



Doukhobor leader Peter "Lordly" Verigin. Courtesy Greg Nesteroff Collection

THE RUSSIANS WERE COMING

RON VERZUH LOOKS AT THE STORY OF A FORGOTTEN OREGON IMMIGRANT COLONY

Members of a Russian sect called the Doukhobors or Spirit Wrestlers twice attempted to found utopian colonies near Eugene, Oregon, once in 1913 and a second time in 1924. What happened to them exposes a well-hidden story of culture clashes involving local landowners, county courts, the Quakers, and the Beaver State's then flourishing Ku Klux Klan.

Historically, the Doukhobors had long suffered persecution under

both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Tsar who saw them as unruly peasants who challenged established religious tenets and rejected dictatorial rule. Initially, they attempted to establish a colony on the Mediterranean island of Cypress, but it failed. Then Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin, who had travelled across Canada in the late 1890s, recommended Saskatchewan as a possible new home.

World-famous novelist Leo Tolstoy agreed with the prince. He praised the sect's communal lifestyle, their pacifism, and their vegetarianism. And after meeting Doukhobor spiritual leader Peter (the Lordly) Verigin, Tolstoy donated the royalties from his book *Resurrection* to fund the migration to the Canadian Prairie.

With additional help from the Quakers, in 1899, they travelled to their new home. But Verigin, who had been exiled to Archangel in northern Russia, did not accompany them. It was not until his release in 1902 that he was able to rejoin about 7,500 of his worshipful followers, representing almost a third of Russia's Doukhobor population at that time. Then in 1908, he led nearly 6,000 of his flock to British Columbia from Saskatchewan to establish a new colony in the Kootenay/Boundary region suitable for communal homesteading, fruit growing, and gardening.

Not everyone was satisfied with the proposed move, however, and some stayed behind to develop a separate plan as members of the Society of Independent Doukhobors. Charging that Verigin had curtailed their freedom, they refused to follow

him to BC. Instead, they planned to seek a new life in Oregon with the purchase of property in the fertile Willamette Valley.

Evidence of the resulting migration is scant, but there remain a few clear indicators. For example, there is a road sign off Crow Road, a quiet two-lane highway running through hilly farm and wine-growing country on the outskirts of Eugene in Lane County. The sign, pointing upward to a narrow track, reads “Dukhobar Road”. It’s a misspelling, which could cause confusion, but another clue soon reveals itself.

Venturing further up the road, one finds an old house that still displays hints of the distinctive Doukhobor architectural style marked by a hip roof and a carved wooden door. The two-story structure has undergone renovations, but the interior design shows that it had been constructed to accommodate several families in a communal lifestyle setting. In fact, the Doukhobors called it a “dom” meaning communal home. Deteriorating outbuildings

suggest that the colonists might have set up outdoor ovens to bake bread, a traditional staple of their vegetarian diet.

The previous owner, Rommie Walker, had learned about the house’s heritage from Bill John Androsoff, a Doukhobor from Grand Forks, BC, who had visited the area and found himself at the same misspelled road sign. Walker and his family welcomed Androsoff as “the first Doukhobor we have met after living here for twenty-five years”.

Following his visit, Androsoff noted in a Doukhobor newsletter that the surroundings had “the unmistakable outline of a Doukhobor village . . . with fruit and nut trees as well as open hay fields”. It was a “serene and private” spot and the “soil must have been excellent”. As he recalled, “I closed my eyes half way and could faintly hear Doukhobor singing in the fields.” (Perhaps he was referring to the Doukhobor choir music that is world famous today.)

It must have struck the Russian migrants the same way.

Many of the families had found it difficult to co-exist within the hostile society they found in Canada and they were keen to find more welcoming surroundings in Oregon. They hoped Lane County would provide an escape, but the sect’s past followed the migrants and helped dash that hope.

Observant Oregonians remembered newspaper images of Doukhobors’ unusual religious ceremonies and their peasant dress. They also read media coverage of active attempts to oust them from their BC location. Legion members were particularly disgruntled with their pacifism and would later censure them for their refusal to bear arms during the First World War.

Many years after the war, the negative images would include house burnings, nude protests by the radical Sons of Freedom sub-sect, car bombings, and the destruction of a high-tension hydro tower. Other accounts later showed families protesting as Canadian authorities forced Doukhobor children



Doukhobor prayer meeting at Brilliant, BC, Canada ca. 1940s. Courtesy Greg Nesteroff Collection

into residential schools in an attempt to assimilate them.

Clearly the new arrivals were no strangers to persecution and social ostracism and, as several Doukhobor families began to farm the Crow Valley area in 1913, some local Oregon farmers and landlords shared the views of Canadian nativists. Even so, until 1916, the newcomers seemed to co-exist peacefully with local farmers. Then negative attitudes once again began to foment controversy.

The Doukhobors were good farmers, growing produce to make their creamy cabbage and tomato borscht, potato dumplings, and other vegetarian foods, with the surplus going to local markets. They were also efficient carpenters. Some had founded lumber mills back in Canada. But they kept to themselves, worshipping in their own way, and developing co-operative enterprises. A notable example was the highly successful jam factory at Brilliant, BC, on the northern Columbia River not far from the international border.

The Willamette Valley held out the possibility of developing similar enterprises and the promise of a new communal life free from past limitations. The Oregon group's leaders hopefully christened their new community the Colony of Freedom. Indeed, for a time it seemed possible.

Oregon Doukhobor philosopher Peter N. Maloff fondly remembers the migration south and living in the Eugene area as a boy. "In Oregon, nature itself uplifts and strengthens towards a better life", he wrote in his 1948 memoir, *The Doukhobors – Their History, Life and Struggle*. "The whole atmosphere seems tireless, fresh and always alive."

He also remembered a Quaker



Lithograph postcard of Doukhobor women with a plow in Western Canada, ca. 1905-1910. Courtesy Greg Nesteroff Collection

named Rose Glason Osburn, allowing him and other Doukhobors to eat at her Eugene hotel. Osburn, once a reporter for the *Oregonian*, defended the sect against the claims of the landlords. She saw the colonists as living the life that Quakerism recommended, but others refused to comply.

As in Canada, the colonists' pacifism stood in the way of success in Oregon. As early as 1895, sect members had declared themselves pacifists with a celebrated Burning of the Arms ceremony in Russia.

The gesture incensed the tsarist government of Nicholas II, and it did the same with Oregonians, especially Legionnaires.

Also fuelling negative attitudes were their religious beliefs. The sect began in the mid-eighteenth century when Christian peasants reacted negatively to what they viewed as the Russian church's opulent excesses and its authoritarianism. Though Christian, the Doukhobors practiced a modified version of Christianity, one that included rituals

unfamiliar to churchgoers in the rural community around Eugene.

These factors converged in 1916 when a complicated property dispute between B.J. Hecker and the Society of Independent Doukhobors ended with the Russians losing the land. Hecker and his wife, the original landowners, had decided to challenge the sale, possibly because the Doukhobors were industriously proving that the land had great production value.

After the judge ruled against them, the colonists rapidly disappeared, ending the first Russian 'invasion'. Oregon Doukhobor Anton Popoff's son, John A. Popoff, recalls in his memoir, *The History of the Anton S. and John A. Popoff Family*, that the court ruling "utterly demoralized the colony and members began to abandon it".

Nevertheless, seven years later, in January 1924, the Doukhobors were planning a second attempt to establish a colony. This time they chose the rich farming area around Peoria on the border of Linn County just north of Eugene. However, this second effort was also shrouded in controversy almost from the outset.

As noted earlier, the first Oregon group had broken with Verigin. Ironically, this time it

was he who guided the group to the new colony. He announced to the Oregon press that he had purchased about 875 acres which he intended to populate by leading his flock south from Canada to what he hoped would be a less antagonistic community. He spoke of a new Eden to be called Friendly Valley. He couldn't have been more wrong.

The renewed presence of Russian communards in Oregon grabbed the local headlines in the anti-radical, racialized atmosphere that pervaded much of the US at the time. "Lane County residents reacted with shock" upon learning of the Verigin land purchase, wrote Eckard V. Toy, a University of Oregon professor. "When a small contingent of Doukhobors arrived in March 1924," Toy continued, "the Eugene post of the American Legion, whose commander, George Love, was also a Klansman, adopted a resolution condemning the 'invasion.'"

Others also reacted negatively, believing that the sect's values were incompatible with their own. But they needed some encouragement to reject these strange, but peaceable, newcomers. They got it from Love who made it his duty to rid Oregon of the interlopers.

During the spring of 1924, he made speeches throughout Lane County opposing the feared colony of assumed radicals and drumming up much hysteria. Cloaked in the respectable guise of the Eugene Legion commander, Love was able to whip up local hatred against the sect. The fact that he was also the leader of the Eugene KKK, seemed only to strengthen his hold on the crowd.

Commander Love and the Eugene klavern's obsession with ousting the Doukhobors

coincided with a significant rise in the popularity of the KKK across the state. In those years, the Klan was somewhat successful in municipal and school board elections and klansmen were highly influential in rousing rabidly pro-white nativist sentiments against groups like the Doukhobors.

The Klan's popularity linked easily to the First Red Scare, with US Attorney-General Mitchell Palmer deporting immigrants if they were suspected of being anarchists and Bolsheviks. In that environment, it didn't take local citizens long to label the Doukhobors communists.

Some citizens were so afraid that they were ready to take up arms against the invaders. At one meeting in Junction City about twelve miles from Eugene, Love's speech so enraged "over 100 citizens and businessmen" that the group took a "'unanimous standing vote' . . . against the proposed colonization", according to the *Eugene Morning Register*.

This combination of "militarism and racism had encouraged a nativist response", noted local journalist Glen Gibbons in an article titled "When Oregon Shut the Doukhobor Door" published in *Northwest Magazine*. With Love stirring the pot, vigilantism was a serious possibility. Fortunately, it didn't come to that. As it turned out, the cause for nativist concern came to an abrupt halt on 29 October 1924.

A mere six months after the Doukhobor colonists had arrived on the Peoria area farmland he had purchased for his new colony, Verigin was killed in a train explosion on the Canadian Pacific Railway line in the Kettle Valley near Farron, BC. Although those responsible for the deadly blast have never been brought to justice, speculation

about who committed the murder included the Oregon Klan.

Twenty-five years after the assassination, another Oregon Quaker named Emmett W. Gulley moved to BC perhaps stirring sad memories of the sect's ill-fated attempts to found colonies. Unlike Rose Osburn, however, Gulley made few friends in the community and offered no meaningful support. Indeed, it was Gulley as a paid government agent who assisted in seizing Doukhobor children and placing them in residential schools.

As the 20th century rolled into its second half, the history of the sect continued to be controversial, but there is little historical evidence to suggest the Doukhobors would have posed a serious problem in Oregon. Few Oregon Doukhobors are alive today to recount the events of those early years, but it seems clear that other than being different, they posed no threat to anyone. Their failed colonies are occasionally noted in biographies, dated histories, and old newspaper clippings. Except for a road sign and an old house with a carved wooden door, the Oregon Doukhobors seem all but forgotten. *Em*

RON VERZUH is a Canadian writer and historian living in Eugene, Oregon. For a more detailed account of the events covered in this article, see Ron Verzuh, "Oregon's Doukhobors: The Hidden History of a Russian Religious Sect's Attempts to Found Colonies in the Beaver State, *BC Studies*, 180, Winter 2013-14, 43-81. Further research aids are available at the excellent Doukhobor Genealogical Website: www.doukhobor.org.