

## **Origins of the Doukhobors**

The Doukhobors (the word *dukho-boretz* means “spirit wrestler”) are a pacifist Christian sect that originated in Russia in the 1700’s. Like other Christian sects, the Doukhobors rejected certain beliefs and practices of the Russian Orthodox Church, including church hierarchy and priesthood, worship of icons, and the Bible as the ultimate source of religious authority.

Instead, Doukhobors believed that each person had a “divine spark” within them, through which they could directly experience divine wisdom and guidance. Their beliefs also evolved to include equality, non-violence, communal living and vegetarianism.

Heavily persecuted by Russian authorities, the Doukhobors were imprisoned, tortured and exiled for their beliefs. In 1899, after a decade of harsh persecution and mass exile, over seven thousand Doukhobors immigrated to Canada.

## **Experiments in Communal Living**

On the Canadian prairies, Doukhobors established villages and broke fresh soil. They farmed cooperatively. Families lived in individual homes, but property, tools and goods were owned by the community.

This communal structure was duplicated when the Doukhobors moved to British Columbia. They built large houses for extended families of up to 60 people, and worked together to grow vegetables, tend orchards and operate a variety of communal enterprises including sawmills and a highly successful jam factory in Brilliant, BC.

## **The Sons of Freedom**

In 1902, over a thousand Doukhobors left their villages and marched toward Yorkton, Saskatchewan. They believed their fellows had become too focused on economic prosperity at the cost of spiritual well-being. They also believed that any form of compromise with Canadian government or society was a threat to their religious identity.

By the 1920's, these radicals had become known as the Sons of Freedom (also known as *svobodniki* or Freedomites), a distinct group separate from the Orthodox Doukhobors who still lived communally, and the Independents who had left the community. Krestova, BC (the word *krestova* means "place of the cross") became the center of the Freedomite movement.

The Sons of Freedom were not a homogenous group, but their shared values included anarchism, mystical religious doctrines, and a belief that suffering and poverty were paths to spiritual liberation. They burned their own houses to demonstrate rejection of material wealth and private property, and marched naked as a form of spiritual cleansing.

## **From Protest to Terrorism**

Though the majority of Sons of Freedom were peace-loving, a small minority turned their acts of protest into terrorism. This minority committed hundreds of acts of arson and bombing from the 1920's through the 1960's, destroying houses, schools, power lines and other public and private property.

In response, the Canadian government made public nudity a crime carrying a mandatory 3-year prison sentence. In 1962, the fire-proof Mountain Prison was constructed in Agassiz, BC to house over 200 prisoners. Their families trekked across the province from Krestova to Agassiz. where they camped in front of the prison gates. Several generations of Sons of Freedom spent long periods of their lives in jail.

## **The School Question**

Sons of Freedom saw public education as a threat, believing Canadian schools would teach their children to disregard traditional Doukhobor values, hastening their culture's assimilation and decline.

Between 1953 and 1959, almost 200 children were seized in RCMP raids and placed in a residential facility in New Denver, BC. The children were denied contact with their families and punished for speaking Russian. Verbal, physical and other forms of abuse were common. The children were released in 1959, when their parents finally agreed to send them to public school.

## **Aftermath**

Today, there is no active Sons of Freedom movement. Some of their children and grandchildren have assimilated into Canadian society, while others retain traditional Doukhobor beliefs. Many New Denver survivors remain deeply scarred by their experiences.

In 1999, BC's Ombudsman released a report recommending that the Government of BC issue a "clear, unconditional and public apology" to the New Denver survivors. While a "statement of regret" was delivered in the legislature in 2004, many survivors are still waiting for a formal apology.