

# The Doukhobors in 1904

by  
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**I**N 1899, over 7000 Doukhobor settlers arrived in Canada and travelled overland to the Districts of Assiniboia and Saskatchewan. The Doukhobors had been living in exile in the Caucasus for over half a century, but renewed political harassment and religious intolerance prompted them once again to seek a new home. Canadian officials were at the same time anxious to settle the vast prairie with experienced farmers, and quickly acceded to the Doukhobors request for reserved land, the right to live in villages and exemption from military duty. These concessions to the Doukhobors were similar to the terms granted to the Mennonites when they formed their reserves in Manitoba in 1874 and 1876, and in Saskatchewan in 1895.<sup>1</sup>

The four boatloads of Doukhobors which arrived in Canada in the spring and summer of 1899 were directed to three separate reserves: the North Colony or Thunder Hill Reserve; the South Colony, with its Devil's Lake annex to the west; and the distant Prince Albert or Saskatchewan Reserve.<sup>2</sup> The North and South Reserves were both situated in the Yorkton area, and they came to form the core of Doukhobor settlement in the Territories.

The first group of settlers to arrive in the North-West travelled to the Thunder Hill or North Colony, and settled mainly near the Swan River valley. These people came from the Wet Mountains in the Caucasus. They were poor and their fares to Canada had been subsidized by the federal government. The second boatload of Doukhobors came from the Elizavetpol and Kars regions of the Caucasus. They settled in the South Colony, particularly in the Devil's Lake annex. These settlers were relatively prosperous; they brought many of their belongings from the Caucasus, and most of them paid their own fares. The third boatload, however, brought to Canada Doukhobors who had already spent a distressing year in Cyprus, due to an ill-advised re-settlement scheme. These families, who were destitute and in poor health, settled in the main South Colony. In July 1899, the last group, made up of well-to-do Kars Doukhobors, arrived in the Canadian west. They were directed to the Prince Albert Reserve, situated along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River between the Elbow and Blaine Lake. The geographical isolation of this colony from the main body of Doukhobors in the Yorkton area emphasized, from the very beginning, their desire for cultural and spiritual independence.

When the Doukhobors started to organize their new settlements, they adhered rigorously to instructions issued by Peter Verigin from exile in Siberia. They were to establish small villages composed of 40 families, and situated two to four miles apart; maintain communal production and distribution of all goods; try to keep self-sufficient and isolated from other groups; and, in their personal habits, be abstemious and rigidly vegetarian. To begin with, most of his disciples conformed to these strictures, but there was a rapid falling off of enthusiasm. As Maude noted:

Now in Canada, the time had come to live a 'Christian' life, and to show the

advantages of communism over individualism. The various forms their attempt took, and the continual drift from communism towards individualism that occurred as a result of practical experience, until Verigin arrived and established a communist despotism based partly on moral coercion, furnish an interesting study.<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising, given the origins of the various groups, that the colonies which held most tenaciously to a communistic form of life were the main South Colony and the Thunder Hill or North Colony, where the poorer Doukhobors lived. Most villages attempted various compromises between the two extremes. However, two settlements, the Devil's Lake annex of the South Colony and the Prince Albert colony, showed rampant individualism. Herbert Archer, a Quaker, estimated in August 1900 that in the Prince Albert colony only one village in ten was communistic.<sup>4</sup>

When Peter Verigin arrived in the Yorkton colonies in December 1902, his immediate objective was to crush the individualistic tendencies of the Doukhobors and to re-impose communism on the more recalcitrant communities by moral and economic force. His success was dramatic. Most villages returned to a communistic organization, although pockets of disaffection with Verigin's rule remained in the Prince Albert and Devil's Lake colonies.<sup>5</sup> When Mavor visited the colonies in 1904, at a time when defections from communal village life were few, he estimated that non-community Doukhobors numbered only one-fifth of the total.<sup>6</sup>

Verigin, nonetheless, decided to cut his losses and early in 1904, he concentrated his attention on the South and Thunder Hill colonies where the "truest" Doukhobors lived.<sup>7</sup> It was there that he demonstrated his flair for organization and his shrewdness in business and financial matters.<sup>8</sup> Under the strict control of the Committee of three, made up of Verigin, Zibarov and Planedin, all aspects of the Yorkton colonies were supervised, and the economy was shored up by keen management.

In the accounts for 1903, presented at Nazhdenia in the South Colony on February 28, 1904, Verigin itemized his purchases: 4 portable steam engines and 2 traction engines with threshing machines; 2 saw mills (to be driven by the steam engines); 50 binders; 32 mowers; 45 disc harrows; 20 seeders; 16 wagons; 109 ploughs; 234 sections of harrows; 12 fanning mills; and 152 sleighs. In addition to the equipment, Verigin also bought 370 horses for \$36,765.00 and sheep for \$1,461.00.<sup>9</sup>

Although one of the avowed aims of the community was self-sufficiency, it is evident from the accounts that many goods still needed to be imported, either from Yorkton or Winnipeg. Almost \$30,000 was spent on dry goods, and wheat, oats and flour cost the colonies \$9,720.<sup>10</sup> Other bulk items, such as leather goods, salt, coal oil, glass, sugar, tea, wool and soap were also purchased, although there was some debate at the meeting that they should abstain from such luxuries as tea and sugar in 1904.<sup>11</sup>

The Doukhobors, then, started the year 1904 with firm leadership, good and modern equipment and enough stock and necessities to give them hope for a more comfortable life in the villages and an economic surplus for the community as a whole. And, according to the minutes of the meeting, Verigin was deeply preoccupied with plans for future improvements and purchases. The Doukhobors resolved to set up a brickyard so that the log and sod houses might be replaced by brick structures. Verigin proposed to buy a hundred milk cows, more seed drills and



2000 poods of wool for homespun cloth. He wanted to construct a new saw mill for each of the North and South colonies and to build a large warehouse near Verigin on the new main line of the Canadian Northern. The Doukhobors also decided to build their own roads in the future and to permit no schools on the reserves unless they themselves wished to establish them.<sup>12</sup>

Although ambitious, these plans turned out to be realistic. In 1904 a brickmaking machine was bought and set up near good clay in section 26, township 35, range 30, W.1.<sup>13</sup> A hundred purebred Ayrshire cattle were purchased so that the Doukhobors might vary their vegetarian diet with more dairy products.<sup>14</sup> In the summer they bought a steam-plough, and Mavor reported that it was used on the reserve that autumn.<sup>15</sup> In July 1904, C. W. Speers, an official of the Department of the Interior, observed that there were ten miles of graded road in the Yorkton district reserves and 20,000 acres of crop "looking excellent". He also stated that:

They intend to cultivate a large area next to the railway and go extensively into wheat-raising . . . They have every material want supplied and excellent equipment for their work in their district. There is an air of prosperity among the people and great promise for the present year.<sup>16</sup>

When the 1904 crop was finally in, the Doukhobors enjoyed for the first time in Canada a small grain surplus. The statistics for the Yorkton reserves were as follows:

<i>South Colony</i>		<i>Devil's Lake Annex</i>	
wheat	40,261 bushels	wheat	10,317 bushels
oats	49,948 bushels	oats	12,131 bushels
barley	23,396 bushels	barley	5,646 bushels
flax	3,584 bushels	flax	895 bushels
<i>North Colony</i>			
	wheat	17,085 bushels	
	oats	16,569 bushels	
	barley	10,673 bushels	
	flax	975 bushels <sup>17</sup>	

In a letter to Alex Moffat, dated January 17, 1905, however, Verigin lamented the fact that the Doukhobors were unable to sell their wheat, which they offered at 85 cents to 40 cents a bushel, depending on the grade. And of the 17,000 pounds of seneca root gathered by the women of the reserves in 1904, only 4,000 pounds had been sold for the small sum of \$2,600.<sup>18</sup> This letter underlines the precarious financial position that confronted Verigin. His attempt at deficit financing depended on a great increase in the production of grains and the sale of grains and the sale of agricultural surpluses outside the reserves. At this stage he was helped by the money brought into the colonies by men who worked as navvies grading railways, as mill-hands and as harvesters on neighboring farms.<sup>19</sup> But, as Mavor cautioned in his *Report*, "It is clear that when external earnings diminish, as after the construction of the railways they must, the exports will have to be increased, or their external purchases diminished."<sup>20</sup>

The population of the three Doukhobor colonies in 1904, according to Mavor, was between 8,000 and 8,500.<sup>21</sup> Most of the Doukhobors lived in villages, and each village accommodated an average of 40 families or 200 persons. Not surprisingly, though, the sizes of the villages varied. In a list of villages in the Yorkton reserves drawn up by C. W. Speers, only 7 of the 45 villages conformed to the ideal size.<sup>22</sup> In

the Prince Albert colony the largest village was Spasoka with 190 inhabitants; the smallest of the 13 villages was Uspennie with 65 inhabitants.<sup>23</sup> The average population for the 13 villages in the Prince Albert reserve was only 115, but there the Doukhobors were allowed to settle only on even-numbered sections, and their density was thus lower than in the Yorkton reserves where they had been granted both odd- and even-numbered sections.

The villages in the Doukhobor reserves were laid out in the *Strassendorf* pattern, so familiar then in the Mennonite settlements, with a wide central street lined with shade trees and houses aligned perpendicular to the street. A visitor to the South Colony in October 1904 brought back a detailed description of a Doukhobor village and the interior of a Doukhobor house:

The houses of this village were all built of small logs, roofed with poles and sod. They were neatly plastered with clay, and I was told that this work was done by the 'girls'. Some of the buildings were whitewashed, and then looked very well. All the houses were set back fifty or so [feet] from the fence bounding the road, but these spaces were not used as gardens, though perhaps that was the intention.<sup>24</sup>

When the visitor entered a Doukhobor house, he found everything "spotlessly clean". The entry room was bare of furniture. The living room measured approximately twenty feet square, and in the middle of it was a post which supported the roof. The log walls and roof poles were plastered with clay.

The floor was also of clay mixed with straw, and perfectly level and smooth. The big clay box-stove was built in one corner, but the door for feeding the wood into it was in the other room. . . . Around three sides ran a bench — one side very wide, forming a bedstead on which two beds were made up covered with patchwork quilts. . . . Above the bench, half way to the ceiling, the wall was covered with newspapers.<sup>25</sup>

In the Yorkton reserves the major departure from the existing Mennonite model of village settlement was the central location of communal facilities such as granaries, stables and, in some cases, prayer homes.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the individual houses, these buildings were usually aligned parallel to the central street and situated on larger lots. In October 1904, the visitor observed the men of the village thatching the barn roof, which projected over the ends of the structure by five or six feet. The barn itself was built of logs and the exterior plastered with clay. It was set back 200 yards from the road, and the large stable had room for nine teams.

I was told that there were eight teams in the village, which was a small one of only thirty-five families. All the animals were in splendid condition, showing good care. They were of no one breed, but all large and shapely, good general purpose horses.<sup>27</sup>

James Mavor noted another characteristic structure of Doukhobor villages, small bath houses, or saunas, built behind the homes.<sup>28</sup>

In the Prince Albert or Saskatchewan colony many Doukhobors farmed individually on their own quarter-section. Where the farmers lived in villages and farmed communally, there was no sharing of common implements, nor was the crop divided up according to need. Their independence was also reflected in their houses. They adopted the traditional house-barn combination, a one-story structure aligned perpendicular to the central street. In addition to his own house and stable, each farmer had a granary on his own property. As a result, there were few communal buildings in the Prince Albert villages, and no prayer homes.



*Doukhobor Village Near Verigin.*

*Photograph by Dr. Thomas Veitch Simpson, copy courtesy Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, Alberta.*

Sgt. Major Schoof, who visited two Doukhobor villages in the Saskatchewan reserve in June 1904 remarked, "Their houses are so perfectly weather tight and withal thoroughly clean," and added that the gardens were "flourishing with all kinds of vegetables" and that "He enjoyed the luxury of a Turkish bath, one of which is built in each village with a competent assistant in attendance."<sup>29</sup>

In many ways the village life was attractive and admirably suited to the rigors of pioneer life on the prairies. The needs of the old or the sick were always taken care of by close neighbours and by the communal distribution of goods and produce. Mavor described, somewhat romantically, a summer scene in a Doukhobor village.

Men and women worked in the fields together, and they adhered to the pleasant Russian custom of marching in groups from the village to the scene of their labour, singing as they went. The earliest risers began to patrol the village street singing a hymn to the rising sun, and their voices aroused the others. When the band was completed, the workers marched away, their voices gradually becoming more distant. They returned in the evening in the same manner.<sup>30</sup>

Even though 1904 was probably one of the more constructive years in Doukhobor history, there were portents of future confrontations with the federal government and of strong dissension within the community itself. Early in 1904 Peter Verigin started to prepare for some of the problems which were to emerge from the Department of the Interior's inconsistent interpretations of the Homestead regulations as they pertained to the Doukhobors. In March or April, Verigin bought 13 square miles of land from a land company for \$10,000, and three quarter-sections of partly improved land for \$360.<sup>31</sup>

His seeming prescience was confirmed by government action on December 15, 1904. In flagrant disregard of promises given to the Doukhobors by Sifton, the government served notice that only 180,000 acres of the 722,000 acres in the reserves had been legally taken up, and that the balance would subsequently be disposed of by the government to new settlers.<sup>32</sup> The *Saskatchewan Herald* reported that the land office in Battleford was "beseiged" when the Prince Albert Doukhobor reserve

was opened up: "Some 60 entries were made, several of the applicants having waited outside the office several hours in order to put in their claim."<sup>33</sup>

With the extension of the Canadian Northern line past Buchanan, in the Devil's Lake annex, in the autumn of 1904, the Assiniboia colonists also began to feel hostility and public pressure from the new settlers pouring into the area. The isolation the Doukhobors had sought and cultivated was irretrievably lost. This external pressure only exacerbated the resentment building within the communities of the so-called "true" Doukhobors for their more independently minded brothers. These they ostracized from the community and called "No-Doukhobors". Early in 1905 Verigin urged all his loyal followers in the Prince Albert colony to come to the Yorkton reserves.<sup>34</sup> The siege mentality which characterized the Doukhobor settlements on the prairies for the next three years was just beginning.

The history of Doukhobor settlement in the North-West was turbulent and emotional. But by 1904 much of the dissension and disorder of the early years, caused by lack of leadership, the fear of governmental interference and the activities of radicals within the sect had been replaced by a firm sense of purpose. There were, of course, occasional outbursts of frustration and fanaticism, but the years 1903-1904 represented a time of relative order and harmony in the colonies.

Under Verigin's leadership all the traditional Doukhobor qualities of thrift, industry, self-discipline and hospitality were concentrated on building a thriving community. James Mavor's observation in the spring of 1904 was that: "The people were in good spirits, and . . . adjusting themselves cheerfully to the country and the climate."<sup>35</sup> By the end of 1904 that spirit of optimism was again lost.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The right to live in villages, as opposed to residence on the individual quarter-sections, was covered in the so-called "Hamlet Clause" (section 32 of the *Dominion Lands Act*). Cultivation duties associated with village life were, for the Doukhobors, subject to differing interpretations. See below, footnote 33.

<sup>2</sup>Doukhobor representatives had first chosen a contiguous block of 12 townships near Edmonton as their reserve. However, they were overruled by the Department of the Interior, and a second choice had to be made in the Yorkton area. J. F. C. Wright, in his book *Slava Bohu*, mentions that the Doukhobors, in choosing the reserves, wanted (i) large blocks of land to farm communally, (ii) a good water supply, (iii) timber for buildings, (iv) proximity to a railroad. *Slava Bohu*, New York and Toronto, 1940, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup>Alymer Maude, *A Peculiar People, The Doukhobors*, London, 1905, p. 183.

<sup>4</sup>Archer is quoted in Maude, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

<sup>5</sup>Maude states that opposition to Verigin's leadership centred in Devil's Lake in August 1903, and Woodcock mentions that the Prince Albert colonists ". . . though they were swept along in the general enthusiasm for communistic organization at the beginning of 1903 and agreed to pool their work and resources with their brethren, by the end of harvest that year . . . began to withdraw into their former independence." But he adds: "Even in the Prince Albert colony he retained many faithful followers and while he ruled on the prairies there were never so many Independents as there had been before his arrival." Maude, *op. cit.*, p. 264, and George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors*, Toronto and New York, 1968, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup>James Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, vol. 2, London and Toronto, 1923, p. 31. Mavor, Maude and others stress the importance of the women's allegiance to Verigin, which acted as a strong conservative force in the colonies. Many of the men worked outside the reserves and returned with the unacceptable notion of farming independently on individual homesteads.

<sup>7</sup>Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>8</sup>Mavor described Verigin's position this way: "The reserve is really worked by Mr. Verigin on the principles of estate management on a large scale; he compels the community to save, and he manipulates the capital so saved, as it were, in one mass." James Mavor, *Report to the Board of Trade on the North West of Canada with Special Reference to Wheat Production for Export*, London, 1905, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>Statement of Accounts for 1903 by Peter Verigin, Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), RG76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 7. The Doukhobors of the Prince Albert colony were not invited to this general meeting.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* Dawson points out that once the railway reached the village of Verigin in 1903, the Doukhobors

bought their supplies wholesale in Winnipeg, bypassing Yorkton. C. A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Groups in Western Canada*, vol. 6 of *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement*, edited by W. A. Mackintosh and W. L. G. Joerg, Toronto, 1936, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup>Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>12</sup>All information from the minutes comes from Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>13</sup>James Mavor, *Report to the Board of Trade on the North West of Canada*, *op. cit.*, p. 17, and a map showing 'Doukhorbor Homesteads and Disposition of Same' (Yorkton District), Department of the Interior, August 1, 1907, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 10.

<sup>14</sup>Letter, C. W. Speers, General Colonization Agent to W. D. Scott, Superintendent of Immigration, July 27, 1904, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 7.

<sup>15</sup>Mavor's *Report to the Board of Trade on the North West of Canada*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Letter, C. W. Speers to W. D. Scott, July 27, 1904, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup>Letter, Peter Verigin to Alex Moffat, Acting Commissioner of Immigration, January 17, 1905, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 7.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>In 1903 these men brought in \$152,474.24. Statement of Accounts for 1903 by Peter Verigin, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 7. In the summer of 1904, 400-500 Doukhorbor men graded railways at 27½¢ per cubic yard of material moved. Verigin remarked triumphantly to Mavor that the deal he had struck would allow no profit for the railway owners. Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>20</sup>Mavor's *Report to the Board of Trade on the North West of Canada*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16. The original population was 7,360.

<sup>22</sup>Letter, C. W. Speers to J. S. Gibson, November 4, 1905, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 8.

<sup>23</sup>Letter, C. W. Speers to W. W. Cory, June 13, 1904, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 7. One must remember that the spelling of most of the village names varied, sometimes widely, in the government reports.

<sup>24</sup>*Phenix* (Saskatoon), January 13, 1905. The name of the village is not mentioned in the article. The descriptions which follow are also from this article.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>Not all Doukhorbor villages were regular in plan. Spasoka held to the basic linear pattern, but with concessions to the terrain. The communal buildings were sometimes aligned perpendicular to the central village street, as in Moisyovo.

<sup>27</sup>*Phenix* (Saskatoon), January 13, 1905.

<sup>28</sup>Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>*Phenix* (Saskatoon), June 24, 1904. A less charitable description of a Doukhorbor house in the Prince Albert reserve appeared in the *Phenix* the next year. The house-barn structure was described as "a mud apartment opening out of the end of the stable." The living room, however, was similar: "The all useful shelf ran round three sides of the room, one portion of it serving for bed, another serving for table, another for cupboard, and any of it for seat." *Phenix* (Saskatoon), June 23, 1905.

<sup>30</sup>Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30. Mavor says that the land was located east of the South Colony, and that the Canadian Northern line ran through the property.

<sup>32</sup>Maude gives the most detailed first-hand account of the negotiations carried on between the Canadian government and the Doukhorbors in 1898. "The Canadian authorities were quite explicit about the conditions on which the Doukhorbors might come to Canada. They were to make entry for their homesteads individually, in the usual Canadian fashion. They would have to supply vital statistics, conform to the laws of the country, and pay their taxes . . . They were to have the advantages of the Militia Act . . . Another [later] concession made in favour of the Doukhorbors was, that they were not required to perform, on each separate homestead, the work legally necessary before a homestead can become individual property, but were allowed to do an equivalent quantity of work on any part of the 'township' they took up; thus facilitating their communal arrangements." Maude, *op. cit.*, p. 61. See also Chapt. 11, *passim*. It was this latter concession, based on Sifton's verbal agreement with the Doukhorbors in February 1902, which the federal government decided to revoke in 1904. See also, Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 3 and p. 33.

<sup>33</sup>*Saskatchewan Herald* (Battleford), December 28, 1904. There were many German squatters on the Prince Albert reserve in the summer of 1904. Letter, C. W. Speers to W. W. Cory, June 13, 1904, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup>Letter, Alex Moffat to W. W. Cory, February 2, 1905, PAC, RG 76, vol. 184, file 65101, part 8.

<sup>35</sup>Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.