

Irakli Makharadze, *Georgian Trick Riders In American Wild West Shows, 1890s-1920s* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2015). Pp. 210. US\$29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-7864-9739-3

At first glance a book dedicated to the topic of Georgian horseback performers in Wild West shows may appear to be, at best, esoteric and, at worst, obscure. Yet Makharadze's text is worthy of closer inspection by both sports and leisure historians alike. For not only does it illuminate the little known, and thoroughly fascinating, world of professional rough riding at the turn of the twentieth century, but its wider themes concerning the movement of people and their sporting cultures across, and between, national borders remain current today. The original trick riders of the 1890s on which the book is focused heralded from western Georgia and, specifically, the region of Guria. They were recruited in their homeland by an emissary acting on behalf of Buffalo Bill Cody. Cody was seeking highly, and spectacularly, skilled riders to join his Wild West Show, in the first instance to perform on tour at London's Earls Court in 1892 and, later, across the United States and successive tours in Europe. These Gurian riders, then, provide an historical instance of sporting prowess, in the form of expert horsemanship, as a conduit for economic migration and exchange across cultures and continents. Moving on an often seasonal basis from the Soviet East to Western Europe and the United States, the trick riders, so Makharadze states, supply one of the earliest relationships between Georgia and the United States.

As the book stresses repeatedly, these Gurian performers were given the longstanding billing of 'Russian Cossacks'. Whilst this terminology was geo-ethnically inaccurate it served to satisfy the imaginative cravings of Wild West show audiences. These so-called 'Cossacks' formed part of what was a multicultural collection of performers that Buffalo Bill assembled as part of his self-styled 'Congress of Nations', drawing together German, Cuban, Turkish and Transvaal rough riders to contrast and compete against the horsemanship of the American cowboy. Although the riders were often referred to in publicity material as 'Princes' and of noble descent, the reality was that most came from peasant stock. The layers of myth-making surrounding these men (and a small number of female Gurian trick riders) were plentiful and Makharadze spends much of the book describing and unpacking these for the sake of the historical record.

As they performed their death-defying tricks (such as drags, standing gallops and riding backwards at breakneck speed) the Gurian riders wore a distinctive native costume, which included a long, heavy, top coat known as the *chokha* together with a complex configuration of belted sabre, dagger, rifle and cartridge cases slung across their bodies. The book suggests that these elaborate performance outfits were an important influence on rodeo costuming, possibly giving rise to the flashy and flamboyant attire so associated with Western performers to this day. In addition, the spectacular and thrilling stunts and tricks originated by these Georgian riders were said to inspire American cowboys, prompting them to introduce variants to the rodeo ring. In spite of being small in number (for example, the troupe recruited for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 comprised ten 'Russian Cossacks'), the impact of these Gurian trick riders on wider Western practice is claimed by Makharadze as significant. This significance extends to the size and scale of audiences attending Wild West shows – and marvelling at the 'Russian Cossacks' appearing in them - during the early 1890s. The book reports that more than 5 million people saw Buffalo Bill's Wild West at the Chicago World's Fair between 26 April and 12 October 1893.

As far as structure is concerned, *Georgian Trick Riders* comprises eighteen, short, chapters. Each is given over to a particular theme, person or event and there is a reasonably logical order to the progression of the discussion albeit repetitive in places. The first two chapters provide valuable scene-setting material in the form of facts and figures about

Georgia, the cultural history of Guria and the development of its reputation as a centre for horsemanship. The remaining chapters proceed in a roughly chronological manner and, in the very broadest of terms, narrate the stories surrounding: the recruitment of the riders in their homeland of Georgia (chapter 3); their first performances in London (chapter 4); their popularity with the British royals and associated command performances (chapter 5); the creation, construction and promotion of the Gurians as ‘Cossacks’ (chapter 6); the influence of Buffalo Bill and his formation of a ‘Congress of Nations’ (chapter 7); the biography of Alexis Gogokhia, a Wild West rider and political activist (chapter 8); the arrival of the Gurian riders in the USA and their assimilation into American life (chapters 9 and 10); the content of the Wild West shows and descriptions of the Gurian stunts within them (chapter 11); the making of the Georgian film *Who’s Guilty?* (1925) concerning an ill-fated trick rider (chapter 12); the involvement of trick riders in the Gurian revolution of 1905 (chapter 13); their public reputation and their rise as ‘celebrities’ (chapter 14); accounts of riding accidents and injuries sustained during Wild West Shows (chapter 15); the case of the audience favourite and stunt hero, ‘Prince’ Luka Chkhartishvili (chapter 16), and biographical details of the female trick riders, to whom Makharadze refers as Georgian ‘Amazons’ (chapter 17).

The final chapter (chapter 18) of the book runs to just five pages but is worth a special note of consideration. It supplies details of the consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 on the Georgian riders, notably in the curtailing of their freedom to travel to, and maintain a relationship with, the United States. Due to their associations with America, most of the Wild West Georgians, so we are told, were imprisoned or exiled under the Bolsheviks and in order to survive the regime many had to eradicate the evidence of their overseas forays as performers, being forced to destroy photographs, diaries and memorabilia. It is in this turn of historical events, as detailed in the *dénouement* to the book, that the value and import of Makharadze’s project is reinforced. Makharadze has succeeded in what is clearly an all-consuming personal quest to search out and unearth the remaining source material on the ‘Russian Cossacks’ and to gather this together in order to champion their hitherto hidden stories. Indeed, in his charming and highly personal, opening prologue to the book he confesses his ‘fanaticism’ for the topic and supplies the reader with vignettes of his visits to flea markets in Tbilisi in hopes of stumbling upon additional material for his archive.

Although the book nods towards scholarly conventions with the inclusion of endnotes and citation details, the more academic among its readers may be left wanting by a discussion that is largely a-theoretical. Doubtless, the text is painstakingly researched and rich in detail, anecdotes and archival gems but critical and analytical insights are beyond the scope of this text which is intended, so it may be surmised, for a popular audience with interests in Western or Soviet cultural history and/or equestrian sport. *Georgian Trick Riders* is not without a number of shortcomings. As far as content goes, a criticism may be levelled at its focus, almost to the exclusion of all other examples, on Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West. Whilst this emphasis on Cody reflects his instrumental role in the history of these ‘Cossack’ riders, only fleeting references are made to contemporary counterpoints. To all intents and purposes, then, this is a book about Cody and the ‘Cossacks’. Another criticism relates to what may be regarded as the marginal status assigned to the female Gurian riders within the book. The subject of just one chapter that is positioned at the end of the book, it feels as though the stories of rough riding women are relegated to something of a postscript. Problematically, then, the book presents a history that is dominated by the experiences of men.

Additional criticisms relate to what appear, collectively, as a lack of editorial intervention in the overall production of the book. For example, readers should be prepared to engage with a manuscript that has been translated into English (presumably from the original Georgian) and that contains some oddities of grammar and syntax. The text would

certainly have benefitted from more thorough copy-editing to assist with these minor, yet easily avoidable (particularly given the American publisher), niggles of language. A similarly minor complaint is that this book is poorly served by its overly prosaic title. There was room for more imagination in the naming of the publication in order to reflect, and promote, the thrilling antics of the performers in question.

Georgian Trick Riders forms just one component in a suite of outputs on the topic by Makharadze. This latest book is a revised and expanded version of a previous publication from 1997. A film-maker by training, Makharadze has also produced a television documentary, several photographic exhibitions (and *Georgian Trick Riders* is a superbly illustrated text) and even spearheaded a (successful) campaign for a commemorative stamp to be commissioned by Georgia Post in honour of the 'Cossack' performers. This passion permeates each and every page of *Georgian Trick Riders* and makes for a lively and engaging read.

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