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# The Peoples of Saskatchewan in Pictures: The Doukhobors

*Introduced and selected by Georgina M. Taylor*



**S**askatchewan's diverse peoples are an important part of our history. Since pictures can tell us a great deal about them, we are now including a selection of pictures of one particular group in each issue of *Saskatchewan History*.<sup>1</sup> This selection, the second in the series, focusses on the Doukhobors because this year is their Centenary.<sup>2</sup> In 1899 some 7,500 Doukhobors arrived in the area that later became Saskatchewan.<sup>3</sup> The largest group of immigrants ever to arrive in North America at one time, they were refugees sponsored by the Quakers and concerned humanitarians such as Leo Tolstoy, the renowned Russian novelist; therefore, they were much discussed right from the beginning. The coming of the Doukhobors, other immigrants, and thousands of Euro-Canadians in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and the displacement of the First Nations had a profound impact on the ethnic and racial balance of the area of the North-West that became Saskatchewan in 1905.<sup>4</sup> The turbulent story of the province's Doukhobors is recorded not only in countless documents and in scholarly and popular writing, but also in the numerous pictures of their life in Saskatchewan.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the controversy about the Doukhobors, there were more pictures taken of them than there were of many other ethnic groups in the province. Their arrival was controversial, in part because they were Russian peasants. Most Anglo-Celts of the day were not only using mechanized farm machinery rather than handmade peasant implements, such as scythes, they were also more market-oriented than these peasants. The ideas of Social Darwinism encouraged the Anglo-Celts to judge the development of agriculture in terms of evolutionary thought to the point that they believed they had evolved to a higher level than peasants who still practised subsistence agriculture.<sup>6</sup> Social Darwinists also ranked people according to their ethnicity or race. As one Canadian newspaper put it, the Anglo-Celts were "the best sort of settlers for the North-West." The Doukhobors, it claimed, were one of "the semi-civilized races."<sup>7</sup>

In tsarist Russia the Doukhobors, who were paci-

fists, had been persecuted and had suffered a great deal for their refusal to serve in the military, so when Canada agreed to take them in and to give them exemptions from military service, they regarded it as a land of refuge. Although some Canadians defended them, many resented and criticised the Doukhobors because of these exemptions and because the government allowed them to live and work communally in bloc settlements. The square survey, the homestead system, and government policy had structured the West for land ownership by individual white male homesteaders. Therefore, when the government allowed bloc settlements there was a great deal of criticism.<sup>8</sup> James Mavor, a professor at the University of Toronto, was one of the people who negotiated with Clifford Sifton, the Minister in charge of the federal Department of the Interior, and bureaucrats in the Department to arrange for the settlement of the Doukhobors in Saskatchewan. Sifton agreed because he thought too few settlers were coming from the East, the United States, and Britain, and he wanted to fill the West with people of the soil who knew how to farm. These negotiations with Sifton meant that the Doukhobors came to regard him as a benefactor.<sup>9</sup>

Living and working on isolated prairie homesteads was very difficult and lonely.<sup>10</sup> However, the Doukhobors lived and worked in 61 agricultural villages with an average population of 142. They had blocks of good land near Pelly, Kamsack and Buchanan, and Blaine Lake and Langham all in present-day Saskatchewan, so they had the advantage of being able to spend time together as they worked.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, their early years were not easy in part because they were very short of money. The men often had to find employment away from the villages and this left a few men, the women, and the children to do a great deal of the heavy work of getting the villages established.<sup>12</sup> This practice also contributed to the controversy that surrounded the Doukhobors, because women doing heavy outside work was frowned upon by middle-class urban Anglo-Celts whose values were dominant. They believed in the "cult of true domesticity," which decreed that a man should work outside the home and a woman should be



a domestic “angel in the house.”<sup>13</sup> Women, they believed, should not do heavy work. This idealistic middle-class urban ideology ignored the reality of the lives of working-class, farm, and pioneer women in every ethnic group, most of whom worked so hard they did not have time to be idle ornamental angels.<sup>14</sup> Unrealistic though this definition of a woman’s role was, it contributed to the controversies that surrounded the Doukhobors. Those who opposed the Doukhobors were able to use the “cult of domesticity” for their own purposes by making much of the now infamous picture of Doukhobor women pulling a plough. The Doukhobors were very short of horses in 1899, and those they had were in use on the trail to Yorkton. They needed food, and the women willingly worked to plant the crops that would feed them and their families, work that now is regarded as “heroic” by their descendents. However, Canadians were given an erroneous impression of the Doukhobors by sensational newspaper stories that suggested the women were enslaved.<sup>15</sup>

The Doukhobors objected to the oath of allegiance that homesteaders were required to take before they could get title to their land. They remembered the persecution they had suffered for their pacifism in Russia and feared that taking the oath and the registration of land, births, deaths, and marriages would lead to conscription.

In 1902, Peter V. Verigin, the charismatic leader of the Doukhobors who had been in enforced banishment in Russia, arrived in Saskatchewan.<sup>17</sup> Verigin, whose parents had been rich farmers in Russia, took charge of the Doukhobors with an “aptitude and zeal for organization” that helped them thrive.<sup>18</sup> He wanted a strong united community, so he tried to deal with the divisions within the Doukhobor community. There were three main groups: first, a small group of zealots; second, the orthodox Community Doukhobors who wanted to live communally and regarded Verigin’s leadership as “divine;” and third, the Independent Doukhobors who believed in seeking guidance from “the inner light” rather than from a divinely appointed leader and wanted to farm independently. “Peter the Lordly,” as his followers called him, tried to convince the zealots to settle down; he made it clear that he believed it was best to live communally but those who wanted to live independently should be free to do so.<sup>19</sup> The number of Independents was always small compared to the Community Doukhobors. In 1906, for example, there were only 849 Independents compared to 7,862 Community Doukhobors. In Verigin’s day there were never more than 100 zealots.<sup>20</sup> Verigin did not heal the divisions

among the Doukhobors, but his leadership helped in the short term, allowing them to focus on working diligently to develop their land and their holdings.

George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic argue that, in a remarkably short time after Verigin’s arrival, the Doukhobors were able to build “one of the largest and most complex of the many idealistic communities



*Peter Ivanivitch Popoff and his wife Masha Popoff. In Russia he had been deported to Siberia for refusing to take up arms. He and other Doukhobors were given life sentences. He was one of the Doukhobors who were driven on foot for over 1,000 miles. He suffered in Siberia for nine years and then was able to rejoin his family and other Doukhobors in present-day Saskatchewan in 1903.*

in North American history.”<sup>21</sup> When they first arrived the Doukhobors had been very short of farm equipment and had harvested their first crop with the scythes they brought from Russia. Verigin could see that, in order to thrive economically on the prairies where the growing season was short, the Doukhobors would have to mechanize. Part of the reason so many men found outside employment in the early years was to earn enough money to buy mechanized implements, such as binders and threshing machines. As a result, the Community Doukhobors were able to spend thousands of dollars on machinery, implements, land, and livestock. By 1903 they had six steam engines, many plows, harrows, and other imple-

Saskatchewan Archives Board, National Doukhobor Heritage Village Collection, S-B 9493.



ments and they had built flour mills and saw mills. They had only 400 horses in 1903, but by 1906 they had 1,067.<sup>22</sup> By 1907 there were 8,700 Doukhobors in Saskatchewan who were “comfortable and happy,” according to Professor James Mavor who visited them.<sup>23</sup>

By 1905 developed land on the prairies was much in demand, and Frank Oliver had replaced Sifton as the Minister of the Interior. Oliver, a dedicated Social Darwinist, disliked all Slavs and had opposed the Doukhobors in his Edmonton newspaper from the time they arrived. When Oliver became the Minister the rules were changed, and the Doukhobors who refused to sign the oath of allegiance were evicted and their lands sold to the public. This meant a loss of over eleven million dollars worth of Doukhobor property in Saskatchewan.<sup>24</sup> It led to a mass migration to British Columbia between 1908 and 1913 of some 5,000 orthodox Community Doukhobors under the “divine” leadership of Verigin and of a small group of zealots, out of which the radical Sons of Freedom were to grow. In British Columbia they bought land and, therefore, did not have to take the oath of allegiance. This left a few Community Doukhobors and the Independent Doukhobors in Saskatchewan.<sup>25</sup>

The Doukhobors who remained in Saskatchewan agreed to live on individual homesteads. They worked on their land using farming methods similar to other farmers in the province who were engaged in team-haul agriculture with mechanized machinery. This did not mean they gave up their pacifism, but with the land question settled and most of the orthodox Community Doukhobors and most of the zealots in British Columbia, life was more peaceful than it had been before. In 1924 Peter V. Verigin died in a mysterious train explosion in British Columbia, and he was replaced by his son. Even though most Saskatchewan Doukhobors were moderates, over the decades they lived with the adverse publicity engendered by problems between the government and the militant Sons of Freedom. Some Canadians regarded Doukhobors as bad, but people in Saskatchewan who knew the Doukhobors saw them as quiet and moderate.<sup>27</sup>

On June the twenty-ninth each year the Doukhobors held St. Peter's Day picnics to commemorate the “Burning of the Arms” in 1895 when they had burned their firearms in Russia in protest against conscription and their persecution had increased. These picnics, accounts they told of their history, and the singing of traditional psalms helped to keep their history alive and encouraged them to retain their pacifism.<sup>28</sup> Their pacifist beliefs led to crisis and controversy again during the Second World War, pushing

the different groups of Doukhobors together to resist the hostility of Canadians who supported the War. When the government began to conscript men, there was a great deal of resistance among Saskatchewan Doukhobors. Conscientious objectors were allowed to avoid conscription by choosing to do alternate work in lieu of military service, but if they refused they were charged, tried, and imprisoned. The seventy Doukhobors in Saskatchewan who chose to do alternate work were sent to a work camp near Lac La Ronge to build a road. Although the government claimed this road building project was a big success it was cancelled after a year. Others served in other camps, such as the camps in the Prince Albert National Park. Believing that this work supported the War effort indirectly, ninety Doukhobors refused to do alternate work and were sent to prison in Prince Albert.<sup>29</sup> The Doukhobors' refusal to participate in the war effort was supported by other pacifists in Saskatchewan, such as Carlyle King, Violet and John McNaughton, and Gertrude Telford but they were a minority.<sup>30</sup> The Doukhobors' staunch pacifism aroused hostility among patriotic people, especially members of the powerful Canadian Legion.<sup>31</sup>

After the War, Doukhobor farmers, like other farmers on the prairies, bought gasoline tractors, combines, and trucks, thereby moving into the modern era of agriculture.<sup>32</sup> Like thousands of people in rural Saskatchewan during the years of farm consolidations in the post-war period, many Doukhobors sold their land and moved to find other means of earning a living. Many stopped attending Doukhobor Prayer Homes, and even those who continued to practise the Doukhobor way of life were much more like other people in Saskatchewan than they had been in the early years.<sup>33</sup>

The pictures in this selection were taken mainly during the settlement period. They show the courage and perseverance of a people who fled persecution in the old country, worked very hard and demonstrated against the sanctions imposed on them in Canada, coped with discrimination in Saskatchewan, and over the decades earned the respect of others in the province.<sup>34</sup>

#### NOTES:

1. For a brief discussion of the current historiographic debate about the value of focussing on the various peoples of Canada and for the first of this series see “The Peoples of Saskatchewan in Pictures: The First Nations” introduced and selected by Georgina M. Taylor, *Saskatchewan History* 51(1) (Fall 1998): 8-9, 28, 31, 41, 47.
2. This introduction is intended to be read with George Stushnoff's article and Margaret Gail Osachoff's review in this issue of *Saskatchewan History*, since they provide more details about the history of Saskatchewan Doukhobors. I am grateful to Osachoff for helping me select these pictures and to George Stushnoff for looking at them with me and making helpful comments. I would like to thank



- Osachoff, Stushnoff, Margaret Baldoock, Paul Denham, D'Arcy Hande and Jim Pitsula for reading earlier drafts of this selection and making helpful comments and suggestions.
3. For a discussion of the Doukhobors' trip across Canada and the number who came to Saskatchewan see Betty Ward, "Trek of the Doukhobors," *Saskatchewan History* 34(1) (Winter 1981): 17-24.
  4. In 1881 the peoples of the First Nations made up 78% of the population of the area, but by 1916, during the Great War, they made up only 1.7% of the population of Saskatchewan. In contrast, the British went from 10.7% to 54.5% of the population in the same period. The Canadian Census of 1881 did not report any Russians or Ukrainians, but thousands of Ukrainians and Doukhobors immigrated to the prairies, so by 1901 they made up to 12.8% of the population of the area. They dropped to only 3.7% by 1911, however, and they were 5.2% of Saskatchewan's population in 1916. It was the Census of Canada that calculated the Ukrainians and the Doukhobors together. John H. Archer, *Saskatchewan A History* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980), 358.
  5. For more details about the history of the Doukhobors in Saskatchewan see George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Koozma J. Tarasoff, *A Pictorial History of the Doukhobors* (Saskatoon: Prairie Books Department, *The Western Producer*, 1969); Koozma J. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava — The Doukhobors* (Grand Forks: mir Publication Society, 1982). Both of Tarasoff's books include a great many photographs, some of which are in this selection. A few of the pictures in my selection have not been published before, to my knowledge.
  6. For a discussion of Social Darwinism and its impact on Saskatchewan during the settlement period see Georgina M. Taylor, "Art Nouveau, Immigration Propaganda, and the Peoples of Saskatchewan," *Saskatchewan History*, 50(2) (Fall 1998): 31-44. For discussions of the periodization of prairie agriculture into peasant agriculture, team-haul agriculture, and modern agriculture see Robert Ankl and John Thompson, "The Adoption of the Gasoline Tractor in Western Canada" *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 2 (1980): 9-40; Jeffery Taylor, *Fashioning Farmers — Ideology, Agricultural Knowledge and the Manitoba Farm Movement, 1890-1925* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1994), 6-7; Georgina M. Taylor, "'Ground for Common Action': Violet McNaughton's Agrarian Feminism and the Origins of the Farm Women's Movement in Canada," Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1997, 49-57; John Shover, *First Majority - Last Majority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), xiii-xiv.
  7. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 35.
  8. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 165-166. Taylor, "Art Nouveau," 31-33, 35-38. For a comparison of the Doukhobors with the Mennonites and the Hutterites, who also lived in bloc settlements, see William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty — The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). See also Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 267-271.
  9. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 34-37. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 131-134.
  10. For descriptions of the loneliness and difficulties of prairie settlers living on individual homesteads see Mary Hiemstra, *Gully Farm* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1955); Sarah Ellen Roberts, *Of Us and the Oxen* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1968); Evan Davies and Aled Vaughan, *Beyond the Old Bone Trail* (London: Cassell, 1960). "The Shirley Keyes Thompson Memories: 'A Prairie Wife's Tale,'" *Saskatchewan History* 44(1) (Winter 1992): 17-30.
  11. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 49-84. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 158, 199.
  12. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 47-57. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 162-163.
  13. For discussions of the "cult of domesticity" and "the angel in the house" see Ruth Roach Pierson, "Two Marys and a Virginia: Historical Moments in the Development of a Feminist Perspective on Education," in *Women and Education - A Canadian Perspective*, ed. Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1981), 203-222; Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 4-5.
  14. For an examination of the lives of pioneer women in Saskatchewan and Alberta see Nanci Langford, "First Generation and Lasting Impressions: The Gendered Identities of Prairie Homestead Women," Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 1994. See also Nanci Langford, "Childbirth on the Canadian Prairies 1880-1930," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 8(3) (September 1995): 278-302.
  15. In 1899 the South Colony had only one horse per 67.7 persons, the two groups in the North Colony had one horse per 27.9 and 22.6 persons, and near Prince Albert they had one per 14.6 persons. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 53. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 158, 162-163.
  17. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 182-186.
  18. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 76, 189.
  19. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 14, 85-154. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 182-260.
  20. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 198. Tarasoff, who grew up in a Doukhobor community in Saskatchewan, defines zealots as "people who demonstrate a quality of passion or zeal, or impatient enthusiasm, usually manifested under conditions of uncertainty and extreme physical, economic, psychological, and social stress." He cites Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as people who had "zealot qualities." Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 76. Koozma Tarasoff and Larry Ewahan, "Significant Dates in Doukhobor History," <http://www.doukhobor-homepage.com>
  21. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 198. For a comparison of the Doukhobors with other utopian communities on the Canadian prairies see A. W. Rasporich, "Utopian Ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada, 1880-1914" in *The Prairie West - Historical Readings*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, The University of Alberta Press, 1992), 352-377.
  22. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 190, 200.
  23. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 131, 155, 199-200.
  24. For a discussion of Oliver and the ethno-bigotry and racism of the Department during his years as the Minister of the Interior see Taylor, "Art Nouveau," 31-44; Koozma Tarasoff, "The Land Loss Story," 17 March 1998, <http://www.doukhobor-homepage.com>
  25. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 85-154. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 182-260. Woodcock and Avakumovic argue that the Sons of Freedom were "a radical activist minority" and "religious fanatics thirsting for martyrdom." Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 310, 317.
  26. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 284-307.
  27. For an example of sensationalist journalism that inflamed feelings against the Doukhobors see Simma Holt, *Terror in the Name of God — The Story of the Sons of Freedom* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964). Holt claimed that the Sons of Freedom were "a backwoods Mafia-like organization." See for example the captions under the pictures. On the other hand, J.F.C. Wright, a Saskatchewan journalist who lived and worked with Doukhobors, liked and respected them. His book *Slava Bohu* won the Governor General's Award for non-fiction in 1940. J.F.C. Wright, *Slava Bohu — The Story of the Doukhobors* (New York and Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940). Norah Story, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 860.
  28. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 21-28. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 84-106.
  29. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 155-158. Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, 320-321. Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War — Pacifism in Canada 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 237-240.
  30. Saskatchewan Archives Board, Telford Papers, R-334, XIII, Gertrude Telford "Memories;" McNaughton Papers A1 D12, Violet McNaughton's correspondence with Peter and Margaret Bludoff, 1938 to 1949. Carlyle King, "A Beginning in Politics: Saskatoon CCF 1938-1943," 36(3) (Autumn 1983): 102-114. Stan Hanson and Don Kerr, "Pacifism, Dissent and the University of Saskatchewan, 1938-1944" *Saskatchewan History* 45(1) (Fall 1983): 15-23. Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 106-107, 179, 216-220, 232. Georgina M. Taylor, "Equals and Partners? An Examination of How Saskatchewan Women Reconciled Their Political Activities for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation with Traditional Roles for Women" M.A.

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