

## THE DOUKHOBORS IN THE KOOTENAYS: SIGNS OF STRESS

The Doukhobors of British Columbia as a social movement, as a distinct cultural group, have largely ceased to exist. Physically they remain in large numbers in the Kootenays and yet they can no longer be considered as a self-contained entity. Among the older Doukhobors many of the values inherent in their earlier way of life remain. It is apparent, however, that the trend is towards assimilation into prevailing Canadian culture. Each successive generation becomes more "Canadian" and there appears to be no reason to believe that this pattern will be reversed.

The following is a study of the first few years of the Doukhobor settlement in British Columbia. By viewing this period it is possible to reveal some of the underlying causes for the eventual erosion of Doukhobor society. During this period the Doukhobors remained as a separate and distinct group, totally alien to the surrounding culture of the province, and yet, with the benefit of hindsight, it is now possible to recognize those signs indicating their eventual collapse. Of particular importance is the relationship between the Doukhobor and those people who also inhabited the Kootenays. The manner in which these two peoples viewed one another and particularly the friction generated by two opposing cultures in close proximity are considered below. Evidence from this period indicates that the assimilation of the Doukhobor was virtually inevitable.

Why did the Doukhobors come to British Columbia? There were, no doubt, many reasons and to elaborate upon them here would entail an extensive study of the Doukhobor history which is beyond the scope of this examination. Suffice it to say that there had developed a pattern of Doukhobor behavior in their dealings with the ruling authorities, with whom they must contend. When the continued existence of the sect was threatened by government policy, the Doukhobors moved, seeking new land in which they could practice their beliefs. Their migration to Canada and eventually to British Columbia can be seen as consistent with their previous behavior. The Doukhobor religion, which is based upon a belief in non-violence, had few options. Passive resistance and group migration were virtually their only defences. Other factors probably influenced their decision to settle in the Kootenays. The area offered the opportunity for a more diverse agriculture better suited to their vegetarian diet. Life on the prairies had been harsh and, like many other migrants to British Columbia, the Doukhobors, no doubt, sought a milder climate, a more hospitable environment.

The Kootenay area of British Columbia was, at the time of the Doukhobor migration, witnessing the decline of a silver mining boom that had opened up the area some twenty years previously. Mining and smelting remained the primary economic base for the area. Those people who came with the mining boom and those who remained were typical in their attitudes and origins of the frontier mining peoples. Most were of

British or American descent. They were, typically, motivated by their material needs, seeing in the mining frontier an opportunity to reap financial reward from an area of untapped wealth. As the mining boom receded those who remained hoped for a prosperous existence based upon a more diverse economy and upon increased settlement.

It is evident from newspaper reports from this period that the migration of Doukhobors was viewed as a valuable contribution to the area.

Surely such an industrious community is deserving of recognition, especially as, in forwarding their own interests, they are advancing the welfare of the entire district.<sup>1</sup>

In assessing the needs of the province at this time the consensus was: "What British Columbia has not: Enough population — its only need."<sup>2</sup> This eager acceptance of the Doukhobor was not to last. It soon became evident that these people with their communal way of life, their allegiance not to Canada but to their own ideals, would not be such an asset to the district. The fact that much of the needed materials purchased by the Doukhobors were obtained in bulk at wholesale prices and shipped in from larger cities, did nothing to endear them to the local population.

The first Doukhobors to migrate to the Kootenays came in 1908, but it was not until 1910 that they came in large numbers. By 1912, the friction between Doukhobors and the surrounding populace had become quite specific. Resistance to registering officially all births, deaths and marriages together with their reluctance to provide an education for their children was viewed as evidence that they had no intention of becoming good "Canadians", that they sought to live an alien existence with no respect for any authority save their own. The Trail News of August 17, 1912, suggested, "that the government ascertain what the facts are, in order that, if necessary, steps may be taken to enforce respect for the law."<sup>3</sup>

An article in the Grand Forks Gazette gives an indication of the mounting hostility.

It was learned that a death had taken place in one of the colony houses, and according to custom, the body would probably be buried the following morning. About midnight Tuesday a search party was sent to scour the land and locate, if possible the grave. The effort proved successful and sentries were posted to watch developments at the grave and at the house where the death took place until morning. The burial took place before daybreak. Constable Stanfield took charge of the case, the body was examined in the afternoon and an inquest was opened by Coroner Black, of Greenwood. After the jury had viewed the remains the inquest was adjourned. In the meantime a post-mortem will be held and all necessary witnesses summoned.

Although the Doukhobors congregated after the disintering of the remains, they took no further action.



All attempts of the officials to communicate with them were ignored.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that, by this time, feeling in the Grand Forks area, where the Doukhobors lived in close proximity with the local residents, had reached an emotional pitch. It is not hard to imagine the feelings of the Doukhobors upon having a funeral, a sacred rite, desecrated by a group of over-zealous farmers and officials. No longer were the Doukhobors viewed with patronizing tolerance; they were seen as a threat to the "Canadian" way of life. In this vein accusations that the Doukhobors lived in a state of moral and physical decadence were commonplace.

The Provincial Government was urged to investigate and, while their findings tended to view the Doukhobors with sympathy, the government, and particularly the Attorney-General, the Hon. W.J. Bowser, were moved to enact special legislation to deal with the Doukhobors.

Efforts to discipline the Doukhobors had proved futile. Terms of imprisonment were ineffectual as Bowser pointed out when he said, ".... for if we incarcerate these people for non-payment of penalties, they pose as martyrs, and we are put to unnecessary trouble and expense."<sup>5</sup> The new legislation, enacted in the spring of 1914, empowered the authorities to levy fines against the community for the acts of individuals. "The new law enables the province to hold the treasury of the community responsible for the sins of the individual member, it is possible that community rule will be undermined."<sup>6</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to imply that all local feeling towards the Doukhobors was entirely negative. An article in the Trail News of March 21, 1914, presents the views of a reporter who visited the settlement of Brilliant. It includes glowing descriptions of industriousness and devotion to their faith. The author presents the Doukhobor position on such abrasive issues as registration, schooling and leadership. However, from this reporter's article it is quite apparent that, in journeying twenty miles over a bumpy trail to Brilliant and meeting these alien peoples, that the author might almost have been visiting a foreign land. From his secure position in Trail it did not seem to him, at first, that the Doukhobors posed any threat. He apparently saw any problems arising from the Doukhobors' mistrust of the government as based upon their false assumption that this government was no different from others they had encountered in the past. The tone of this reporter's account was probably representative of the views of the better educated, more enlightened citizens who had, as yet, had no personal involvement with the Doukhobor. Had these people not received the support and assistance of such respected peoples as the Quakers and of Tolstoy?

It was not long before this generous assessment of the Doukhobors was challenged. In fact, in the next issue of the newspaper there appeared an article under the heading, "What the Neighbors Think of Douks,"<sup>7</sup> The paper, apparently responding to letters protesting the bias of the earlier article, aired the views of those Castlegar residents who had decidedly different opinions as to the virtues of the Doukhobor.

The Doukhobors, as a people, are very ignorant, and they are entirely under the influence of Peter Verigin, John Sherbinin and a few others.

They go on to say that, "this domination is the cause of all their trouble." Local merchants complained that "....they find it good policy to be on the lookout when the Doukhobors enter their store or place of business." Elsewhere in the same article:

One of the most charges against the members of the brotherhood is that of trickery.....Deception they say, is sometimes carried to the point of bribery, when occasion so demands and in business transactions the neighbors think it is usually well to keep an eye out."<sup>8</sup>

There followed, in the Trail News of April 11, 1914, a series of letters from people who had known the Doukhobors at various times. The first from a Voldemar Kruglak, formerly editor of the Russian-American Echo of New York. Following his charges as to their ignorance and the corruption of their leader, he concludes with the statement:

But as a whole, they are a nice people, If you send their children through school and remove the evil influence of such a leader as Peter Verigin, they will be very desirable settlers.<sup>9</sup>

Other letters followed in much the same vein, placing the blame upon the despotic Peter Verigin. It is evident that prejudice towards the Doukhobors at this time was largely directed against their leader, and it, no doubt followed in the minds of the local citizens and of the government that for these people to be integrated in "Canadian" society simply required the removal or undermining of their leaders. It seems to have been completely beyond the realm of possibility that anyone would have suggested that the Doukhobors be left to live, amongst themselves, as they pleased. The Canadian just naturally assumed that, with a little enlightenment the Doukhobors, like anyone else, would choose the "Canadian" way of life.

That the Doukhobors have chosen to become "Canadian" is, perhaps evidence that their first neighbors in the Kootenays were right all along. However questions remain. For example, is it sufficient to say that the Doukhobors social movement was simply unable to contend with the surrounding materials and culture? When faced with a view of life that so completely ruled out the possibility that there could exist any reasonable alternatives, did the Doukhobor conviction simply crumble? Or could there have existed within the structure of Doukhobor society weaknesses that in themselves, contributed to their collapse? Other societies such as the Indian and the Metis had faced the same cultural conflict, that of a static, agrarian existence confronted with the advancing age of technology and materialism. These people had been 'defeated' and there is little evidence that the Doukhobor possessed any defenses that would have altered the outcome in his case.

Because of the Doukhobor religious beliefs the only defenses they were able to practice were in the form of passive resistance. Such tac-



tics as nude parades, the destruction of their property and a willingness to accept fines and imprisonment were largely designed to draw attention to their grievances. These measures failed to shake the "Canadian's" absolute conviction that his was the right and only way of life. About the only other defence weapon in the Doukhobor arsenal was the threat of migration. While they did, at one time, offer an alternative for the Doukhobor, it had, by the time they reached the Kootenays, ceased to be a viable solution. The idea that they could move on and thus retain their way of life, had served to hold the group together. However, with the filling up of the North American continent, there remained virtually nowhere for the Doukhobor to go. The struggle for survival in the Kootenays could therefore be described, to paraphrase the fate of General Custer, "the Doukhobor's last stand."

In the sequence of Doukhobor migrations a pattern had emerged. As each migration was undertaken only those who were most devout, most attached to the community and the least financially independent were to make the move. This distilling process produced, in the Kootenays, a group who were, at first, unwilling to compromise but who, with the possibility of further migration, were poorly equipped to employ other tactics. The use of political power would have, for others at least, been a valuable tool. For two reasons this was not available to the Doukhobors. Firstly, because the government recognized the dangers, to them, of such a large group voting as a block and enacted legislation to deny the Doukhobor the vote, and secondly, because to have engaged in political activities would have been viewed by the Doukhobors as negotiating with the 'devil'.

Another significant pattern from Doukhobor history is the notable decline in strict devotion to their religious principles at times when persecution virtually ceased. Such had been the historic case under the leadership of Lukeria Kalmikova, a period of relative prosperity. In some respects a parallel predicament has faced the sect in the Kootenays. Pressure has been applied but usually in the form of insistence upon conforming to Canadian regulations concerning registration, ownership and education. The more unacceptable demand that Doukhobors serve in the armed forces has not been applied in Canada. This less direct form of persecution has not had the effect of uniting the Doukhobors, but rather the opposite; it has, coupled with the temptations of individual prosperity, convinced many Doukhobors that to comply with the authorities would be in their own best interests. Even in the early days of the Kootenay settlements this erosion of the community was evident. The men of the sect worked outside the community in order that the purchase price of their lands could rapidly be paid. These men were expected to turn over their entire earnings to the community but it is apparent that many retained some of this income for themselves, later purchasing property in their own names in such areas as Thrums and Terrace. That they were able to do this without severing all ties with the community suggests yet another structural flaw in the Doukhobor society.

Unlike such other communal religious sects as the Hutterites or Mennonites, the definition of devout member is not strictly applied. Having departed from the Orthodox church in the eighteenth century, the Doukhobors had dispensed with the trappings, with the priests, with the

church, as a place of worship and with the ikons. Their total religious tradition is preserved by oral means. Although this had the advantages of simplicity, economy and portability it lacked the rigid restrictions designed to assure strict adherence to the faith. Being a good Doukhobor is considered more a question of attitude and behavior in everyday life than it is conforming to any precise religious law. Also absent, to a large degree, from the Doukhobor faith is the emphasis on fear inherent in most religious doctrines. The Doukhobor believes not so much in a heaven or hell, a God or a devil, as he does in a spirit of God which is present in all men. This tolerant concept of Christianity may have much to commend it, however, it leaves much to be desired as a means of retaining group cohesion. Leaving the community did not result in a total loss of affiliation with the sect. With family ties a Doukhobor could leave and yet still identify with his people.

In the early days of the Kootenay settlement devotion and obedience to the leadership of Peter V. Verigin prevailed. Despite the efforts of local officials to undermine this authority there is little evidence that they were successful. However, the Doukhobor's dependence upon their spiritual leader proved a liability in later years, when, under the leadership of Peter P. Verigin, their affairs were mismanaged.

It is, perhaps, idle to speculate as to whether the Doukhobor social movement could have survived had it been somewhat different or if the people who surrounded them had behaved differently. But it is possible to suggest that the structural dynamics of the Doukhobor society doomed their movement to eventual extinction. At least it would appear that by the time of their migration to the Kootenays, their outlook was so colored by a sense of persecution that they were unable to view any demands made upon them by the authorities as anything other than an effort to destroy their way of life. Had they been able to, as a group rather than individually, compromise with the government on such matters as the registration of births and deaths and marriages, and had they been willing to provide at least a rudimentary education for their children, it is possible that they could have avoided much of the friction with their neighbors and the government. While this might have enabled the Doukhobor communal way of life to continue for some time, it cannot reasonably be claimed that it would have solved all their problems. Although the pressures applied by the government and by those people who also inhabited the Kootenays focused upon such specific issues as the refusal to register, to provide an education for their children and upon their leadership, it is apparent that these were but specific issues which provided the "Canadian" with a righteous front from which to practice his intolerance of a way of life which was at variance with his own.