

DOUKHOBORS AND THE MEDIA

Since the Doukhobor arrival in Canada in 1899, the relationship between Doukhobors and the media, here referring primarily to the Canadian media, has run roughly parallel to that of other ethnic minorities and the media.

Because the media tend to sensationalize in search a good story or a story that will sell papers and programs [the ratings game], and since some behavior of the Doukhobors was unusual, it appears the Doukhobor stories reached some sort of pinnacle in distortion of truth, fairness and accuracy. The fact that the popular press generally presents an establishment view plays a part; as well as the fact that the Doukhobors were anything but establishment.

There was also a built in feeling of superiority among the players controlling the press, since most of them were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and generally the view presented was that of this majority outlook coupled with vested interests, whether the interests were economic, patriotic or cultural.

This paper will give some examples of this throughout the history as well as some examples of fair and unbiased reporting.

One generalization has it that many distorted reports occurred over the years because essentially, the Doukhobors possessed an oral culture and did not place a high, intrinsic value on the written word. Presumably, because of this, they were remiss in recording their own story - thus being written about rather than writing about themselves. The facts do not really bear this out.

Early writings by such literary note worthies as Sulerjitski, Lev Tolstoy, Bonch Bruevich, Orest Novitsky, Almyer Maude, Biryukov, Khomyakov, James Mavor, Kropotkin, and others such as George Woodcock of later years, spoke very highly of Doukhobor ideals and life style.

So did the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in Cambridge in 1910, and this article is still used by some Doukhobors [and others] as a definitive, short and concise report on the history and aspirations of the Doukhobors.

Following this lead, most Encyclopedias since that time, with some exceptions, continued to present a balanced and more or less accurate picture of the group.

Examples are: The Illustrated History of Canada, The Encyclopedia Americana, The Canadian Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia Canadiana, The World Book Encyclopedia and the New Encyclopedia Britannica.

I mention these books not so much as members of the media, although I consider them as such just as I consider any organ capable of forming public opinion as media, but because these are reference books which are available to researchers, news reporters, reviewers, and other people in responsible positions who present ideas and concepts to the public. Given that some accurate sources exist since 1900 [publication in English of Christian Martyrdom in Russia by Vladimir Tchertkov] there seems to be little excuse for inaccuracies and imbalance beyond the motive of sensationalism and the selling of newspapers and viewing of programs.

Returning to the theme of 'Doukhobors being written about rather than writing about themselves', there have been some early Doukhobor writings. The majority of these were so-called 'exposes' which easily rivaled the more sensationalistic aspect of the Canadian press. From this viewpoint, the literate Doukhobors did not extol the virtues of Doukhoborism, but in these specific cases, presented an unsavoury view of the inner workings of the community.

Other Doukhobors such as Sam Stupnikoff in Saskatchewan are well meaning, self-published authors of Doukhobor history, but are woefully ignorant of the Doukhobor history and publish fanciful notions and myths rather than historical facts.

I am not going to specifically deal with the media writings of the Russian press except for those already mentioned which are available in translation.

The first big Canadian headline was the HALIFAX HERALD, January 21st. 1899, perhaps one of the most favourable of all and one of the first and last such favourable stories. The story carried a complete report of the journey, events on board etc. and generally was a balanced view with a favourable aspect towards the immigrants.

The HALIFAX MORNING CHRONICLE wrote: 'Singing psalms of thanksgiving to Almighty God over two thousand souls freed from Russian tyranny and oppression sailed into Halifax harbour . . . One reason why they left their own country was because they refused to take up arms, yet they received a warm welcome in a harbour studded with forts.'

Later references to pacifism would suggest that they were disloyal or traitors for their pacifist beliefs.

The January 24th issue of the ST. JOHN DAILY STAR reported: . . . men, women, and children, 2000 in all, showed a willingness to do anything and everything that had to be done on board the ship in order to make the passage as pleasant as possible for all on board. It was a holiday trip for the ship's crew, for the immigrants did the greater part of the work.'

Reporters from the MONTREAL DAILY STAR were also on hand and reported: 'He had not seen a row or heard a cross word among them during the voyage. There was no vice of any kind among them, and he believed they would make a superior class of immigrant.'

In 1902, a Winnipeg paper reported on the arrival of Peter Verigin: 'Both physically and mentally, he is perfectly equipped to be a leader of men . . . his conversation reveals a bright, keen, active mind . . .'

At this time, it was hoped that Verigin would settle all of the Doukhobor problems with the government regarding the land issue, and the bias was in the Doukhobors' favour.

Notable exceptions to bias was the consistent and even handed reporting in THE FRIEND, published by the Quakers.

In the December 27th issue of 1907 we hear of the latest Doukhobor 'pilgrimage' in which forty members of the community had left their homes and trekked to Winnipeg, arriving on foot and penniless after a journey of 300 miles. Their journey is noted in a sympathetic light and concludes: 'It is obvious that the pilgrims are sadly misguided, but it is satisfactory to reflect that the number is a very small fraction of the 8,000 Dukhobors [sic] now in Canada.'

It is this very demarcation between the zealot faction and the law abiding majority that this publication carefully points out, and the lack of distinguishing between these factions that became so irritating to scholars and Doukhobors when the Canadian press began its open season on 'Douks' in general, with no regard for the majority which did not participate in illegal behaviour.

The TORONTO MAIL AND EMPIRE at the time wrote a sensible and sympathetic editorial noting the need for 'gentle influence' and education, ' . . . for the Doukhobors are with us now and it is important that they should become rational citizens.' As will be seen from following examples, such articles reflecting a non-sensationalistic attitude were the exception.

This same article provided further balance by quoting from a WINNIPEG FREE PRESS editorial which stated: ' . . . the participants in these absurd demonstrations are by no means representative of the colony . . . less than a 100 people were on these pilgrimages of this summer and there are over 8,000 Doukhobors in the west.'

The editorial goes on to speak positively of the development of the brick factory in Yorkton and

presents a picture of a Doukhobor scene; an elder with children. This is notable because pictures of demonstrations were not featured as they were in most such reports.

From this period until after World War 1 and 11, the splinter group of the Sons of Freedom became the focus of many lurid stories as all newspapers and some authors of books competed in a frenzied climax to portray the arson and nudity of the Sons of Freedom. Once this precedent of extreme reporting had been set and was not challenged except by the odd letter to an editor, the field became open to refer to all Doukhobors in a broad generalization with no distinction being made for the majority of peaceful, law abiding and sometimes exceptional Canadian citizens who formed the majority of the Doukhobor population.

A random selection of absurd and derogatory headlines are available for any researcher throughout this period. So accepted had the slanderous remarks become in the newspapers and magazines of Canada that publications presented the most absurd distortions and exaggerations with impunity. Among others, popular magazines such as MACLEANS featured gross distortions under the label of journalism.

One particular article contains many errors but also takes for granted that it can slant the truth against the Doukhobors with impunity. Such statements as: 'The Freedomites have been fairly careful to avoid homicide . . .' indicates that their natural inclination would be to kill people; 'Both Mike and Laura Bayoff, like a number of other Freedomites, were former patients of the mental hospital at Essondale.' This, of course, indicates that most Freedomites are insane or should be committed. 'Elasoff is a small, busy, slightly hyper thyroid man, considerably trimmer than most Doukhobors who tend to run to fat.' Note that the generalizations in this article indicate that Doukhobors are fat, insane, murderers. This article was written by Ralph Allen, contributing editor. One of the most irritating aspects of such reporting was the use of the term DOUKS to designate Doukhobors. The word Doukhobor is a transliteration for Dookh-a-bor; the proper translation being SPIRIT WRESTLER.

Thus the word DOUK has no proper literate origin except as English derogatory slang; in personal language and perhaps aided by the unfortunate alliteration, the epithet became DIRTY DOUK. Well qualified journalists perhaps did not even realize that such a title could be derogatory, but certainly should have made it their business to find out.

The acceptance of such cliched stereotyping reached a height in a comic strip which appeared in the Lethbridge Herald in 1961. Here, a dynamite thief hides after his escape in his settlement and his disguise is the fact that everyone is naked. Later on the culprit is identified by his huge black beard and apprehended. In a mocking way, the Mountie says: 'I've got orders these people have to be handled gently. They're a minority group in Canada'.

In this settlement, where all of the 'renegades' live, all are naked, though none have genitalia.

Just as this episode of JEFF BUCHANAN typified the laissez faire attitude of the popular press towards this particular minority's sensibilities, Bruce Hutchinson, Canadian writer and establishment beacon of Canadian history stubbornly defended his backward and unenlightened view of our early settlers. His writings appeared in various Canadian history books as well as school books. According to his view:

'Ukes,' said the lady from Winnipeg. 'The square faces, flat noses, and high cheekbones showed their nationality . . . Her hands told the story plainly enough. She was a beast of burden, and content . . . we stopped and let her out at a huddle of squalid barns and a dirty-looking shack --- queer contrast to the neat houses of the Icelanders. She bowed to us and smiled again and trudged through the

barnyard, up to the ankles in mud.'

The Icelanders: 'He is an old man now, with curly grey hair, a face which may be properly called beautiful, and fine clear eyes . . . in this neat and shining sitting room.'

The Chinese and Japanese are referred to as 'the Oriental problem.'

The Scots: 'Everywhere the Scottish people have succeeded, in city, in village, on lonely farm, and in Indian trading post, until you cannot mark their special place in Canada.'

The English: 'They are handsome of face, charming of manner, sportsmen all, maintaining civilization in the wilderness and as the Englishman does everywhere, organizing society, entering public service . . .'

The Doukhobors: 'But strangest of all are the Doukhobors : . . they marched chanting through the prairie snow, stark naked, to meet Him . . . What agony the Wrestlers have suffered for the Spirit, marching naked through the snow of winter and the summer heat . . . locked up in foul jails by bewildered constabulary, who couldn't persuade them to put on their clothes, imprisoned on a lonely island in the sea because they would not send their children to school, defying the laws of Canada as stubbornly and dumbly as cattle! . . . that perennial nuisance, the naked Doukhobor.'

First published in THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY in 1942, then published in school books in 1951 and reprinted many times.

If this is the information that school children receive, one cannot be surprised as to what is acceptable in the popular media - think too, of the effect of such 'lessons' on Doukhobor children who learn of their own history in such a fashion.

When a Doukhobor elder [Michael Verigin, Cowley, Alberta] wrote to him and informed him that: 'neither my great grandfather, my grandfather, my father, myself or any of my children have ever marched naked, or burnt anything or defied the laws of Canada, and neither have 99% of the Doukhobors in Canada. Not only has any of my family never marched nude, we have not even even seen a nude march, and neither have the greater majority of Doukhobors in Canada.

Yes, as all other people have and had, there were a group of religious fanatics, who numbered less than 1% who had marched in the nude, but why condemn all, the more than 25,000 law abiding citizens for the actions of a very few? There are bombings and murders being committed in Ireland today between the Catholics and Protestants, do you condemn all Protestants and Catholics in the world? Today in Canadian prisons, there are murderers, no doubt from every race and religion, do you condemn all the people of their faith and race? If not, why after 80 years in Canada, you still discriminate against us?'

Not one to offer humility and contriteness when not necessary, Hutchinson responded in his own column in the Vancouver Sun: 'After more than two score years the Doukhobors of British Columbia and Alberta suddenly discover that THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY was racist . . . They insist records of the minority's earlier offenses must be removed from the public school texts and, if possible, from all books of history as if the offenses had never happened.'

Obfuscation and side stepping the issue. Hutchinson became the Editor Emeritus of the Vancouver Sun and as the leading paper in British Columbia, set the standard and the tone for other papers in the west.

A further letter from a Doukhobor scholar [this writer] in 1985 to the editorial pages of the Vancouver Sun states, in part: ' . . . Les Bewley, a writer noted for his unpopularity among unbiased readers, passes off as fact a mere unproven rumour. He says of Doukhobors that they "set fires and blew up trains". Yes, some radical Doukhobors did set fires, but it has never been proven that they

blew up trains. The only suggestion that they did so was made by a former Sun columnist, Simma Holt, who in her smear laden, yellow-tainted book *TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD* suggested that the Doukhobors themselves blew up a train in 1924, causing the death of their revered leader, Peter Verigin. That suggestion has been consistently and categorically denied by the Doukhobors, and Holt has never revealed the source of the information that led to her bizarre conclusion. But Bewley, not known for his high journalistic standards, seizes on that spurious allegation as established fact. Does that indicate a SUN position regarding the Doukhobors? Do you belong to a waspish old-boy network that treats the members of that minority as benighted heathens capable of any vile act and always available to help sell a few more newspapers or further a journalistic career through sensationalistic reporting? After all, Bruce Hutchinson, editor emeritus of *THE SUN*, was also well known for his bellicose attacks on the Doukhobors throughout his entire reporting career; attacks that carried with them built in conclusions about those early B. C. settlers; conclusions that bespoke an attempt to destroy any credibility the Doukhobors may have had. It seems *THE SUN* continues with that smug foregone-conclusion attitude as editorial policy. I invite your columnists and editors to join the 20th century in terms of journalistic standards and to try to maintain their objectivity and to screen out of the paper such unproven, prejudicial allegations as Bewley seems intent on presenting us with. . . '

The epitome of yellow journalism and bad press, of course, was attained by the aforementioned book; *TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD*; except for some earlier references in newspapers which referred to the Doukhobors as hardly above the ape in life scale. [This by Frank Oliver, editor of the *EDMONTON GAZETTE*, the same Frank Oliver who later engineered the dispossession of the Doukhobor properties in Saskatchewan.]

Without devoting more space to this unfortunate exercise in prejudicial bad taste, it is worth noting that even other biased journalists agree that it is full of errors, assumptions and unproven allegations. In the end, all Doukhobors are discredited, condemned as fanatics, and in this respect, *TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD* fulfils all criteria to be classified as hate literature. Many reviews, not written by Doukhobors, cite many factual inaccuracies and simple conjecture presented as truth.

In 1958, Koozma Tarasoff tabled a report on 19 newspapers in British Columbia over a two year period in response to an editorial in the *VANCOUVER SUN*. One of the major findings was: 'Wide spread inaccuracy in the handling of news along with the denial of opportunity for diverse expression has resulted in greater prejudice and discrimination against two of Canada's minority groups --- the Doukhobors and the Sons of Freedom.'

The resultant prejudice created by casual every day press and more specifically, prejudicial histories in school texts, make this especially difficult for children of Doukhobor parents and the parents themselves.

In the well known book *THE COMMUNITY DOUKHOBORS, A PEOPLE IN TRANSITION*, by John Freisen and Michael Verigin, in the Chapter *THE QUEST FOR CULTURAL SURVIVAL*, the authors state: 'Part of the difficulty of preserving Doukhobor identity requires the simultaneous eradication of the perpetual press image of them staging nude marches and burning buildings . . . the press is still attuned to negative vibes.' (P.195]

On Page 197, the authors continue: 'In a study of public attitudes towards Doukhobors in the nineteen-fifties, John P. Zubeck found that negative attitudes among high schoolers increased as students grew older. He also found that such prejudice increased because of sensationalised news

accounts about Doukhobor tragedies and the resultant parental exaggeration of Doukhobor faults.' From this we can see what far flung effects careless reporting can have on people's lives. On Page 191 of the same book, we note: 'Some Doukhobors have changed their names to hide their origins.' This of course, is the extreme result of a feeling of isolation and prejudice from the rest of Canadian society.

Coupled with the Doukhobor terrorist image was the image of the dull, dour, placid, cunning and conniving Communist striving for world domination and the suggestion and belief in some quarters that the Doukhobors were fifth column sympathisers of the Communist cause. While it is true that many Doukhobors have a highly developed sense of social consciousness, Peter Verigin was horrified at the Russian revolution and the bloodshed that followed. This did not prevent the Doukhobors from sending carloads of wheat and sums of money collected at meetings to aid the famine in Russia in 1921. At that time the Doukhobors petitioned the workers of Russia not to support the Communists because of their random and turbulent aggression. It also must be understood that many Canadian Doukhobors had left relatives in Russia. Ties to a motherland existed, but they were not political. This further representation of the Doukhobors was fuelled by the cold war and aided and abetted by government policy in which any organization having the word PEACE in its name or aim, was investigated by the RCMP.

In an ineffectual counter action against the negative press and in an attempt to foster a realistic stance and role model for Doukhobors, three publications stand out, one of which survives today. In all cases, they were created and put into effect by Doukhobors, and therefore gave a balanced view of Doukhobor activities and concerns.

Two of these were started by the Union of Young Doukhobors. In 1953, such a convention was held in Canora, Saskatchewan, and the idea of such a periodical was launched. Its purpose was two fold: through such an English language publication, the presentation of Doukhobor ideals and accounts of the activities of the youth organization would bring about a better understanding with the other Canadians; and secondly, the Doukhobor INQUIRER would serve to counter act the adverse publicity given the Doukhobors by the press.

The mast head proclaimed: ' . . . an enquiring approach to social problems.' and the publication continued from February 1954 until April 1958; first as a monthly, then as a quarterly. Topics ranged from philosophy, religion, book reviews, Doukhobor events and recollections of pioneer life and customs as well as promotion of cultural events and sports. Unfortunately, when the editor, Koozma J. Tarasoff, left Saskatchewan to pursue his education in British Columbia there was no one left to replace him and publication ceased. Throughout its publication life, the highest journalistic standards applied.

A second and important Doukhobor publication was begun by the Union of Young Doukhobors of Vancouver, spear headed by Jim Popoff. Throughout its brief life of seventeen issues, from 1973 to 1979, it also provided a positive report on the activities and aspirations of Doukhobor activity. Under difficult circumstances, the limited staff managed to produce a smooth, attractive and professional magazine which centred on Doukhobor culture and history and related topics dealing with peace and social activism. This too, unfortunately met its demise through lack of finances and man power.

By far, the most influential and consistent Doukhobor publication is ISKRA.

Begun in 1943 as a Russian language publication, it became bilingual in 1952 with a 'Youth Section in English,' and to the present time, English language communication has developed into a main

feature. Although this is a publication of the USCC, [The Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ], it is now a major source of information and contact for all groups across Canada, the US and even Russia.

In all of these three publications, costs played a major factor. The current subscription cost for Iskra does not fully cover the cost of publication; subscriptions vary, and in all cases, donations played an integral role. In addition, extra copies were always provided to libraries and other institutions, over and above the number printed for subscribers.

Of course, the distribution of any or all of these did not come close to the circulation of even a small, local paper. The readership was Doukhobor or interested or sympathetic to the Doukhobors, and while presenting a positive, truthful account of Doukhobor activities, of course, could not combat the negative stereotyping from the larger organs.

We have already seen how Bruce Hutchinson stuck by his guns and refused to bend in defending his previous works. One of the most irritating aspects of dealing with the major media was their reluctance to qualify or correct anything that they had printed. A large concern can or a wealthy individual can threaten to sue, most of the scattered Doukhobors were not organized or effectual enough to create much objection or protest. Letters to the editor were printed because they had to be, but that generally was the extent of any corrections.

In the case of specific errors, there was no redress. I cite one particular example: In 1970, William Popove wrote a chapter on the Doukhobors for the British Columbia Centennial volume; STRANGERS ENTERTAINED - A HISTORY OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. I have read this paper, an intelligent appraisal of the history of the Doukhobors in Russia and their settlement in Canada. When the publication appeared, his entire article had been changed to exhibit a negative portrayal of the people; however, his name still appeared as author. In a letter February 28, 1972, to the editors and publishers; he wrote the following: [One paragraph of a four page letter.] 'The book is purportedly based on accounts prepared by the ethnic groups themselves. Under "Acknowledgements" my name appears as the sole contributor to Chapter Twenty, dealing with the Doukhobors. Taking much exception to many parts of Chapter Twenty, and certainly the unqualified linking of my name to same, without ever an opportunity for some consultation in the pre-publication stage, I cannot but take the view that this constitutes not only a flagrant transgression of the normal courtesies extended in such matters, but is in keeping with the many high-handed statements and judgements concerning the Doukhobor group. At the very least there should have been some clarification in the "Acknowledgements" regarding the misuse of my name and article "The Doukhobor Saga" and particularly so if its contents were found objectionable to the author. I would have preferred my name not appearing in the book in its presently published context.' He did not receive a reply to his letter.

Have conditions improved over the years? Undoubtedly. Our society is now diverse enough that many ethnic groups are putting collective pressure on governments and public institutions such as newspapers to stop expressing bias. The Press Council has revised and updated its code to guide reporters; certain guidelines have always been in place, but their interpretation was lax. In addition, government inquiries on human rights and prejudice have established principles in law. The idea of banning immigration of one group or denying a specific group franchise today would cause a lot of public reaction. In smaller centres, local newspapers are more attuned to local citizens, and certain newspaper have made efforts to honestly reflect its citizenry.

That said, I offer an example of a situation where improvement is still possible: In a letter dated

January 18, 1993, Michael Verigin writes to Provo Magazine, in part,: 'Mr. Romansky, what are you trying to prove or achieve, as publisher and editor of this magazine, by publishing this article where you referred to myself, my family, and my people as DOUKS? What are DOUKS? ... We still recall from the past, certain newspapers and magazine articles, where we were labelled and referred to as DOUKS. But, thank God, over the years, people are starting to have more understanding, tolerance and respect for all peoples, no matter what colour their skin is, what nationality they are or what religion they adhere to. Name calling is in very bad taste and certainly not acceptable by most cultured people. No one likes to be called a Wop, Bohunk, Nigger, Yid, Chink, Jap or Douk. I wish you success with your publication of your otherwise fine magazine, but perhaps you should learn to proofread yourself, so that you can prevent discriminatory issues such as this from being published in the future. Sincerely, Michael M. Verigin.'

In support of the theory that we still have a long way to go, I would like to cite two final articles; one from THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, Oct3., 1993, in which the headline reads: MEDIA ARE MODERN DINOSAURS. The article suggests that all media are not doing their job, and instead of reporting the country's problems, are part of them [Speech by Michael Crichton, National Press Club].

A further article in THE VANCOUVER SUN, April 19,1994, says: 'Most papers'miss boat' on covering minorities. - Daily newspapers in Canada are almost as white as the paper they're printed on, suggest two new studies on the hiring and coverage of minorities.'

I have tried not to draw conclusions but to merely offer examples of past stories.

My final offering deals with Doukhobor scholars still being thwarted in telling their own stories. In 2008 the City of Castlegar [the major stronghold of Doukhobors today] received a provincial grant to develop a public square in front of the newly constructed city hall. As Curator of the Doukhobor Discovery Centre, the museum of 37 years standing, I thought that it would be appropriate for the design to contain some Doukhobor motifs, e.g. Bread, Salt and Water, doves etc.

The Doukhobors were the founders of the area and it was the 100th anniversary of the settlement. Through my efforts, the migration was declared an Event of National Importance by the Federal Government. The leader, Peter V. Verigin, was also declared a Person of National Historic Significance. The time seemed right for the Doukhobor fact to emerge in the area with official recognition by the city fathers.

I got in touch with the city and was told to contact the designer in Rossland. I found out who the designer was and sent him various designs and sketches. I did not receive an answer to my suggestions. The result of the so-called 'Spirit Square' is a large, sterile concrete platform devoid of ambiance and any spirit whatsoever. Nothing distinctive and no feeling or connection to this unique location or its historic heritage.

At a later time I heard that there was to be a plaque mentioning the Doukhobors to be erected in the square. I once again offered my services and expertise in writing the story of the Doukhobor founding of this area. Once again my services were rebuffed and this particular job went to a person with only rudimentary knowledge of the Doukhobors, a sign painter of German origin. The unfortunate result is a dispirited collage of several mounted posters, the Doukhobors mentioned in about one half of one panel.

Although this was the 100th anniversary of the Doukhobor move to BC [National Historic Event] and the 150 anniversary of British Columbia, no mention of these seminal events was made at the opening of the new city hall and the spirit square. The gala opening which concentrated on our

Japanese sister city and the upcoming Vancouver Olympics. Once again, the most singular contribution of the Doukhobors to any particular area was all but ignored.

If not now, when?

If changes are not going to become evident in such obvious circumstances, I will not hold my breath for any great expectations of corrective action in the near future.

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