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Paper Title: “Dissenters & Friends: The Doukhobor Migration of 1898”

Study Group: DABOH, Religious Freedom or Christian Communities and Mission*

Abstract:

This paper explores the inequalities between a marginal Christian sect from 19th century Tsarist Russia, the Doukhobors, and their powerful “friends” who rallied their vast resources to bring about a religiously motivated mass migration on their behalf. Based on a sensationalized narrative of the persecution of these “peaceable Christians” and promoted through print media designed for Western consumption, Doukhobor advocates enacted a transnational political, religious and financial campaign intended to secure Doukhobor life by rescuing them from Russia’s grips. One great irony of this history is that while notions of Christian faith united all parties involved, the inequalities between Doukhobors and those who took their well-being as a matter of mission were glaring.

Doukhobors were illiterate, communitarian, agrarian and pacifist – each a central tenant of their spiritual faith. Among their “friends” were Russian elites who chose political dissention and retained their cultural influence, such as Leo Tolstoy, and groups of British and American Quakers established in business and government. Consulting primary source texts from this time frame, including biographies, published books, Quaker journal articles as well as letters from Leo Tolstoy and Peter Verigin, I demonstrate how the power of literacy was used to develop romantic depictions of the Doukhobor communal and Christian life and garner international political and financial support over ideals of pacifism and anti-militarism. Before the end of the 19th century, approximately 7,500 Doukhobors were transported to Canada – accomplished completely by the efforts and initiative of their international Christian “friends”. The history of the Doukhobor religious migration offers insight into the vulnerabilities of persecuted communities and the potential to exploit power imbalances by well-meaning friends.

*The paper can fit into either of the three listed Study Groups, as its primary source material is documentation and archives; it addresses the issues of religious freedom of pacifist and sectarian Christian groups in late 19th century Russia; and engages the differing notions of Quaker and Tolstoyan community conceptions of mission.