

## The Doukhobors: Burning of the Firearms A Backgrounder

On June 28–29, 1895 high in the Transcaucasia Mountains of Russia, 7,000–8,000 people secretly converged on three separate plateaus. Wagons, drawn by horses, contained muzzle rifles, handguns, swords, sabers, and daggers all considered lethal weapons. The weapons were voluntarily surrendered by Doukhobors who vowed never to use them again. As a community, they had also renounced compulsory military service to the Russian State.

Each site had 15–20 wagons filled with weapons. They were stacked with other combustible materials, teepee style, with the muzzles pointing skyward and doused with kerosene. At midnight the piles were lit and flames soared into the sky revealing a huge bonfire which could be seen for many kilometers. Since it was considered bad luck to disarm the weapons, salvos of gunfire burst forth from the flames adding to the drama of the event. As the tools of killing and murder melted into slag, the Doukhobors sang hymns and songs of peace. This historic event is remembered as the, "Burning of the Firearms."

The Russian military authorities were furious with this act of conscience and the commander ordered that the dissidents be brought to the Governor of the State by force. Cossacks were dispatched on horseback to beat the Doukhobors into submission. This they did with brutality and bloodshed. The Doukhobor men, women, and children, formed into a circle as the Cossacks charged them on horseback and flayed them with horse whips and truncheons. As the beating raged, the centre moved out to the edge replacing those who had been beaten and bloodied. The Doukhobors were demonstrating their new belief: they were willing to suffer and die for their beliefs rather than kill others for them.

The Doukhobors were now a social movement committed to peace and non-violence. They would live a life without weapons. They vowed not to kill another human being either in a time of war but also in a time of peace. For their belief, they were willing to endure suffering inflicted on their bodies and their minds.

Their message, their ruthless persecution, and their martyrdom reached beyond the borders of the Russia. An "Appeal for Help" was organized by Russian sympathizers and commissioned by Lev Tolstoy. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, took up the Doukhobor cause. Together with their Russian friends they arranged for the Doukhobors to leave Russia.

In 1898, arrangements were made for them to move to the Island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. Doukhobors began to move to Cyprus but found the conditions unhealthy and unsuitable to their practices of agriculture. Over a period of eight months 108 people died.

On December 8, 1898, an Order-in-Council issued by the Canadian government granted permission for the Doukhobors to immigrate to Canada and to settle on the Canadian prairies. Equally important, it granted the Doukhobors exemption from participating in military service in Canada. This may have been Canada's first official action as an international peacemaker.

I am proud to be a descendent of that of that noble movement for peace through non violent action.

—Sam Fillipoff  
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