

THE DOUKHOBOR MIGRATION TO CANADA “AGREEMENT”

I read many books written on the Canadian Doukhobors that were authored by outstanding authors and I appreciate their research and diligence to create a historical record from their initial founding of Doukhobors and through the various migrations that ultimately brought them to Canada in 1899,

While writing my story “Veregin 2017”, I asked Dr. Carl J. Tracie, author of **“Toil and Peaceful Life” Doukhor Village Settlement in Saskatchewan 1899-1918**, for permission to quote from



his excellent compilation.

I especially enjoyed his research into the **“AGREEMENT”** to permit the migration of 7,400 (Woodcock and Avakumovic source number) Russian Citizens into Canada. The excerpts quoted also give credit to Tracy’s sources where applicable.

“.....The Agreement

The Doukhobors came to Canada in four sailings of two refurbished freighters, the SS Lake Huron and the SS Lake Superior, from January to June of 1899 – the largest single body of intending settlers in Canadian history.

*Their migration to Canada brought to completion, under vague conditions, (quote from **James Mavor, My Windows on the Street of the World**) collaboration among representatives of the Doukhobors, the Canadian Government, James Mavor, and English and American Quakers and Tolstoyans. The arrangement seemed a happy coincidence of needs and resources: the Doukhobors were escaping fierce persecution by removing to a country which promised them freedom of religion and extensive farmlands; the Canadian Government was receiving proven agriculturalists to fill and develop the still incompletely settled lands of the Canadian West. But the reality was quite different: as one astute assessment had it, “Both were perfectly satisfied with each other and neither realized how far they were from mutual understanding. (**Harry Snesev ‘Doukhobors in British Columbia’(unpublished report for the University of British Columbia 1931)**). The accuracy of this statement would become quite clear within a matter of months, as vaguely worded conditions, agreed to in haste, were interpreted quite differently by the Doukhobors and the Canadian Government almost immediately after the Doukhobors’ arrival. **Woodcock and Avakumovic** point out that the Liberal government and the railroad were so anxious to recruit Doukhobors that:*

*They chose to waive formalities in the interest of haste. This lack of detailed written agreements between the principal parties involved in the arrangement was eventually productive of great misunderstanding, since it enabled the Doukhobors to claim rights they did not legally possess and Sifton’s successors to act in ways not in the spirit of the understanding reached in 1898 (**Woodcock and Avakumovic**).*

The formal agreement between Doukhobors and the Canadian Government addressed in a general way conditions which, according to James Mavor, the Doukhobors had stipulated:

1. *Land in a block or reserve similar to the Mennonite Reserve.*
2. *Some reasonable aid in establishing themselves in the country.*

3. *Some concession to their prejudices regarding education. They wish their children educated but wish to be consulted as to the mode. Some arrangement like that with the Mennonite might be made in the first instance. I do not think this will turn out to be a practical difficulty.*
4. *Assurance that they will not be called upon to render military service. In fact, generally, an arrangement similar to that entered with the Mennonites (**James Mavor to James Smart, 8 September 1898**). **As I will suggest later, the reference to similarities with the Mennonites may have led the government to assume their system of landholding was also similar.***

In an amplification of this illusion to the Mennonites which must have seemed ironic just a few years later, Mavor goes on to say that those who know the Doukhobors “say that they are in many ways superior to the Mennonites. They are not so obstinately non-adaptive. On the contrary they readily adapt themselves to new conditions”.
(Woodcock and Avakumovic)

*Three conditions appeared formally in the final agreement: 1) each eligible Doukhobor should receive “the usual Free Grant Homestead”; 2) the steamship company’s bonus would be paid to the Doukhobors to help them establish themselves (the monies were not to be used for transportation but “must be expended entirely in the interests of settlement of the Doukhobors **Smart to Mavor, 1 December 1898, in discussing the revised (and final ?) agreement**); and 3) they would be exempt from military service. .**Woodcock and Avadumovic. The Doukhobors 137; NA, RG76, V183 F65101, Pt. 1, Clifton to Governor General, 30 November 1898, Maude, A Peculiar People, 327-28.***

*The soon-to-be contentious issue of interplay between the type of agricultural organization and conditions of taking up the land which was buried in the innocuous first condition was not detailed. It could be argued that the uppermost in the minds of the Doukhobors was escape from their desperate conditions and that they were perhaps willingly ignorant of any details that might interfere with that escape. On the other hand, the government may have unwisely assumed that the Doukhobors understood more about the requirements of acquiring land than they actually did. In assessing the conflict between the Doukhobors’ concept of property and the requirements of the Dominion Lands Act. Mavor later argued that the government was fully aware of the Doukhobors’ communal way of life before they entered Canada. **Mavor, My Windows, 2:3** and Peter Verigin made the same point about their rejection of oath-taking in his petition on behalf of Doukhobors in 1907:*

Is it possible that you did not know why the incident (the loss of their lands in Russia) has taken place between us and the Russian Government and why we left our country and migrated to your country, Canada? This happened only because we did not choose to take the oath of allegiance to Nicholas Alexandrovich.

*The government maintained that the conditions of obtaining homestead land, including the matter of swearing allegiance to the Crown, were clear from the beginning. **“The Canadian authorities were quite explicit about the conditions on which the Doukhobor might come to Canada. They were to make entry for their homesteads individually, in the usual Canadian fashion. (Mavor, My Windows, 2:4). But Maude goes on to say that as an additional concession, they were allowed to cultivate an amount of land anywhere on their “township” equivalent to the total amount required, rather than on each quarter section, “thus facilitating their communal arrangements (A Peculiar People, 61). As to the oath of allegiance, Woodcock and Avadumovic’s research turned up nothing to indicate a specific reference to the need for pledging allegiance as a requirement for patenting the land. Their conclusion is that probably nobody thought to mention the issue (The Doukhobors, 134).***

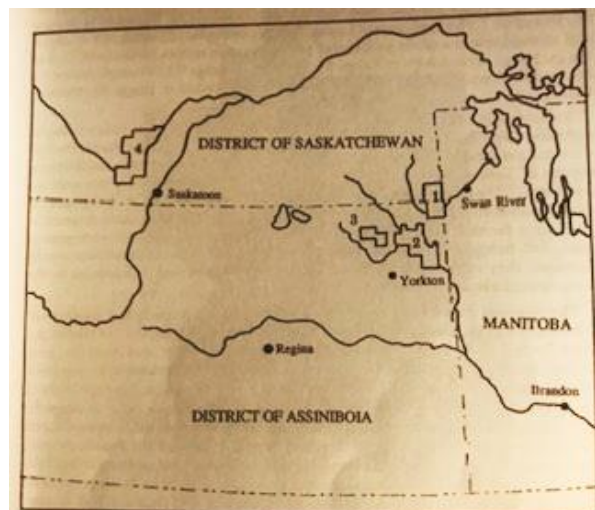
The Land

*Although James Mavor later made the point that Doukhobors had never asked for lands set apart for their sole use (**Mavor My Windows 2:4**), reserved *en bloc* was a necessity for their communal way of life and was a major*

inducement offered by the government. Representatives of the Doukhobors and the government, assisted by Tolstoyan Aylmer Maude. A retired businessman, and Prince Hilkoff, a disposed Russian estate-holder and Doukhobor sympathizer, set about to locate a block of land which would accommodate the potential migrants. Mavor suggested that the reserves be “as near as possible to the northern limits of practical settlement” so the Doukhobors could establish themselves in a self-contained manner while attracting other settlers to intervening areas. The representatives found a suitable area near Beaver Lake, northeast of Edmonton, but had to abandon to strong opposition by Edmonton district residents to these very “foreign” settlers. They were forced to consider lands “in other, less tempting, parts of the country (**Maude, A Peculiar People, 51-52. Foreshadowing a later conflict, the opposition was led by Edmonton businessman Frank Oliver who was later to succeed Clifford Sifton as Minister of the Interior, and who was to show little regard for the “non-binding” modification of cultivation requirements negotiated by Sifton with the Doukhobors**). The Doukhobors were favourably impressed with a block of eleven townships near Wetaskiwin, (**NA, RG76, V183 F65101, Pt. 1, William F. McCreary to James Smart, 11 October 1898**), but Sifton thought it too small to accommodate the whole group (**Stuart to McCreary, 14 October 1898**). Both William McCreary, the Commissioner for Immigration at Winnipeg, and James Smart, Deputy Minister of the Interior, championed a location in the Pipestone district just South of the Canadian Pacific Railway along the eastern edge of the District of Assiniboia, (**Deputy Minister to Maude 6 October 1898**) but the Doukhobors showed little enthusiasm for it as it contained few trees, Sifton thought it might be too small after all. (**Sifton to McCreary, 18 October 1898**).

The indecision of the Doukhobor representatives added to the difficulty of finding a large block of land which satisfied their requirements. As representatives of a group in which “all are equal, no one is better than the other”, they did not feel empowered to make any final decisions, and so were unwilling to express firm preferences about any piece of land. Even Prince Hilkoff, who took the initiative in representing the, proved indecisive. William McCreary, described by Sulerzhitsky as a “lively, energetic, good-natured man, (**L.A. Sulerzhinsky, To America With the Doukhobors**) betrayed his frustration when he reported to his superiors that he was “pretty much going blindfolded” in the matter of locating the Doukhobors since Hilkoff “changes so often in his ideas. (**NA, RG76, V183 F65101, Pt. 3, McCreary to James Smart, 18 February 1899**) Finally, after Hilkoff and the delegates had looked at lands in the Carrot River district and in Northern Manitoba, they agreed to lands in the Yorkton-Swan River area. Two blocks of land comprised the initial reserves., the North Reserve (also called the Thunder Hill, or Swan River Reserve), with a later addition to it know as the Devil’s Lake (or later Good Spirit Lake) Annex.

Eventually, more than twice as many migrants came as originally expected. (**As late as the end of September, only 2,000 Doukhobors were expected during the winter (NA, RG76, V183 F65101, Pt. 1 Maude to Smart, 27 September 1898**). As the government received news of more and more migrants, it made substitutions, modifications and additions to these reserves even as Doukhobors were arriving. Even so it was clear that the two reserves would not accommodate the last group of more than 2,000 Kars Doukhobors. Prince Hilkoff continued to favour lands east of Prince Albert, particularly those in the Carrot River and Lather River Valleys, to accommodate the last group, but finally agreed to lands along the North Saskatchewan River some 204 miles north and west of the original reserves. In June 1899 the Saskatchewan Reserve (or



Map 1. Doukhobor Reserves: 1. North Colony; 2. South Colony; 3. Good Spirit Lake Annex
4. Saskatchewan Colony.

Prince Albert Reserve) (The lands in this region were almost totally in the Prince Albert Land District; a few of the southernmost townships were in the Regina District) was added to the others. The three reserves totalled nearly three-quarters of a million acres, a "magnificent endowment" (The phrase is James Mavor's (My Windows, 2:4) set aside by the Canadian government for the Doukhobors' sole use.

As a discussion on this article, I want to thank firstly Dr. Carl J. Tracie, for his excellent work on his book. Those of you who have not yet read it, are missing out on the detail that Dr. Tracie has researched his material and mentions all the Saskatchewan Doukhobor Villages from the implements purchased to cattle raised and acres cultivated. He also has quantified the number of Doukhobors migrating to British Columbia in the years 1908-12.

Many of my readers have already a major grasp of the confusion and diverse interpretation of the agreement between the Doukhobors and the Canadian Government. This article provides the observations from non-Doukhobors who witnessed the agreements.

Enjoy the experience!

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