

3000 words about the Doukhobors - Dr. Christian Bartolf

*“Jesus Christ indeed has been acclaimed as the prince of passive resisters but I submit in that case passive resistance must mean satyagraha and satyagraha alone. There are not many cases in history of passive resistance in that sense. One of these is that of the Doukhobors of Russia cited by Tolstoy. The phrase passive resistance was not employed to denote the patient suffering of oppression by thousands of devout Christians in the early days of Christianity. I would therefore class them as satyagrahis. And if their conduct be described as passive resistance, passive resistance becomes synonymous with satyagraha.”*

*(Mohandas K. Gandhi: Satyagraha in South Africa, 1928)*

If we look for a basic definition of “Doukhobors” (Spirit Wrestlers), we find some historical notions in the Wikipedia article (22 June 2022) - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doukhobors> - : “The early Doukhobors called themselves "God's People" or "Christians." Their modern name, first in the form Doukhobortsy (Russian: Духоборцы, Dukhobortsy (Spirit wrestlers) is thought to have been first used in 1785 or 1786 by Ambrosius the Archbishop of Yekaterinoslav or his predecessor Nikifor (Nikephoros Theotokis). The archbishop's intent was to mock the Doukhobors as heretics fighting against the Holy Spirit (Russian: Святой Дух, Svyatoy Dukh) but round the beginning of the 19th century the dissenters adopted the name "Doukhobors" usually in a shorter form Doukhobory (Russian: Духоборы, Dukhobory), implying they are fighting alongside rather than against the Holy Spirit. The first-known use of the spelling Doukhobor is in a 1799 government edict exiling 90 of the group to Finland; presumably the Vyborg area, which was part of the Russian Empire at the time, for producing anti-war propaganda.”

“When Nicholas I succeeded Alexander as Tsar, on February 6, 1826, he issued a decree intending to force assimilation of the Doukhobors by means of military conscription, prohibiting their meetings, and encouraging conversions to the established church. On October 20, 1830, another decree followed, specifying all able-bodied members of dissenting religious groups engaged in propaganda against the established church should be conscripted and sent to the Russian army in the Caucasus while those not capable of military service, and their women and children, should be resettled in Russia's recently acquired Transcaucasian provinces. With other dissenters, around 5,000 Doukhobors were resettled in Georgia between 1841 and 1845. Akhalkalaki uyezd (district) in the Tiflis Governorate was chosen as the main place of their settlement. Doukhobor villages with Russian names appeared there; Gorelovka, Rodionovka, Yefremovka, Orlovka, Spasskoye (Dubovka), Troitskoye, and Bogdanovka. Later, other groups of Doukhobors were resettled by the government or migrating to Transcaucasia of their own accord. They also settled in neighboring areas, including the Borchaly uyezd of Tiflis Governorate and the Kedabek uyezd of Elisabethpol Governorate.

In 1844, Doukhobors who were being exiled from their home near Melitopol to the village of Bogdanovka carved the Doukhobor Memorial Stone, which is now held in the collection of the Melitopol Museum of Local History.”

“After Russia's conquest of Kars and the Treaty of San Stefano of 1878, some Dukhobors from Tiflis and Elisabethpol Governorates moved to the Zarushat and Shuragel uyezds of the newly created Kars Oblast to the north-east of Kars in modern-day Republic of Turkey. The leader of the main group of Doukhobors, who arrived in Transcaucasia from Ukraine in 1841, was Illarion Kalmykov (Russian: Илларион Калмыков).” “The Kalmykov dynasty lived in the village Gorelovka, a Doukhobor community in Georgia.” “... In 1886, there were around 20,000 Doukhobors in Transcaucasia ... the region's Doukhobors had become vegetarian and were aware of Leo Tolstoy's philosophy” of bread-labour and non-violent non-cooperation.”

“On January 26, 1887, at a community service at which the new leader was to be acclaimed, police arrived and arrested Verigin. He, along with some of his associates, was sent into internal exile in Siberia. Large Party Doukhobors continued to consider Verigin their spiritual leader and to communicate with him, by mail and via delegates who travelled to see him in Obdorsk.” “The Doukhobors had resisted registering marriages and births, contributing grain to state emergency funds, and swearing oaths of allegiance. In 1887, Russia extended universal military conscription, which applied to the rest of the empire, to the Transcaucasian provinces.”

“Under instructions from Verigin, the Large Party stopped using tobacco and alcohol, divided their property equally among the members of the community, and resolved to adhere to practice pacifism and non-violence. They refused to swear the oath of allegiance required in 1894 by the newly ascended Tsar Nicholas II.

Under further instructions from Verigin, about 7,000 of the most zealous Doukhobors—about one-third of all Doukhobors—of the three Governorates of Transcaucasia destroyed their weapons and refused to serve in the military. As the Doukhobors gathered to burn their guns on the night of June 28/29 (July 10/11, Gregorian calendar) 1895, while singing of psalms and spiritual songs, government Cossacks arrested and beat them. Shortly after, the government billeted Cossacks in many of the Large Party's villages; around 4,000 Doukhobors were forced to disperse to villages in other parts of Georgia. Many died of starvation and exposure.”

The early Doukhobors were pacifists who rejected military institutions and war and were thus oppressed in Imperial Russia. Both the tsarist state and church authorities were involved in the persecution and deprivation of the dissidents' normal freedoms.

In 1802, Tsar Alexander I had encouraged resettlement of religious minorities to the "Milky Waters" (Molochnye Vody) region around the Molochnaya River around Melitopol in modern-day southern Ukraine. This was motivated by the desire to quickly populate the rich steppe lands on the north shore of the Black and Azov Seas, and to prevent the "heretics" from contaminating the population of the heartland with their ideas. Many Doukhobors, as well as Mennonites from Prussia, accepted the Emperor's offer, and travelled to the Molochnaya from other provinces of the Empire over the next 20 years.

“The Doukhobors first appeared in the 18th century. By the end of the last century or the beginning of the present, their doctrine had become so clearly defined and the number of their followers had so greatly increased, that the Government and the Church, considering this sect to be peculiarly obnoxious, started a cruel persecution.

The foundation of the Doukhobors' teaching consists in the believe that Spirit of God is present in the soul of man, and directs him by its word within him.” (1)

(1) Vladimir Chertkov: Their Martyrdom in Russia (in: Alexander M. Evalenko: The Message of the Doukhobors: a statement of true facts by “Christians of the Universal Brotherhood” and by prominent champions of their cause (University of Michigan, 1913, pp. 84-92).

“The Doukhobors found alike their mutual relations and their relations to other people - and not only to people, but to all living creatures - exclusively on love; and therefore, they hold all people equal brethren. They extend this idea of equality also to the Government authorities; obedience to whom they do not consider binding upon them in those cases when the demands of these authorities are in conflict with their conscience; while, in all that does not infringe what they regard as the will of God, they willingly fulfil the desire of the authorities. They consider murder, violence, and in general all relations to living beings not based on love, as opposed to their conscience, and to the will of God.”

(2) Vladimir Chertkov: Their Martyrdom in Russia (in: Alexander M. Evalenko: The Message of the Doukhobors: a statement of true facts by “Christians of the Universal Brotherhood” and by prominent champions of their cause (University of Michigan, 1913, pp. 84-92).

Leo Tolstoy and the Doukhobor Peter Verigin demonstrated the fundamental importance of activism against military and war: a plea for conscientious objection to military service.

“There has lately appeared in the papers information that in connection with Nobel's will the question has been discussed as to who should be chosen to receive the £10,000 bequeathed to the person who has best served the cause of peace. This has called forth certain considerations in me [...]. I think this point in Nobel's will concerning those who have best served the cause of peace is very difficult. Those who do indeed serve this cause do so because they serve God, and are therefore not in need of pecuniary recompense, and will not accept it. But I think the condition expressed in the will would be quite correctly fulfilled if the money were transmitted to the destitute and suffering families of those who have served the cause of peace. I am alluding

to the Caucasian Doukhobors or Spirit-Wrestlers. No one in our time has served and is continuing to serve the cause of peace more effectively and powerfully than these people.”

(3) Leo Tolstoy: Nobel’s Bequest. Letter Addressed to a Swedish Editor (August 1897).

In “Carthago delenda est” (1898) Leo Tolstoy had written:

“Every man, in refusing to take part in military service or to pay taxes to a government which uses them for military purposes, is, by this refusal, rendering a great service to God and men, for he is thereby making use of the most efficacious means of furthering the progressive movement of mankind toward that better social order which it is striving after and must eventually attain.”

“The governments may and should fear those who refuse to serve, and, indeed they are afraid of them because every refusal undermines the prestige of the deceit by which the governments have the people in their power. But those who refuse have no ground whatever to fear a government that demands crimes from them.”

Leo Tolstoy wrote in his “Appeal on Behalf of the Doukhobors” (March 19, 1898):

“Not to mention the floggings, incarcerations, and every kind of tortures to which the Doukhobors who refused to serve in the army were subjected in the penal battalions, where many died, and their banishment to the worst parts of Siberia; not to mention the two-hundred reserves who, during the course of two years, languished in prison and are now separated from their families and exiled in pairs to the wildest parts of the Caucasus, where, deprived of every opportunity of earning a living, they are literally dying of starvation— not to mention these punishments of those guilty of having refused to serve in the army, the families of the Doukhobors are being systematically ruined and exterminated.”

“They are all deprived of the right to leave their communities, and are specially fined and locked up in prisons for not fulfilling the strangest demands of the authorities: [...]

Four hundred families, who were deported from their homes and were settled in Tartar and in Georgian villages, had to rent themselves houses and support themselves with their own money, having no land and no income, and are in such hard straits that, in the three years since their deportation, one-fourth of them, especially their old men and children, have died from want and from diseases.”

“The Doukhobors are now in a position which makes it impossible for them to emigrate. At present they have not sufficient means to do so, and being confined within their villages, they are unable to make any preparations. Formerly, they were well-to-do, but during the last few years, the greater part of their means has been taken away from them by confiscations and fines, or has been spent in maintaining their exiled brethren. As they are not allowed to leave the vicinity of their homes, and as nobody is allowed to see them, there is no possibility whatever for them to confer and decide upon the way of emigrating.”

“I happen to know the details of the persecutions and sufferings of these people; I am in communication with them, and they asked me to help them. Therefore I consider it my duty to address myself to all good people whether Russian or not Russian, asking them to help the Doukhobors out of their terrible position in which they now are. I have attempted to address myself, through the medium of a Russian newspaper to the Russian public, but do not know as yet whether my appeal will be published or not; and I now address myself to all sympathizers, asking for their assistance – first, in the form of money, of which much will be needed for the removal to a distant place of ten-thousand people; and secondly, of advice and guidance in the difficulties of the coming emigration of people who do not understand any foreign language and have never left Russia before.”

The traditional commemoration of the June 28-29, 1895 Burning of Guns in Russia (e.g. the 1895 Doukhobors’ (Spirit Wrestlers) arms burning near the village of Orlovka, Bogdanovka region, today: Georgia) is an outstanding event in the Doukhobor calendar: an ‘event that shook the world’ (Koozma Tarasoff)! Those in the

wider public who know this history recognize this day as a firm resolve to get rid of the institution of militarism and wars.

That message is still relevant today. Wars are still being waged. Foreign bases are still occupying territories where people desire to be free. And weapons of mass destruction continue to be manufactured and traded world-wide.

Doukhobor organizers of the Burning of Arms in Kars Province, 1895, were Ivan I. Planidin, Peter I. Dorofeev, Grigory V. Verigin, Pavel V. Planidin, Semyon E. Chernov. Sergej Tolstoy, son of Leo Tolstoy, accompanied and supported the Doukhobors on their forced emigration to Canada in 1898 and after. Friends of the Doukhobors were Anna de Carousa, Leo A. Soulerjitsky. Sasha Satz, Prince Hilkov, W.R. McCreary, Mary Robetz. Tolstoyans assisted the Doukhobors in their migration to Canada in 1899. Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy's secretary, went on to publish many works about (and by) the Doukhobors.

Tolstoy had already written in "The Kingdom of God is Within You" (1893), the book which inspired young law student and lawyer Gandhi and Peter Verigin, the Doukhobor representative who had been banned into Siberian exile:

"There are people, hundreds of thousands of Quakers, Mennonites, all our Doukhobors, Molokans, and others who do not belong to any definite sect, who consider that the use of force - and consequently, military service - is inconsistent with Christianity. Consequently there are every year among us in Russia some men called upon for military service who refuse to serve on the ground of their religious convictions. Does the government let them off then? No."

"The resistance of the Doukhobors gained international attention and the Russian Empire was criticized for its treatment of this religious minority. In 1897, the Russian government agreed to let the Doukhobors leave the country, subject to conditions:

emigrants should never return;

emigrants must emigrate at their own expense;

community leaders currently in prison or in exile in Siberia must serve the balance of their sentences before they could leave Russia.

Some of the emigrants first went to Cyprus, which could not sustain a large migration. Canada offered more land, transportation, and aid to resettle in the Saskatchewan area. Around 6,000 Doukhobors emigrated there in the first half of 1899, settling on land granted to them by the government in modern-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The Cyprus colony and others joined them, and around 7,500 Russian Doukhobor emigrants—about a third of their number in Russia—arrived in Canada by the end of the year."

James Mavor (1854-1925) was a professor of Political Economy and Constitutional History at the University of Toronto: „Mavor started a publicity campaign about the desirability of having the Doukhobors as immigrants, as they were people who had suffered for their faith, hard-working and on the whole quite respectable, and he began to lobby the Canadian government to let them into Canada.“ (Sergey Tolstoy)

It was the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) who after corresponding with Leo Tolstoy and during his stay in England proposed to James Mavor in 1898 that several thousand Doukhobors be settled in Canada.

Kropotkin argued that three conditions needed to be fulfilled:

The pacifists should be exempted from military service;

The internal organization (principally educational matters) of the immigrants should not to be interfered with;

Lands should be allocated to the Doukhobors in their own reserves so that they could till the soil collectively.

The Doukhobors come to Canada on board the first immigrant ship "Lake Huron", leaving Russia in December 1898.

"A population of twelve thousand people – "Christians of the Universal Brotherhood", as the Doukhobors, who live in the Caucasus, call themselves - are at the present moment in the most distressing circumstances. Without entering into argument as to who is right: whether it'd be the governments who consider that Christianity is compatible with prisons, executions, and, above all, with wars and preparations for war; or whether it'd be the Doukhobors, who acknowledge as binding only the Christian law (which renounces the use of any force whatever and condemns murder), and who therefore refuse to serve in the army - one cannot fail to see that this controversy is very difficult to settle. No government could allow some people to shun duties which are being fulfilled by all the rest and to undermine thereby the very basis of the State. The Doukhobors, on the other hand, cannot disregard that very law, which they consider as divine, and, consequently as supremely obligatory."

After successful emigration to Canada, Tolstoy continued to praise the example of the Doukhobors:

"You suffered and were exiled and even now suffer want, because you wished to lead a Christian life, not only in words, but also in acts. You refused to commit any violence against your neighbor, to swear, and to do police or military duty. You even burned weapons, that you might not be tempted to defend yourselves with them. And, in spite of all the persecutions, you remained true to the Christian teaching. Your acts became known to men, and the enemies of the Christian teaching were confused when they heard of your acts. They either locked you up and deported you, or exiled you from Russia, trying in every way to conceal your acts from men. But the followers of the Christian teaching rejoiced, triumphed, loved and praised you, and tried to emulate you. Your acts have done much toward the destruction of the kingdom of evil and the confirmation of men in the Christian truth."

L. N. Tolstoy: To the Doukhobors of Canada (15 February 1900).