

The School Question

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

Their fears were not unfounded. For example, between 1953 and 1959, almost 200 Sons of Freedom Doukhor children were seized in RCMP raids and incarcerated in a residential facility in New Denver, BC. The children had limited contact with their parents, specifically two visits per month with a high wire fence between them. The children were denied physical contact and comfort. The children were subject to a strict authoritarian environment and were punished for speaking Russian. Verbal, physical and other forms of abuse from the caretakers were common. The children were released in 1959, when their parents finally agreed to send them to public school.

- Natasha Jmieff and Ahna Berikoff

Aftermath

Today, the Sons of Freedom Doukhobor heritage is valued by many individuals, and even though there is no active resistance movement, there are many creative community initiatives that foster heritage, culture and language. 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.

- Natasha Jmieff and Ahna Berikoff