

The Doukhobor Problem: Media Representations of Sons of Freedom Women, 1952–1960

JULIE RAK

University of Alberta

This paper analyses the process of the media in British Columbia and in Canada in the stigmatizing of members of the radical Doukhobor Russian religious community known as the “svobodniki” or the Sons of Freedom. This process lasted from the late 1920s through to the end of the 1960s. A key issue of their protest was the disruption to their way of life in the Kootenay region in British Columbia by an unsympathetic cultural environment—secularized and pro-militarist—which they regarded as the antipathy of their values. Despite the clarity of their demands and the open statements of the reasons for their protests, their methods of protest were presented by the media as acts of insanity. When women led the protests, the media portrayed them as monstrous and unfeminine. My analysis of the media shows how female Sons of Freedom protestors presented a direct challenge to the conservative gender roles which middle-class women of the 1950s were being asked to adopt. The response of the state was to declare these protestors “bad mothers” and to imprison their children for up to six years.

From the late 1920s until the late 1960s, the radical Doukhobor religious group known as the *svobodniki* or the Sons of Freedom vigorously engaged in various forms of protest against what they saw as the dangers of living in the secularized, pro-militarist environment of the Kootenay region in British Columbia. The Sons of Freedom were created and sustained by a combination of factors, including the dissolution of Doukhobor communal living in 1939, the rapidly changing social environment of the Kootenay region and the election of a reactionary Social Credit provincial government which vowed to bring Sons of Freedom nude protestors, arsonists and bombers to justice and

to assimilate their children to a Canadian way of life. In response to these pressures, the Sons of Freedom grew in membership from the 1920s until the 1950s, when they numbered in the thousands in small villages in the British Columbia interior, particularly in the settlements of Krestova, an area north of the town of Nelson (Rak 2004; Yerbury 1984; Woodcock and Avakumovic 1977).

Although the Sons of Freedom were quite clear in terms of what their demands were and why they protested, their methods of protest were presented by the media as acts of insanity. For people who study religious sectarian groups, particularly those groups that are thought to be threatening to mainstream ways of life, this treatment of the Sons of Freedom will not be news. But I suggest that issues connected to the Sons of Freedom group were handled so badly in the media and at the provincial level in the 1950s because of the threat Sons of Freedom women posed to postwar Canada and its changing attitudes to gender roles. In this paper, I will show the media coverage of Sons of Freedom women in light of the conservative roles that middle-class white women in the 1950s were being asked (often in the same newspapers) to adopt. As middle-class, urban lifestyles began to be popular among people in the British Columbia interior during the 1950s and as fear of communism began to increase, the portrayal of women in the media began to shift away from rural models where collective, women-centred activities and values like industriousness and thrift were prized, to an emphasis on women either as sexual objects, or as wives whose role was to serve their husbands and shop for labour-saving domestic products. Sons of Freedom women—who were often protest leaders, who openly advocated collective activity and who did not subscribe to any of the norms of femininity (except for the importance of motherhood)—were represented as possibly monstrous and certainly unfeminine. As almost inhuman women, the Sons of Freedom female protestors, particularly when they engaged in nude demonstrations, were presented therefore as a fundamental threat to the Canadian way of life. The media representation of these women as a threat was key to the initial public approval for the enforced incarceration and separation from their parents of many Sons of Freedom children in the New Denver facility until

1959, when the mothers of these children finally agreed to send their children to provincially-run schools.

Before I do this analysis, I will provide some background about the Doukhobors in general, and the Sons of Freedom in particular. The Doukhobors are a Russian-speaking sect which was formed some time in the sixteenth century. Along with other peasant sectarian movements like the Molokans or the Mennonites, the Doukhobors decided that the spirit of God lives in each person and gives that person access to divine reason. All people, therefore, are equal and no person can kill another person, because that would be like killing the spirit of God. Although Doukhobors are Christian sectarians, they do not believe in the Trinity, and consider Jesus Christ to be a good teacher and example for others. Since all people are equal and have divine reason, priests are unnecessary, as are churches and other religious rites. The only rites that Doukhobors have are the presence of bread, salt and water at their meetings in prayer homes—these are the basic elements that sustain life. The single religious custom at these meetings is that each participant bows to the other as a recognition of divinity within each person. Strict reliance on written texts like the Bible are also not necessary. Instead, the Doukhobors sing songs and spiritual songs called psalmi—these form *Zhivotnaiia Kniga* or the Living Book. The Living Book is not written—it comes into being when its songs are sung in groups. The Living Book contains, in mystical form, the belief system, ethics and history of the Doukhobors (Breyfogle 1995). Other important features of Doukhoborism—which is what Doukhobors call their way of life—are pacifism, the refusal to acknowledge any earthly authority, a belief in collective effort and communal living, a commitment to live simply, vegetarianism (since the early twentieth century) and a refusal of militarism and patriotism of any kind. Doukhobors often believe that “toil and peaceful life” is central to what they think, and so living by example and working hard are spiritual practices in themselves. One of the main Doukhobor groups, called the Orthodox or Community Doukhobors, also has a leader who at one time was regarded as semi-divine, but the other groups do not always recognize that leadership (Tarasoff 1982).

In 1895, the leader of the Doukhobors at the time, Gospodii or Peter the Lordly, ordered the Doukhobors to burn any weapons they had and refuse to serve in the tsar's army, even in a peaceful role. The Doukhobors began to endure harsh persecution as a result and would have been wiped out but for a humanitarian campaign run by English Quakers and followers of Leo Tolstoy (called Tolstoyans), who convinced the Russian authorities to send the Doukhobors away. After a false start in Cyprus, the majority of the Doukhobors migrated to Canada in 1899—eventually 8,000 of them came, which represents the largest single mass migration of people to Canada in its history (Woodcock and Avakumovic 1977).

The arrival of vegetarian, communitarian Russian-speaking peasants to a nation that was entering the modern world and had little understanding of Doukhobor values caused a series of problems for the new settlers, even as they settled in Saskatchewan, broke the soil by hand and worked in railway construction to raise funds. Forced by the Minister of the Interior to swear an oath to the Queen and register their lands individually, farm by farm, in 1913 the Doukhobors gave up their Saskatchewan homesteads and bought land in British Columbia in the Kootenay region (Janzen 1990). There, they built communal homes, farms and orchards as well as small trades businesses, and they built their community into the most successful collective in the history of North America. But their leader was killed in a train accident in 1924 and when his son, Peter Chistiakov or the Divider came from Russia, he proved to be a charismatic leader who was also given to alienating some of his followers and not managing the affairs of the commune very well. In 1939, the Doukhobor community was foreclosed on by the British Columbia provincial government, which could have bailed it out. This happened partly because there was so much hostility in British Columbia towards ethnic minorities in general, and towards the Doukhobors in particular. The refusal of most Doukhobors to assimilate and their exemption from military service were looked upon with suspicion, and a deep rift developed between Doukhobors and non-Doukhobors in the Kootenays (Rak 2004). From this rift, the Sons of Freedom became more than a small group of disaffected

Doukhobor followers and by 1932 it was a strong movement with anarchic tendencies and a number of leaders, with its base in the village of Krestova just north of Nelson, British Columbia. The authorities reacted to the refusal of Sons of Freedom people to school their children in local schools by jailing their parents for a few years—this caused the group’s distrust of outside authorities and customs to deepen throughout the 1940s (McLaren 1995). By then, Sons of Freedom members had rejected owning any private property at all, paying any taxes, living in a materialistic way or learning much English. Until the end of large-scale resistance in the late 1960s, the Sons of Freedom used unusual forms of protest to register their distrust of the non-Doukhobor world, or as a warning to Doukhobors not to adopt materialistic ways. Protests could include stripping, burning farm equipment and marching, sometimes in the nude. During times of radical activity from the 1920s onward, some Sons of Freedom also burned private property. By the early 1960s, radical Sons of Freedom had begun to burn buildings owned mostly by non-Sons of Freedom Doukhobors as a protest against materialism. A very small group of radicals also blew up rail sidings, bridges, and public buildings including the court house in the town of Nelson (Rak 2004; McLaren 1999). At these times, many Sons of Freedom rejected ideas about individual adherence to a secular state and the separation of religion from citizenship activity in favour of identities grounded in group affiliation and a belief, based on Doukhobor prophecies of a century before, that the Doukhobors would return to Russia after suffering at the hands of the authorities. This last belief, often misunderstood by non-Doukhobor people, meant that the measures intended to curb their behaviour—imprisonment and removal of any privileges of citizenship—actually encouraged mystic identification of Sons of Freedom radicals with the sufferings of their forefathers and foremothers after the Burning of Arms in 1895. They willingly entered the prisons built for them at Piers Island and Agassiz in order to suffer and eventually—they thought—to migrate. They called this need to migrate “The Doukhobor Problem” (Maloff 1957).

The authorities, particularly the Social Credit government which was elected in the 1950s, saw the Doukhobor Problem as something quite

different. Unfortunately, by the 1950s the actions of BC provincial and Canadian federal authorities, as well as the portrayal of protestors in the popular press, all contributed to a problem which is very much in evidence today: political protests with a religious basis were regarded as nonsensical and the protestors were labelled terrorists (Holt 1964). In the news media, Sons of Freedom depredations appeared to strike at cherished ideas of civic pride, the ownership and care of property and state-sanctioned control of the nude body as a private, rather than a public and politicized entity. In their turn, the popular media sought to portray the depredations—and even Sons of Freedom cultural differences—as the Doukhobor Problem which could only be solved by incarcerating all protestors, removing their fundamental rights such as the right to vote, and by taking Sons of Freedom children away from their parents and placing them in a prison-like school in New Denver, British Columbia.¹ From 1952 to 1959, the provincial government of British Columbia, with the help of the RCMP (who rounded up children in night raids on Sons of Freedom households) did just that (McLaren 2002).

In government documents and media reports, the Doukhobor Problem is described as the paradox of a peaceful, likeable people who nonetheless engage in so-called anti-social activity. This is seen as a “problem” because attempts to engage members of the group on what was thought to be a rational level; i.e., by asking group members to stop parading in the nude, met with stubborn resistance. Other measures, like threats of imprisonment, only seemed to make the group more determined to disobey laws and—more importantly—to disregard social expectations for good behaviour. Like other religious sectarian groups, including Islamic fundamentalist groups today, the Sons of Freedom posed a “problem” for the authorities and the general public because their religious expressions were thought to be irrational. In a liberal, secular state, any groups which do not see a separation between religion and politics, and which challenge the basis for the state itself, become a problem when the basis for the group’s logic is not based on liberal ideas about the subject, private property or the rule of law. Representatives of the state tend to think of this situation as a “problem,”

not of negotiation, but of repression and containment since in a liberal framework there can be no communication between rational and irrational systems of thought. Therefore, the Doukhobor Problem was created as unsolvable by negotiation in the minds of the authorities and in the Canadian public, and that Problem had to be solved without negotiation, despite the existence of alternatives which included not seeing the Sons of Freedom as a problem, but as a group with its own logic.

A number of government reports—including the findings of an interdisciplinary research project headed by anthropologist Harry Hawthorne and a special set of reports from Doukhobor Peter Maloff for a commission headed by Colonel Meade—did give sound advice about the Doukhobor Problem (Hawthorne 1955; Maloff 1957), which included tolerance of this part of the sect and an attempt to understand the religious basis for Sons of Freedom activities. But the provincial government disregarded these recommendations. In the popular press of British Columbia, the Doukhobor Problem took on the status of a pathogen, and there were many calls in newspapers like the *Victoria Daily Times*, *The Vancouver Sun* or the *Nelson Daily News* for solutions which involved exile, jail or forced labour. Sometimes the suggested remedies were quite comical: a spanking machine called “the Slapper” was suggested, for instance (Rideout 1953). But the Social Credit government, elected on a law-and-order platform, decided by the early 1950s to do something more radical: it imposed two-year sentences for public nudity, severe sentences of twelve years for anyone involved in arson or bombing, mass arrests of protestors (there were over 140) at Parrys Siding in 1952 and, shortly thereafter, it authorized the kidnapping of Sons of Freedom children for enforced schooling at the New Denver TB sanatorium (a former Japanese-Canadian internment camp) until the children were 18 or until the Sons of Freedom leaders agreed to send their children to school. For years, the children were kept there. They were never allowed to go home, even during school vacation time. After 1955, their parents were only allowed to see them through a chainlink fence once every two weeks (Ombudsman 1999). As John McLaren has argued, the decision to be harsh on the Sons of

Freedom was purely political, and it was not in the best interests of the people involved. The result was that some of the more than 100 children who were sent to New Denver (in some cases for the full six years) became bombers during the 1960s as they reacted against the authoritarian measures they endured. Clearly, the long sentences given Sons of Freedom members and the thorough (if ineffectual) investigations of the group by the RCMP indicate that Sons of Freedom agitation posed a deeper threat than merely the threat to destroy selected properties or parade in the nude (McLaren 1995).

Why did the Social Credit government feel so threatened by a small group of backwoods radicals in the British Columbia interior? Clearly, it regarded the Sons of Freedom and their actions as far more than an annoyance, and in direct conflict with conventional values and ideas.

This holds particularly true for the image of Sons of Freedom women, who seemed to symbolize everything that the 1950s ideal of the perfect woman was not. More than anything else, the image in the media of Doukhobor women as fearless, humourless women who were not afraid to engage in nude protest, speak frankly to get what they wanted and who seemed not at all enthralled by the consumerist culture developing all around them meant that the ideals they represented flew in the face of rapidly changing society of British Columbia, and the new roles that women had begun to assume as part of this social order. It was the media portrayal of Sons of Freedom women as inhuman which led to the depiction of the Sons of Freedom, and of all Doukhobors, as terrorists and religious fanatics, people who cannot be understood and who should not be listened to, but who are fascinating because they are somehow alien.² This is not, I maintain, so different from the fascination of the western media with the idea of the veil in some Islamic societies today.

How did this depiction of Doukhobor women in the media work, and why did it take the shape that it did? First of all during the 1930s, issues of the Nelson Daily News, the most important newspaper in the Kootenay region, portrayed the concerns of women mainly in its society pages. Interspersed with articles about social calls and appearances, there were advice columns to women about how to manage farm accounts, or about matters pertaining to education. The audience for

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

these kinds of articles was probably rural, and so the focus of the items was on practical matters that were of interest to farm women of the period. At this time, although they lived communally and had some unique customs, the lives of Doukhobor women would have looked much like the lives of other women in the region, since like them, they worked in orchards and on farms, and raised their children in rural settings. And like most of the women in the area, they would have had some schooling, but may not have finished high school.

During the 1950s, changing media coverage shows that the image of women has shifted towards regarding them as sexual objects on the one hand, and consumers on the other, who are expected to be attracted to new appliances and to images of feminine beauty that are part of the mass media that is beginning to be influential in British Columbia at

of sorts. He once built a jeep-like vehicle that had 21 speeds ahead and performed prodigious farm chores. His farm is served by natural gas from a well dug in his yard by an exploration company in thanks for his help in ironing out drilling problems.

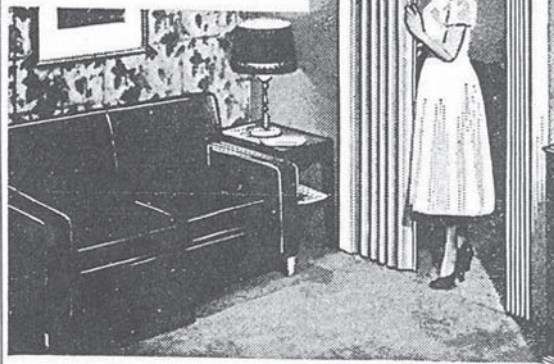
A recent survey showed concentrations of Doukhobor families around Grand Forks, Brilliant, Shoreacres, Slocan, Castlegar and Creston in B.C., Arrowwood, Mossleigh, Calgary, Lundbreck and Cowley in Alberta; Verigin, Yorkton, Kamsack, Calmar, Canora, Saskatoon, Langham and Blaine Lake in Saskatchewan; and Benito in Manitoba.

CHANGE AT KRESTOVA

Even at Krestova, the semi-isolated shack-town headquarters of the Sons of Freedom, communal living once the Doukhobor mode of life, has disappeared. Almost everyone works at an outside job, farms, has a profession or business or is dependent on someone who does. A few depend on government welfare.

The closest thing left to communal living is at Hilliers in the Comox area on Vancouver Island. An offshoot movement was founded there in 1947 by the late Michael Verigin, a relative in the Verigin family line which has provided Doukhobor leaders through

More *Living Room*
...in *Every Room*



with the new low-priced *SPACEMASTER* folding door

Is there any quicker way to get more room?
"Spacemaster" doors are so easy to install you
can do it in 15 minutes . . . with your screwdriver.
Of course you never have to paint them, or worry
about warping or swelling.

Figure 1 "Change at Krestova" article juxtaposed with advertisement for Spacemaster Folding Doors, Nelson Daily News, early 1950s.

idity averts forests

... more than expected has of the woods in the Van- however, said Sunday that 1 daily with the hazard is week.

Two rescued from glacier

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP)—Two men were found alive Sunday in a glacial crevasse, a week after they disappeared on a helicopter flight. A third man was dead. The Coast Guard said Robert Baldwin of Danbury, Conn., a geophysicist, was dead. The two survivors were picked up from the glacier by a helicopter and transferred to a Coast Guard amphibian to be flown to Juneau. They are pilot Martin Cuertens of Reno, Nev., and Robert Sheldon of Spokane, Wash., a geophysicist.

They opened the doors of the submerged car and pulled out the couple but they could not be revived. Valerie Jacobson is the daughter of Vancouver police constable Arne Jacobson.

FATHER DOZING

The three Wardrobe children died in their blazing home in Nanaimo. The fire started while their father, Jack Wardrobe dozed in the living room. Miss Cope was struck by a sports car in an unmarked crosswalk at Broadway and Slocan Friday and died in General Hospital Sunday. A companion, Mrs. Arnes Clark, also of 2683 East Eighth, suffered minor injuries. Miss Cope had lived in Vancouver for 27 years and since 1924 had worked for the B.C. Electric. She is survived by five sisters in England.

TROWN 40 FEET

Mr. Ruwerts was thrown nearly 40 feet by the ambulance which hit him as he crossed Kingway at Wessex. The driver rushed him to Vancouver General Hospital in the ambulance, but Mr.

bodies on Formosa and shored for Chiang's reelection. Under the constitution, no president or vice-president can serve more than two terms in office. Chiang's second term expires next May.

Okay for man to do laundry —but not this!

WATERLOO, Iowa (AP)—Kenneth Kirsey walked into a downtown laundromat to wash his clothes. Housewives hardly noticed when he threw a shirt into a machine. But one screamed and another called police when he threw in his trousers too. He was washing the clothes he had on. Kirsey, 22, was fined \$15 and costs for disorderly conduct.

Canada's high —and low

Regina \$2
Prince George... 39

Miss West VANCOUVER

is title won by Wynne Conn, of 3388 Mathers. She will now enter the Miss P.N.I. contest.

WOMEN STRIP IN EMOTIONAL WELCOME

Tears as Sons return home

By FIVE SCOTT
Canadian Press

KRESTOVA—Elderly women stripped with pleasure Sunday as they welcomed some 60 Sons of Freedom Doukhobor children just released from government custody. The made women embarrassed many of the children as they stood in a tight group in the centre of this community, on a dusty, barren plain under a scorching 100-degree sun. Looks of humiliation could be seen on some of the boys' faces as the women hugged and kissed them. Earlier, there had been a tearful reunion with the parents before some 400 Freedomites gathered in front of a gas station at Crescent Valley, four miles away. For many of the children, the ceremonies at this capital of the radical Freedomite sect was their first glimpse of their home in many years. They had left a government dormitory at New Denver, modern in every way and nestled on the side of Slocan Lake, 65 miles northwest of Nelson. They came to a community of unspiked log and wood houses. A community with no electric- ity and where water is delivered by truck from a river a mile away. The children were ordered into a group when they arrived here. They stood before a semi-circle of men and women, six of them made. Before them was a table containing bread, salt and water, symbols of the Doukhobor faith.

(Continued on Page 7)
See SONS RETURN

Figure 2 “Tears as Sons Return Home” juxtaposed with a picture of Miss West Vancouver. Vancouver Sun June 2, 1959.

this time. As the headlines begin to reflect the fear of the “Reds” in the south (“Senators Slap Down McCarthy” 1955), the advertisements in BC’s major papers begin to multiply. Many ads showed a new lifestyle based on consumption and conformity to new ideas about what women’s bodies are supposed to look like and what consumer products they should acquire, rather than what kinds of skills they are supposed to have (figs. 1, 2). These messages often appeared on the same pages as articles about what appears to be a parallel universe: the situation of Sons of Freedom women. In jarring contrast to the images of women found all over the mainstream newspapers of British Columbia, the Sons of Freedom women of the 1950s spoke out in the media for what they believed in and projected an image of upmost seriousness (fig 3).

But in cartoons, their seriousness is lampooned as a lack of care about their appearance. Sons of Freedom women are presented as being outside cultural norms because they lack so-called feminine modesty. They are pictured as dirty women who are no better than farm



COURTROOM SCENE — These were some of the 60 spectators at the courtroom Friday when family court judge William Evans ordered release of 77 children from the New Denver school dormitory, ending the institu-

tion's five-year role as an establishment for Sons of Freedom children whose parents had refused to send them to regular schools. The children will leave the school Sunday.

Trosky Gets Nine-Month Term

PRINCE GEORGE (CP) — Raymond Trosky, 27-year-old jail escapee who led RCMP on a nine-day chase through northern B. C. bush, was sentenced Friday to nine months in jail.

The sentence is to run concurrently with a six-month sentence handed Trosky at Fort St. James, B. C., on a charge of assaulting a policeman.

Magistrate George Stewart imposed the nine-month sentence for three offences to which Trosky pleaded guilty following his capture near here last weekend.

The charges were escaping custody, pointing a firearm and breaking and entering. Trosky appeared in the dock wearing rubbers, work pants and a sweat shirt.

When sentence was pronounced he asked Magistrate Stewart: "Can I get a fine?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Trosky," the magistrate replied.

Trosky, who threatened to escape again when he was caught, was not handcuffed.

Trosky was on the point of be-



IN TALKS — Leo S. Gansner, extreme left, counsel for the Attorney General's department and the superintendent of child welfare at the hearings of applications for release of the children, chats here with three Freedomites at Friday's brief session. Fred Ozeroff, interpreter, is second from left.—Daily News photos by M. Carlton.

Figure 3 Freedom women in court. Vancouver Province, June 1 1959. n.p.

animals (fig. 4) and whose desire to protest can only be understood as a desire not to be “housewifely”—which for one cartoonist is a joke in itself (fig. 5). In view of the turn to materialism, the values of the Sons of Freedom women in the media not only provide a contrast to what is happening in the rest of BC: these values are on a head-on collision course with that world. Although by 1955 the coverage in *The Victoria Daily Times* had softened to some extent, reporting on the tears of Sons of Freedom women who went to the capital to ask the Attorney General for their children back, supported by letters to the editor in sympathy with the women (Halsall 1955; “Douk mothers” 1955; “Why Make” 1955), other reporting continued to represent Sons of Freedom women as inhuman. This is why, for instance, Doukhobor mothers were often shown in the media as uncaring, as in the article in the *Vancouver Sun* of 1959 when women are finally reunited with their children from New Denver, “Doukhobor Mothers Happy But You’d Never Know It” (1959), or when an editorial from *The Vancouver Province* says that “kindness” does not work for Doukhobors and so they should all be exiled (1952). In *The Nelson Daily News*



Figure 4 Cartoon by Peterson, *Vancouver Sun*. Date unknown.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

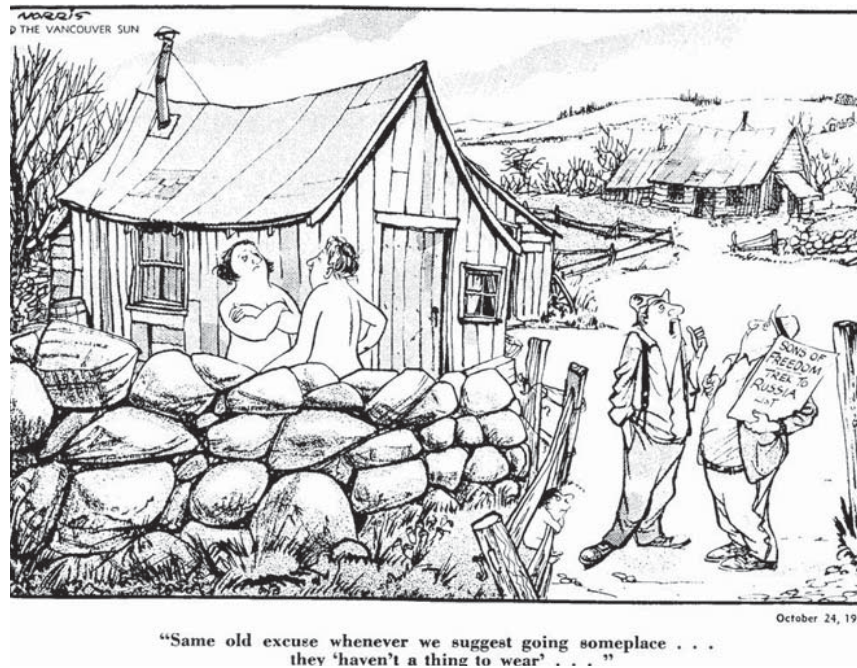


Figure 5 Cartoon by Norris, Vancouver Sun, October 24, 1958.

editorial of April 14, 1959 called—in an oblique reference to the racist epithet “Dirty Douks”—“Krestova Spring Cleaning.” Sons of Freedom women are—ironically—said to be feminists, which is a negative way to understand their lack of fear of the authorities:

At the forefront of the feminist movement...those who engagingly envisage women as essentially sweet and gentle have never met the ladies' auxiliary to the Sons of Freedom. No one can be considered in the sissy class who can throw rocks and eggs at the RCMP...Meanwhile, the problem of the women remains. It is probable they will continue to be a nuisance...while the RCMP continues to treat them with gentleness.

These comments, made right at the end of the confinement of the Sons of Freedom children, show how fundamental a challenge the Sons of Freedom women posed to what “normal” womanhood is supposed to be: they are unafraid of police—and so are called “feminists”—which even at this early point referred to unfeminine behaviour (they are not

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

sisssies). Their rage is understood as a problem because it is irrational in the mind of the editorial writer, and the RCMP is portrayed as the rational group. Since the Sons of Freedom women were throwing eggs at the RCMP to express their frustration with them for rounding up their children during night raids, it would have been relatively easy to understand the meaning of their anger. But, in keeping with the portrayal of Sons of Freedom women as irrational fanatics who do not behave as women should, this issue is never raised.

The most extreme, and far-reaching, example of the othering of Sons of Freedom women is Simma Holt's book *Terror in the Name of God*, which was based in part on her reporting for the Vancouver Sun on the Sons of Freedom movement. The nationally best-selling book includes photographs of nude protestors, and especially of the bodies of Doukhobor women, which are interpreted by Holt as pathenogenic and perverted even as she admits the erotic potential of looking at the photographs themselves.³ The caption beneath one of the photographs, a shot of nude and semi-nude Sons of Freedom women from behind, reads "Lovely bodies, like their minds, begin to change as these youngsters find themselves trapped in the frustration and hate of the Sons of Freedom world" (Holt 1964 n.p.). This photograph is the first in the series: it is meant, with its photograph of young naked women (a rare sight in non-pornographic material at this time) to provide the means for voyeurism and the explanation of pathologies. In subsequent photos, Holt tells us where such so-called frustration and hate will lead: she includes a shot of the naked bottom of an older, overweight woman which emphasizes her size. In another photograph, Holt's caption for a nude older Sons of Freedom woman greeting children released from New Denver interprets the downcast eyes of one small boy as this: "Six years' absence from Krestova ways brought shock at first sight of nudism" (Holt 1964 n.p.). The "shock" is presumed to be at the sight of an overweight, older woman in the nude as opposed to the "lovely bodies" from the first photo. We (the voyeuristic viewers) are meant to share the "shock" of the young boy and to feel outraged that a "Canadianized" boy fresh from the progressive influence of New Denver must look at this unprogressive body, although in fact it is unclear whether this is what the young boy is looking at. More importantly,

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

Holt's glosses on these pictures show that it is the bodies of Sons of Freedom women which pose the greatest threat to Canadian society. Again and again, Holt returns to different pictures of these bodies in the photographic section of the book as proof of the inhumanity and abnormality of these women, and as the reason why it is necessary for the authorities to restrain them, and their children. Paradoxically, Holt's presentation of these women as inhuman gives her the licence to show nude photographs of them as social instruction for others. It does not matter for her purposes what the members of the group thought about the photographs.⁴

This treatment of the Sons of Freedom women as a pathogenic threat, I would argue, is what perpetuated so much of the incomprehension about what the Sons of Freedom were doing, and why so few reporters understood that the mothers of children in New Denver might be upset enough to protest and finally, to negotiate with the authorities. Although there were numerous letters to the editors of *The Nelson Daily News* and *The Vancouver Sun* asking that the children of the Sons of Freedom be released from New Denver and at least two religious groups pleaded for tolerance ("Understand" 1953; "United" 1953), the newspapers themselves almost never printed stories which were sympathetic to the parents of these children, or which tried to find out what their point of view might have been. Instead, the Sons of Freedom were most often discussed as if they were a disease, not a people.⁵ The reason why is obvious: the Sons of Freedom women were not thought to be proper mothers or even human ones because they refused to participate in any of the markers of femininity which were becoming the hallmarks of postwar industrialized society in British Columbia. As the most visible representatives of the group, Sons of Freedom women were portrayed as the visual evidence of mass insanity and unsanitariness, rather than as members of a group which had an alternative way to be feminine, whose pleas for the return of their children might make sense. Like the authorities during the 1950s, reporters like Holt decided that there was no point in asking Sons of Freedom women about anything, since it was assumed that they could only give a fanatical, "crazy" response to any questions which might be asked of them. Sons of Freedom women, therefore, posed an elemental

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

threat to Canadian society in their resolute desire to stand outside developing social norms for women and act as empowered subjects who did not care at all about consumerism or “the feminine mystique.” As a result, the mass-media (and much of the public) largely supported the measures brought against Sons of Freedom children from 1952 to 1959, with what were to be and still are disastrous results for everyone involved. The Doukhobor Problem, today, can be seen as a problem of misrepresentation and a failure, by the mass media, to respect or negotiate with a specific type of female difference during a time when consumerist ideals for all women were proliferating.

End Notes

1. For the Victoria Daily Times’ position, see Webster (1953). For the Vancouver Sun’s position, see McKay (1953) and Holt (1957). For The Nelson Daily News’ position, see the September 17, 1953 editorial and the March 23, 1954 editorial.
2. The reporter who did the most to popularize the view of the Sons of Freedom (and all Doukhobors) as terrorists and who most strenuously recommended forced schooling was Simma Holt, who wrote a series of articles for the Vancouver Sun from 1957 to 1962 about the Sons of Freedom and the situation of their children in New Denver. Holt’s best-selling book *Terror in the Name of God* (1964) remains the most enduring image of Doukhobor radicals in Canada. Unfortunately, it is riddled with errors and exhibits considerable bias against Doukhobor people in general and Sons of Freedom people in particular.
3. The photographs in *Terror in the Name of God* are graphic, and they make no effort to hide the identities of the people in them. For this reason, I do not reproduce them here.
4. Many members of the Sons of Freedom group feel that Holt betrayed their confidence and find the photographs an enduring source of shame, particularly since their relatives and friends appear in them. To this day, non-Doukhobor researchers who work with the Sons of Freedom population are distrusted because of the legacy Holt left behind. Personal communications with the author.
5. For examples of the view of Sons of Freedom people as a disease rather than as a group of people, see the editorial “We Want a Permanent Cure” in The Vancouver Province May 1952, n.d. or the editorial “Krestova Spring Cleaning,” in The Nelson Daily News of 1959.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2007

References

Breyfogle, Nicholas B.

- 1995 Building Doukhoboriii: Religious Culture, Social Identity and Russian Colonization in Transcaucasia, 1845–1895. *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 27(3): 24–51.

Halsall, Walter

- 1955 Children of the Sons. *Victoria Daily Times* February 5: 4.

Holt, Simma

- 1957 Doukhobor Tots Enjoy Schooling. *Vancouver Sun* February 15: 1.
1964 *Terror in the Name of God: The Story of the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors*. Toronto/Montreal: McLelland and Stewart.

Janzen, William

- 1990 *Limits on Liberty: the experience of Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor communities in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Maloff, Peter

- 1957 *In Quest of a Solution (Three Reports on Doukhobor Problem)*. Second Edition. In English. First report plus preface. Unpaginated. University of British Columbia Archives, Doukhobor Collection.

McKay, Louise

- 1953 Even Doukhobors Open Door to Public Health Nurse. *Vancouver Sun* April 10: 30.

McLaren, John

- 1995 Creating “Slaves of Satan” or “New Canadians”? The Law, Education and the Socialization of Doukhobor Children, 1911–1935. In Hamar Foster and John McLaren (eds.), *Essays in the History of Canadian Law: British Columbia and the Yukon*, 313–352. Toronto: Osgood Society for Canadian Legal History.
1999 The Despicable Crime of Nudity: Law, the State and Civil Protest Among the Sons of Freedom Sect of Doukhobors, 1899–1935. *Journal of the West* 38(3): 27–33.
2002 The State, Child Snatching, and the Law: The Seizure and Indoctrination of Sons of Freedom Children in British Columbia, 1950–1960. In John McLaren, Robert Menzies and Dorothy E. Chunn (eds.), *Regulating Lives: Historical Essays on the State, Society, the Individual and the Law*, 259–293. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Nelson Daily News, The

- 1953 Punishment Alone Futile; Move on Sons Should be Starting Point. Editorial. Sept. 17: 4.
 1954 Education and the Freedomites. Editorial. March 23: 4.
 1959 Krestova Spring Cleaning. Editorial. April 14: 4.

Ombudsman Province of British Columbia

- 1999 *Righting the Wrong: The Confinement of the Sons of Freedom Doukhobor Children*. Public Report No. 38 to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

Rak, Julie

- 2004 *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Rideout, Page

- 1953 Advocates "Slapper" to Halt Terrorism. Nelson Daily News, September 16: 4.

Tarasoff, Koozma

- 1982 *Plakun Trava: the Doukhobors*. Grand Forks, BC: Mir Publication Society.

Victoria Daily Times

- 1955 "Why Make Children Suffer?" Douks Ask. February 19: 5.
 1955 Senators Slap Down McCarthy. June 22: 5.
 1955 Douk Mothers Ask Return of Children. June 22: 5.

Vancouver Province

- 1952 We Want a Permanent Cure. Editorial. May (n.d.).
 1953 Understand Douks' Religion, Anglican Archdeacon Urges. May (n.d.).
 1953 United Church Demands "Positive" Douk Solution. May (n.d.).

Vancouver Sun, The

- 1959 Doukhobor Mothers Happy But You'd Never Know It. August 2 (n.p).

Webster, Jack

- 1953 Why Not Lash Those Douks? Grand Forks Asks Wismer. Victoria Daily Times April 8. n.p.

Woodcock, George and Ivan Avakumovic

- 1977 *The Doukhobors*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Yerbury, J.C.

- 1984 The "Sons of Freedom" Doukhobors and the Canadian State. *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 16(2): 47-70.