both Vladikavkaz and Nazran adds to the economic viability of Arkhonskaya and helps explain its transformation from village to *stanitsa*.

## The Economy of Arkhonskaya

Given the region's favorable climate and soil conditions, it is not surprising that most residents are employed in agriculture and that agriculture is the most important and profitable local industry. Yet, Arkhonskaya is more than a farm community and there are other occupations. For example, there are many people who benefit from Russia's economic reforms and have their own



Sign at entrance to Arkhonskaya

businesses, most of which are involved in trading. Under new regulations, almost every city and village has a small area that is set aside for trading. In this area there are small tents which are situated side by side with a variety of products being offered for sale. This is the type of private business which exists in Arkhonskaya. Other local people are employed in the construction trade and enjoy a profitable commerce in building houses and preparing modern plumbing

systems for those new homes. Finally, in an effort to sustain traditional Russian culture, villagers also trade in handicrafts which they can create in their homes. In the local school, students are able to study craft-making and can turn this skill into a marketable skill after they complete their basic education.

While Arkhonskaya offers job opportunities, its residents do feel the attraction of nearby Vladikavkaz as well as other cities in the region and have chosen to

work outside the town. The most obvious appeal of a place like Vladikavkaz in contrast with Arkhonskaya is a higher salary for the same work. If a person enjoys the relatively modest cost of maintaining a home in Arkhonskaya, the generous urban salary makes possible a higher standard of living. Yet, as long as Arkhonskaya continues to offer opportunities for productive work, the attraction of a higher Vladikavkaz salary is limited. The benefit of that salary is reduced by the expense and inconvenience of a long commute. A worker could avoid the long commute by maintaining an apartment in Vladikavkaz but, again, that is an expense that must be counted against the urban salary. Equally compelling is the fact that the commuting worker would then miss the benefits of a more relaxed small town life by having a permanent residence in the city. Of course, as noted



Children of School Number 2 in 2009

previously, many people own the business they operate in Arkhonskaya or are involved in agriculture so they are not likely to contribute to the urbanization of the North Caucasus by moving elsewhere.

An important feature of agriculture in this region has been the creation of entrepreneurial ventures in which private individuals actually own large plots of land and have developed their own markets. This involves cultivation of the land in order to produce crops that can be individually marketed throughout the district. Their productivity is often facilitated by the employment of workers who help harvest and market agricultural products.

The attractiveness of Arkhonskaya as a home is enhanced by the fact that this small community offers the basic services that are associated with larger towns or cities. There is, for example, a large hospital in Arkhonskaya which accepts patients not only from the village but even from outlying communities. An ambulance service is provided for bringing patients from nearby population centers. In addition to the hospital, Arkhonskaya has a modern polyclinic to meet immediate health care needs. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Arkhonskaya city manager Lysokon Alexandr Vasilievich

Equally important as both a basic service and a support for maintaining the local population is the Arkhonskaya school system. There are two schools in the village and, as a result, children are able to complete their studies without having to travel to nearby towns. In these schools children are taught the basic subjects that one would expect for young Russians. In addition, the schools offer instruction in handicraft production. Given the fact that the handicraft industry is an important component of the North Caucasus community, this is an important contribution to maintenance of the local labor force. Formal instruction is supplemented by handicraft exhibitions which are organized by the schools and local competitions to cultivate the skills of Arkhonskaya's youth. The picture on the right shows an exhibition of knitted goods for small children. They are examples of locally produced items which are sold



Handicraft produced in Arkhonskaya



Locally produced nesting dolls

throughout the region. Another locally produced item, one that has long been synonymous with Russian culture, is the *matryoshka* or “nesting doll”. These dolls are typically made of wood from the linden tree, painted in accordance with the appropriate local artwork, and aged for two years to ensure durability. The ability of Arkhonskaya's youth to practice this art represents an important skill in the production of popular Russian crafts. <sup>5</sup>

Events throughout the school year demonstrate basic themes of Arkhonskaya's culture. School programs, such as those in Arkhonskaya School Number 2, emphasize not only the idea of Russian patriotism and history but include key elements of Cossack history and tradition. The school uniforms themselves are a reflection of at least some elements of Cossack symbolism. Equally important in perpetuating Cossack values are the special courses in martial arts and other self-defense skills. Members of the local Cossack organization volunteer

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

to offer this instruction for Arkhonskaya's young boys. As the program draws to an end, participants receive the certificates (*pictured on the right*) which attest to their completion of the instructional program and their possession of skills which will help qualify them for Cossack membership in the future. Many of those completing the course become members of the Terek Cossacks.



Participants display course certificates



End of school year festival in 2009

Just as the opening of the Russian school year is an important event in the life of every town, the conclusion of the school year is also marked by special events. Each spring, students from all of Arkhonskaya's schools, their parents, and the teachers gather for a picnic in the village's culture park. The occasion is marked not only by an abundance of food but also by music and speeches which emphasize the important role played by Arkhonskaya's school in making it possible for young people to have the skills needed to be productive members of this community.

## The Culture of Arkhonskaya

Like most Cossack communities, Arkhonskaya's culture is a reflection of traditional Russia. Discipline, patriotism, and hard work are among the core values of this community. Alcoholism and abortion, the scourge of many modern Russian cities, are discouraged in Arkhonskaya. Temperance is an important attribute of residents of this village and, in contrast to so many Russian urban dwellers, people want to have large families. As is the case in most Cossack villages, the Orthodox Church plays an important role in Arkhonskaya. Like many places of worship during the Soviet period, Arkhonskaya's St. Alexander Nevsky Church had fallen into disrepair. Following the collapse of the Soviet system, Arkhonskaya's villagers united to restore their church by collecting money and donating their own services in

order to realize their dream of having a functional church. While the overwhelming majority of village residents are Orthodox Christians, there is also a small Muslim community. No other religious communities are represented in Arkhonskaya.



St. Alexander Nevsky Church

While there is more to Arkhonskaya today than what one might think of as a “Cossack community”, it is important to note that the establishment of Arkhonskaya was a consequence of the advance of Ukrainian Cossacks into Prigorodny. At the entrance to the village, a sign notes that Arkhonskyaya was founded in 1838. It was in this year that seventy-nine of the Ukrainian Cossacks, who were accompanied by their families,



Statue in Arkhonskaya’s park honors Terek Cossacks who died in combat.

settled in Arkhonskaya and created a village which was surrounded by a fence and a moat and protected by two large guns. Historians have often observed that Cossacks have their origin in settlements of runaway peasants and the story of Arkhonskaya would support this proposition.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after their arrival in the region, the Cossacks created a force which was known as the Terek Cossack Army and consisted of seventy villages. While Arkhonskaya was not a major component of this force, it did enjoy respect for its participation in numerous battles against tribes of the North Caucasian Muslims during the Caucasian War (1817–1864) or, as it is sometimes known, the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. By 1859, most of the combat in the Caucasus had ended and the residents of Arkhonskaya were able to resume the farming for which their climate was suited. In

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<sup>6</sup> For development of this theme see Thomas M. Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700-1860*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999.



1873, as part of the First Vladikavkaz Cossack regiment, Arkhonskaya once again resumed its military role and played a major role in claiming the Khanate of Khiva as a Russian protectorate.

Shortly after this, the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 brought the Arkhonskaya Cossacks back into combat where they distinguished themselves for bravery and determination. Among the most exemplary of their engagements was a clash with Turkish infantry in July 1877 as a result of which the unit received a special commendation from Czar Alexander II. The Russian-Turkish war was followed by over two decades of peace of Arkhonskays's Cossacks. It was not until the Russian-Japanese war (1904-1905) and the mobilization of Cossack forces that the Cossacks of Arkhonskaya returned to combat. According to accounts of this two year long conflict, the Cossack cavalry distinguished itself by constantly patrolling without relief and engaging the enemy with success in what was an otherwise dismal performance by Russian troops.<sup>7</sup> In the House of Culture in Arkhonskaya, the names of local Cossacks who fell during that war are recorded on monuments which are carefully maintained by villagers who still take pride in the service of their forefathers.

In 1914, Arkhonskaya's Cossacks found themselves in combat against Turkish forces. While they were not involved in many major campaigns, Arkhonskaya's



Professor Abzaletdinov meeting with House of Culture official Bogachyova Nina Ivanovna

Cossacks suffered greatly, not only from excessive combat losses – up to one third of their force in one engagement – but also from the difficult environmental conditions they faced. Although they distinguished themselves in the Caucasus region by enhancing the stability of Persia, which was a Russian ally, their greatest contributions to the war effort took place on the Western Front. In this theater, Arkhonskaya's forces faced Russia's enemies in the Carpathian Mountains and played an especially significant role in fighting in the forests of Bukovina. Almost every member of this force earned the Cross of St George's in recognition of their exemplary service in this region.

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<sup>7</sup> Serge Nidvine, "The Russian Cavalry during the Russo-Japanese War", *The Russo-Japanese War Research Society*, [www.russojapanesewar.com/russcav.html](http://www.russojapanesewar.com/russcav.html)

The contemporary situation is very different. Under Russian defense regulations, Cossack organizations are not allowed to participate in military operations as discrete units. However, individual Cossacks who wish to be involved may contract with the Ministry of Defense and thus serve in a regular military organization while still being recognized as Cossacks. Through this arrangement, individual Cossacks from many North Caucasus communities, including Arkhonskaya, are perpetuating the Cossack tradition of service to the Russian state. <sup>8</sup>



Monument honoring Arkhonskaya's Cossacks

While maintaining a tradition of service to the Russian state, the Cossacks of Arkhonskaya also serve the local community. There is a formal Cossack organization in Arkhonskaya which is supported by the village administration. In turn, the Cossacks help Arkhonskaya in several ways. First, they are



Arkhonskaya's Art Center is a focal point for cultural activities

responsible for securing the territory of the village and the area around the village. Second, they have a specific responsibility to keep the streets orderly and to support the police in preventing criminal actions. Finally, the Cossacks participate in all demonstrations and celebrations of holidays. This maintains the Cossack tradition of being part of the community and ensures that,

should there be instances of public disorder during those events, the Cossacks are there to suppress disruptive or dangerous behavior. Cossacks can often be seen assisting the police on the roads in the area by joining with them if automobiles are stopped in connection with law enforcement demands.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Arkhonskaya city manager Lysokon Alexandr Vasilievich

While Cossack organizations have been known to discourage the excessive use



An Arkhonskaya memorial to cultural figures

of alcohol, the Arkhonskaya Cossacks have not been involved in such undertakings. They do, however, visit schools and offer special programs for local children. Cossack martial arts instructors are frequent guests in the schools and children enjoy learning the basics of self-defense. These activities, of course, give the Cossacks an opportunity of encouraging children to join the Cossack

organization. This is a positive activity not only for the children but also for the Cossacks themselves who often express concern that the Cossack culture in the North Caucasus may disappear.

The cultural record of Arkhonskaya is being preserved, at least in part, by the village's excellent web site at <http://st-arhonskaya.narod.ru>. The site provides information about the history and culture of the community and features an assortment of photographs of people and places while giving readers a forum for sharing ideas and facts about the region.

## Demographic Considerations

The demographic situation of Arkhonskaya's Terek Cossack community does not stand in isolation but is linked with trends throughout the North Caucasus. Of special importance is the continuing decline of ethnic Russians, a phenomenon which began in the mid-1990s when the accumulated impact of social-political tensions and criminality forced many Russians to flee.<sup>9</sup>

Arkhonskaya, however, unlike many other communities of the North Caucasus, has not suffered from an out-migration of its Russian population. There are 22 nationalities in Arkhonskaya today but the Russians are by far the major ethnic community. As of today, 70% of the village's residents are Russia while the Ossets make up 27% of the local population. Moreover, while

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<sup>9</sup> "Outflow of Russians from Dagestan Continues", *www.skfonews.ru*, 21 March 2010

young people of Arkhonskaya are likely to go away to study at a university – sometimes in nearby cities other times in cities that are far away – they tend to return to either Arkhonskaya or Vladikavkaz to work there. They generally embrace the notion that their hard work will be rewarded and do not contribute to the negative demographic trends observed elsewhere in the North Caucasus. The young people who do not return to the area are motivated primarily by economic concerns and fear they will suffer professionally if they return to their home region rather than the security concerns often discussed in the media. <sup>10</sup> Consequently, Prigorodny has a reputation for tensions between the Ingush and the Ossetians. The Russian human rights organization Memorial has documented several cases of violence in Prigorodny, especially random assaults against members of the Ingush minority. <sup>11</sup>

While Arkhonskaya has not suffered from the violence associated with other



Arkhonskaya's main street is a reminder of the prosperity that makes this region attractive

regions of the North Caucasus, residents are aware of the fact that criminal behavior and violence are possibilities. Even though the village itself is not directly involved, the Prigorodny District faces problems with Ingush, including Ingush refugees. Citizens frequently express their concern about corruption associated with

the programs dealing with Ingush refugees who are, under law, entitled to compensation. All too often, the Federal Migratory Service of Russia for the Republic of Ingushetia, the agency responsible for dealing with compensation for the Ingush, pays benefits to people who have never been refugees. One anonymous informant claimed that relatives of employees of the Migratory Service have provided false documents that enabled them to receive funds allocated for genuine refugees. Thus, the free-of-charge resort vouchers intended as benefits for refugees fall into the hands of people who are

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Arkhonskaya city manager Lysokon Alexandr Vasilievich

<sup>11</sup> [www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2007/11/m110411.htm](http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2007/11/m110411.htm)

manipulating the system. There are also disputes about whether the Ingush or the Ossetians will get places in the better regional schools.<sup>12</sup>

Lawlessness is commonplace throughout much of the Caucasus and Arkhonskaya residents live in the shadow of violence. In a six month period, twenty-two North Ossetia residents (nineteen Ingush and three Chechens) disappeared. The mutilated body of one victim was found but the others remained missing and, over a year later, nobody had been detained or was even suspected of committing these crimes. In the nearby village of Chermen a group of unidentified men shot three local Ingush youths, all of whom died.<sup>13</sup> Trouble may well have been averted earlier when officers of the Russian Ministry of Interior seized 5 kilos of ammonite, two 200-gram TNT sticks, 147 detonators and a 180-metre length of igniting cord from a 43-year old man who lived in Arkhonskaya.<sup>14</sup>



Arkhonskaya's house of business hosts several private commercial enterprises

Disputes with the Ingush emerged as a factor in an incident which took place on a troop transport on 29 November 2008. The incident took place on a Russian troop train traveling through the Krasnoyarsk region toward a military facility in Khabarovsk where the draftees were to begin their service. According to published reports, four draftees confronted the two Ingush youths, both of whom were residents of Arkhonskaya, and who were forced to jump from the moving train. One died immediately while the second youth was hospitalized for his injuries. Police arrested four other draftees and charged them with provoking racial conflict and causing the death of the Ingush soldier.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Caucasian Knot*, 4 February 2009

<sup>13</sup> [WWW.memo.ru](http://WWW.memo.ru), 11 November 2007

<sup>14</sup> [WWW.MVDInform.ru](http://WWW.MVDInform.ru), 13 May 2005

<sup>15</sup> "Arkhonskaya Incident", RIA Novosti, 5 December 2008

## The Arkhonskaya Worldview

The worldview of any community is a complex amalgam of many cultural elements. For Arkhonskaya, one of the most conspicuous values is the veneration of the traditions of the Terek Cossacks. Those traditions are memorialized in public displays which can be seen in Arkhonskaya's park as well as in the cemetery with its monuments which honor the Cossack dead. The Terek Cossack tradition is not limited to the frozen postures of statuary and other artistic still life. A living Terek Cossack tradition is instilled into the youth of Arkhonskaya through the local educational system and the special courses offered for young people who want to learn the skills needed for service with the Cossacks. Equally significant is the belief system of the Russian



Sign seen upon leaving Arkhonskaya

Orthodox Church. The prodigious local voluntary effort that went into the restoration of the St. Alexander Nevsky Church is a tribute to the community's embrace of Russian Orthodoxy as their faith. At the same time, it is important to note that adherence to Russian Orthodoxy has not been accompanied by intolerance of the local Islamic community, small though it may

be. While so much of the Western world experiences bitter clashes between these two rival cultures, Arkhonskaya's tolerant attitude is a reminder of the possibility of avoiding the clash of cultures that seems to define the future. An entrepreneurial spirit is a final element of Arkhonskaya's worldview and is seen in the enthusiasm with which residents have exploited new opportunities associated with Russia's post communist economic reforms. Rather than cultivate bitterness over what might have been lost with the collapse of the old order, the residents of Arkhonskaya seem determined to build on positive trends which have come with the end of the Soviet Union's centralized and planned economy.

## Contributors

**Stephen R. Bowers** is Director of the Center for Security and Science as well as a Professor of Government in the Helms School of Government. He is the author of *Ethnic Politics in Eastern Europe* (London: Institute for the Study of Conflict) and numerous studies on the Caucasus and Central Asia and has traveled extensively in the region. He is a graduate of the University of Tennessee and has studied at the U. S. Foreign Service Institute.



**Anna Vladimirovna Chekashkina** is a native of Samara in the Russian Federation and a student in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University. In July, 2010, she interviewed Lysokon Alexandr Vasilievich, the head of Arkhonskaya's local administration. She has been a participant in various conferences relating to international education. Anna currently resides in the Krasnodar region and is familiar with the North Caucasus.



**Oleg Abzaletdinov** is a professor of economics at the Pyatogorsky branch of the Russian State University of Trade and Economics. Dr. Abzaletdinov has worked extensively throughout the North Caucasus in his studies of the history and economy of the region. This work included studies of the Georgian Diaspora in North Ossetia as well as the impact of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war on the refugee population.



**S. Reed Bowers II** is a researcher for the Center for Science and Technology as well as a student in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University. He has previously worked on projects with Romanians and Moldovans and in 2008 he assisted in hosting a Washington, DC-based conference on the progress of Georgia's Rose Revolution.

