

# Research Note: The Doukhobor Canadian Centennial 1899-1999

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Doukhobor Canadians (often referring to themselves as Spirit-wrestlers) are among the more prominent minority groups which form important segments of national society. Manitobans are not as well acquainted with this group, as are the people of Saskatchewan and B.C., many of whom have had them as neighbors for the past 100 years.

Upon arriving in Western Canada in 1899 the first settlers did in fact spend some transit time in Manitoba, Their experiences in the immigration sheds of East Selkirk, Winnipeg, Dauphin and Brandon are familiar points in their history, although not fully researched as yet. That is being remedied by related members of the community residing in Winnipeg presently.

Their immigration to Canada from Russia at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century involved about 8000 persons, representing about a third of their total membership in Russia at the time. The first land which they were given (some of which was later reclaimed by the Canadian government) was located at Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Circumstances brought on further moves leading to resettlement in Alberta and especially in the Kootenay valley area of B.C. Scattered families of the group are now found in most other provinces of Canada also.

Doukhobors are, in part at least, an offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church,

with Protestant and other indigenous influences giving them the forms and character which they have today. Their militant pacifism (if that is a usable term) has given them a kinship with Mennonites, as have parallels in the emigration movement itself.

A June 1982 International Doukhobor Conference held at Castlegar, B.C. provided invitations to Russian and Canadian Mennonite scholars, as well as representatives from the Quaker, Molokan and other Doukhobor communities of North America, and elsewhere. Disarmament and peacemaking were important agenda items for these sessions. Doukhobor peace manifestations, as they are called (we might call them demonstrations) have taken at various places, including Manitoba, and been held on other occasions from time to time.

Russian Mennonites learned to know Doukhobors as neighbors when Alexander I allowed a group of them to settle in nine villages along the right bank of the Mollotschna in 1802, just before the Mennonites move into the area east of the River several years later. Occasional friction and some harassment from other neighbors led them several times to appeal to Johann Cornies for assistance and advice.

Internal migrations and forced resettlements by the Russian government took them to new communities in the North Caucasus (not far Chechnya, one could add, if not in the actual area), and then more recently to further moves to set up new settlements in the vicinity of Tula, south of Moscow, which, it could be added, have numerous Mennonite families residing the general vicinity. One Valerie Friesen, from Tula, was involved in this relocation process, along with reconstruction project for German families, we are told.

A crucial self-defining event in the renaissance of the Russian Doukhobor community came with the "burning of arms" incident on 11-12 July, 1895, when about 7000 Doukhobor soldiers heeded a call to renewed pacifism by burning all their weapons in protest against service in the Russian army. Harsh punishments and exile, for many, with some deaths followed for the participants in this "peace manifestation". Here in Canada a large number of Doukhobor communities commemorated that event in 1995, highlighting this for them unforgettable event in their history.

A similar, indeed even more extensive list and variety of celebrations recalled their coming to Canada came to an end on December 31 last year. The community centres of Grand Forks and Brilliant near Castlegar, B.C. were both focal points of meetings at that time.

The publication of several essay volumes, and other items, have been a significant aspect of these Canada-wide and year long celebrations. These began with a special issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* which came out with an edition entitled "From Russia with Love: The Doukhobors" in the No. 3 issue for 1995. More recently, Koozma J. Tarasoff, a photo-journalist-researcher and Dr. Robert B. Klymasz, both of Ottawa now, have edited *Centennial Papers in Honour of Canada's Doukhobor Heritage* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995, pb. 239 pp). Tarasoff alone then compiled and edited another collect of essays entitled *Spirit-*

*wrestlers' Voices: Honouring Doukhobors on the Centenary of Their Migration to Canada in 1899* (New York, Ottawa, Toronto: LEGAS, 1998, pb., 387 pp.).

The latter two volumes provide an excellent in-depth study of a significant number of important Doukhobor (Spirit-wrestlers)-related themes. One will find that the 1995 volume included an essay by Dr. Bill Janzen, of Ottawa, Ontario, entitled "Doukhobor earlier publication, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

Mennonites, Jews and Ukrainians recently held an intergroup conference in Winnipeg (actually already in 1995), and in 1999 the Steering Committee of this venture published *A Sharing of Diversities*, made up of selected papers from the sessions of that meeting. Doukhobors might have fit very well into that "mix", as these comments have indirectly intimated. Perhaps the four will have their own get-further-acquaintance setting in the not-too-distant future. It will be well worthy doing, and we hope it can occur.