Sons of Freedom Doukhobors of Saskatchewan win communal land-holding, Canada, 1900-1907

June 1900 to January 1907
Country: Canada
Location City/State/Province: Saskatchewan province
Goals: Exemption from the swearing of an oath of allegiance to the Crown, and from the individual registration of land occupied by Doukhobors

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 135. Popular nonobedience

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 135. Popular nonobedience

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 022. Protest disrobing
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches › Nude parading
- 048. Protest meetings
- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements › Taking shelter in makeshift roadside campsites
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 4th segment:
• 022. Protest disrobings
• 038. Marches › Nude parading
• 048. Protest meetings
• 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
• 135. Popular nonobedience

Methods in 5th segment:

• 022. Protest disrobings
• 038. Marches › Nude parading
• 048. Protest meetings
• 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
• 135. Popular nonobedience

Methods in 6th segment:

• 022. Protest disrobings
• 038. Marches
• 048. Protest meetings
• 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
• 135. Popular nonobedience

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• Freedomite/Sons of Freedom Doukhobors

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Ivan Ponamoroff, Vasily Obedkoff, Nicholas Zeboroff, and possibly Peter V. Veregin, leader of Doukhobors at large

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
Leo Tolstoy

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Leo Tolstoy
- Orthodox/Community Doukhobors (Exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 13 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Canadian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Government had Quaker leaders attempt to persuade Doukhobors to abide by Canadian law in first march of 1902.

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Police arrest and imprison protestors in march of May 1902. Resentful Orthodox/Community Doukhobors beat Sons of Freedom for protest. Police forcibly return Doukhobors to their homes on several accounts.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The original Sons of Freedom objective, freedom from property, was achieved as they were relocated to reserve. Their loss of much land came at the cost of their freedom from registration, but is not reflective of a failed objective. However, many Doukhobors had to migrate to British Columbia to find more land, and Peter V. Verigin registered much property under his own name so that Doukhobors could live communally and peacefully. Four success points were given to reflect only relative success of the campaign.

The Doukhobors are a group of Russian peasants who left the Orthodox Church following a schism and were named “doukoborets,” meaning “spirit wrestlers.” Their Christian beliefs led them to adopt principles of pacifism, communal living and the sharing of the possessions, the rejection of church and state authorities, and vegetarianism.

In 1899, nearly 8,000 Doukhobors migrated from Russia to Canada to escape Tsarist conscription laws, and settled in Saskatchewan province. Their leader at the time, Peter Vasilievech Verigin, remained in exile in Siberia but wrote them letters regularly. Not long after arrival, the Canadian federal government notified the Doukhobors that titles to their settled lands would be granted only upon their signing of an oath of allegiance to the Crown of British Empire. The Doukhobors were confused, as
their religious beliefs did not allow for their subjection to the state and required them to live communally instead of acquiring private property. As a result, most of them refused to sign the oath and register their land individually.

In June of 1900, the Doukhobors presented a petition to the Canadian government, signed by twenty-two delegates of the Society of Universal Brotherhood organization demanding exemption from the law: “we once more petition the Government of Canada to grant us exceptions concerning the use of lands, legality of marriage unions, and registration in order that we may be able to live in Canada without breaking the Divine Truth as we understand it” (Holt, 1964, pp. 29-30). In the petition the Doukhobors notified the government of their intent to disobey laws; they would refuse to individually register their lands and decline to register marriages and divorces or report births and deaths. Throughout 1901, restlessness increased among the Doukhobors as government demands remained.

In 1902, the Doukhobors began to march in protest. They hoped to disrupt the order enough to convince the government to cede the demands, or at least facilitate the Doukhobors’ migration to a warmer climate. Nineteen marchers trekked southward as scouts for warmer land, promising that more would follow. Canadian government had the U.S. immigration service stop them at the border and turn them towards home.

In October 1902, following numerous inter-village meetings, migration efforts redoubled as a second procession of over 1,100 Doukhobors, led by Ivan Ponamoroff, Vasily Obedkoff, and Nicholas Zeboroff, marched from village to village promoting their cause. Men preached their religious principles to convert villagers by day, prayed and sang in campsites along the road throughout the night, and endured the elements. Women and children fasted and refused the food offered by other citizens in a brief hunger strike, but many soon took shelter in Doukhobor villages and accepted food.

Men continued to march south. Authorities offered them food and shelter and tried to persuade them to turn towards home, but the Doukhobors refused to cooperate. During this time, a few Doukhobors were found disrobed as an expression of the true freedom of living as original man, an ideal growing in popularity; the most radical believers sought to live as God had created Even and Adam, naked, non-oppressive of animals, and free from notions of property. In warmer lands they hoped to find fruits and other natural bounty on which they could sustain themselves without cultivating the soil or keeping animals. In November, a large group of marchers reached Minnedosa, Manitoba. Police used physical force to load some 450 Doukhobor men and women into guarded train cars and sent them back to Yorkton, Saskatchewan, where they were made to return home on foot.

In December 1902, following his release from exile, Verigin arrived in Canada. He persuaded a majority of Doukhobors to individually register their lands, claiming it would not interfere with communal living. Others were resistant to the idea, and favored the continuation of protest. Schism arose, producing three distinct Doukhobor factions: the Independents, already integrated into Canadian conventions; the Orthodox/Community, favoring Verigin’s call to register individually; and the Freedomites/Sons of Freedom, refusing any kind of land ownership.

In May 1903, time came for land registrations, but the Sons of Freedom staged another march. This time, they would disrobe. Twenty-eight men, and seventeen women and children, led by Zeboroff, marched nude through sixteen villages toward Yorkton, baring their bodies to protest the government’s restriction of their right to their vision for free living. Russian author Leo Tolstoy published a letter of support, praising the Sons’ protest. Exceptionally resentful Doukhobors, on the other hand, beat them on their pathway. At Yorkton, the Sons stayed in an immigration hall, were ordered to dress and then rounded up. They were all arrested on charges of nudism and sentenced to three months in prison. But by September, twenty-one Sons of Freedom once again marched nude in search of warmer lands and their number doubled by Saskatoon. Police forcibly rounded them up and took them home.

In 1906, the government established the Homestead Act, which issued a new declaration that Doukhobors would have to register land individually and accept the demands of Canadian citizenship. A land crisis ensued. Sons of Freedom continued to hold village meetings, hunger strikes, and nude marches frequently, while disagreement amongst Doukhobors escalated. Verigin, however, who showed concern at the Sons’ actions, never openly condemned them, and, regarding the land registration issue, stated that “Each Doukhobor will decide for himself. None among us is greater than each other. We are all equals before God”
(Holt, 1964, p. 45). He claimed to have no part in Sons of Freedom actions, but the Sons were inspired by the religious ideals Verigin had written about and claimed that he had sanctioned the protests. Authorities suspected that Verigin had secretly arranged for the protest, but it remains unclear whether or not Verigin played any leadership role in the resistance.

In 1907, the government announced their cancellation of all existing Doukhobor land titles where owners did not comply with the new Act. They would have to re-register under the new terms or lose land titles altogether; either they accepted citizenship and naturalization, or they would be limited to fifteen acres per capita reserve land. In the end, less than three hundred of the 8,175 qualified Doukhobors accepted naturalization, and Doukhobors land was subsequently reduced to less than a third of the previous area. Community Doukhobors were placed into sixty-one village reserves with fifteen acres each.

The Sons of Freedom had not attempted to change land laws, but rather to remain exempt from them. They, along with moderate Doukhobors, succeeded in defending the rights of their community to live according to religious convictions. That they would be relocated to small reserves in the process was not expected.

The Sons of Freedom were diminished after Verigin's arrival, but flourished after 1907 and remained firm in their ideals while Community Doukhobors gradually accepted naturalization. The Sons continued to experiment with nudism and took up more extreme tactics in protest of other government regulations in the following decades, forming a culture of resistance.

Research Notes

Influences:

Sons of Freedom actions influenced by earlier Doukhobour protests, such as the Burning of Arms symbolic refusal to comply with Russian conscription laws (1).

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Quincy Brandt, 24/02/2012