

The Emigration of the Doukhobors

Leo Tolstoy

1898

A population of twelve thousand people - Christians of the Universal Brotherhood," as the Dukhobors, who live in the Caucasus, call themselves are at the present moment in the most distressing circumstances.

Without entering into argument as to who is right: whether it be the governments who consider that Christianity is compatible with prisons, executions, and above all, with wars and preparations for war ; or whether it be the Dukhobors, who acknowledge as binding only the Christian law (which renounces the use of any force whatever, and condemns murder), and who therefore refuse to serve in the army, one cannot fail to see that this controversy is very difficult to settle. No government could allow some people to shun duties which are being fulfilled by all the rest, and to undermine thereby the very basis of the State. The Dukhobors, on the other hand, cannot disregard that very law which they consider as divine, and, consequently, as supremely obligatory.

Governments have hitherto found a way out of this dilemma, either by compelling those who refuse military service (on account of their religious convictions) to fulfill other duties, more difficult, but not in conflict with their religious beliefs, as has been done, and is still being done, in Russia with the Mennonites (who are compelled to do the usual term of service at government works) ; or else the governments do not recognize the legality of a refusal for religious reasons, and punish those that fail to obey a general law of the State, by putting them into prison for the usual term of service, as is done in Austria with the Nazarenes. But the present Russian government has found yet a third way of treating the Dukhobors a way which one might have expected would be dispensed with in our time. Besides subjecting those that refuse military service to the most painful tortures, it systematically causes suffering to their fathers, mothers, and children, probably with the object of shaking by the tortures of these innocent families the resoluteness of the dissentients.

Not to mention the floggings, incarcerations, and every kind of tortures to which the Dukhobors who refused to serve in the army were subjected in the penal battalions, where many died, and their banishment to the worst parts of Siberia ; not to mention the two hundred reserves, who, during the course of two years, languished in prison, and are now separated from their families, and exiled, in pairs, to the wildest parts of the Caucasus, where, deprived of every opportunity of earning a living, they are literally dying of starvation, not to mention

these punishments of those guilty of having refused to serve in the army, the families of the Dukhobors are being systematically ruined and exterminated.

They are all deprived of the right to leave the place where they live, and are heavily fined and imprisoned for noncompliance with the strangest demands of the authorities ; for instance, for calling themselves by a different name from the one they are ordered to adopt, for fetching flour from a neighboring mill, for going from the village to a wood to gather fuel; a mother is even punished for visiting her son. And so the last resources of inhabitants formerly well-to-do are being quickly exhausted. In this way four hundred families have been expelled from their homes and settled in various Tartar and Georgian villages, where they, being obliged to pay for their lodgings and food, and not having any land or other means of subsistence, have found themselves in such difficult circumstances that in the course of the three years since their removal, the fourth part of them, mostly old people and children, have already died from want and disease.

It is difficult to imagine that such a systematic extermination of a whole population of twelve thousand people should enter into the plans of the Russian government. It is probable that the superior authorities are unaware of that which is in reality going on, and even if they suspect it, they would not desire to know the details, feeling that they ought not to allow such a state of things to continue, and yet at the same time recognizing that what is being done is necessary.

At all events, it is certain that the Caucasian administration has been during the last three years regularly torturing, not only those that refuse to serve in the army, but also their families, and that in the same systematic way it is ruining and starving to death all the Dukhobors who were exiled.

All petitions in favor of the Dukhobors, and any assistance rendered them, have hitherto only led to the banishment from Russia of those who have interceded in their behalf, and to the expulsion from the Caucasus of those who have attempted to help these victims. The Caucasian administration has surrounded with a kind of Chinese wall the whole of an unsubmissive population, and this population is gradually dying out ; another three or four years and probably not one of the Dukhobors will survive.

This would actually have happened, but for an incident, apparently unforeseen by the Caucasian government namely, when last year the dowager-empress, having come to the Caucasus on a visit to her son, the Dukhobors succeeded in submitting to her a petition, asking for permission to be settled all together in some remote place, and if this should be impossible, to allow them to emigrate. The empress handed over this petition to the superior authorities, and the latter acknowledged the possibility of allowing the Dukhobors to emigrate.

It seems as if the problem were now solved, and that a way has been found out of a position burdensome for both sides. This, however, is only apparently the case.

The Dukhobors are now in a position which makes it impossible for them to emigrate. At present they have not sufficient means to do so, and being confined within their villages, they are unable to make any preparations. Formerly they were well-to-do, but during the last few years the greater part of their means has been taken away from them by confiscations and fines, or has been spent in maintaining their exiled brethren. As they are not allowed to leave the vicinity of their homes, and as nobody is allowed to see them, there is no possibility whatever for them to confer and decide upon the way of emigrating. The following letter describes, better than anything else could do, the position in which the Dukhobors now find themselves.

This is what a man, highly respected among them, writes to me :

We inform you that we submitted a petition to her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Maria Feodorovna, who handed it over to the Senate. The result was the decree expressed in the enclosed official notification.

On February 10, I went to Tiflis, and there met our brother St. John;¹ but our meeting was of very short duration ; they soon arrested both of us. I was put into prison, and he was immediately expelled from Russia.

I intimated to the chief of police that I had come on business to the governor. He said : " We will first imprison you, and afterwards we will report you to the governor." On the 12th I was put into prison, and on the 13th I was taken to the governor, escorted by two soldiers. The chief clerk in the governor's office asked me, " Why were you arrested ? " I said, "I don't know." "Was it you who were in Signakh lately?" " Yes, I was there." " And what did you come here for ? " " I wish to see the governor ; last summer we submitted a petition to the Empress Maria Feodorovna during her stay at Abostuman. I received an answer to the petition through the head official of the Signakh district. I asked for a copy, but he refused, saying that he could not give one without the governor's permission and this is why I have now come here."

He announced me to the governor, the governor called me in, and I explained to him the position of affairs. He said : " Instead of seeing me you made haste to meet the Englishman." I replied : " The Englishman is also our brother."

The governor talked to me kindly, and advised us to emigrate as soon as possible; he added: "You can all go, except those of you who are liable to be summoned at the next call to military service."

He also gave orders for me to be released from prison, and sent back to Signakh. We are, just now, meeting in council, and, with God's help, we will try to prepare for our emigration to England or America. And in this matter we ask for your brotherly assistance.

As to the position of our brethren, we inform you that Peter Vasilyevitch Verigin² has been ordered to remain for another term of five years. The brethren in the province of Kars are still, as before, being fined at every opportunity ; they are still forbidden to leave their places of residence, and for noncompliance with this order they are put into prison for a term of one to two weeks. Diseases continue as before ; but there are fewer deaths. Material want is most acutely experienced by the brethren of the Signakh district ; those of the other districts, however, are somewhat better off.

And here is the official notification :

The Fasting Dukhobors,³ who were expelled in the year 1895 from the district of Akhalkalak, and transported into other districts of the government of Tiflis, having submitted a petition to her Imperial Majesty the Empress Maria Feodorovna, asking either to be grouped and settled in one place, and to be exempt from the duties of military service, or to be allowed to emigrate, the following instructions have been received :

1. The request for exemption from military service is refused.

¹ This is an ex-captain of the English army who took the Dukhobors some money collected for them in England.

² Verigin is one of their brethren who was at first banished to the government of Archangel, and afterwards to Siberia, and who is now for the eleventh year in exile.

³ The government thus designates those Dukhobors that have not consented to military service, and who also refrain from flesh foods.

2. The Fasting-Dukhobors with the exception, of course, of those that have reached the age at which they can be summoned to the duties of military service, and of those who have failed to fulfill those duties may emigrate under these conditions :
 - (a) That they provide themselves with a foreign passport, in accordance with the established order ;
 - (b) that they leave Russia at their own expense; and
 - (c) that before leaving they sign an agreement never to return within the borders of the empire, understanding that in the case of noncompliance with this last point the offender will be condemned to exile to remote places.

As to their request to be settled in one village, it is refused.

This notification is issued by order of the governor of Tiflis to one of the petitioning Fasting-Dukhobors, Vasili Potapof, in answer to his personal application.

TIFLIS, February 21, 1898.

People are permitted to emigrate, but they have previously been ruined, so that they have nothing to emigrate with, and the circumstances in which they find themselves are such as to render it absolutely impossible for them to know where to go and how to arrange the migration, and they are even unable to make use of the assistance extended to them from outside, since all those that attempt to help them are immediately expelled, and the Dukhobors themselves are put into prison for each absence from their homes.

Thus, if no assistance can be rendered them from outside, they will in the end be completely ruined, and will all die out, notwithstanding the permission given them to emigrate.

I happen to know the details of the persecutions and sufferings of these people ; I am in communication with them, and they ask me to help them. Therefore I consider it my duty to address myself to all good people, whether Russian or not Russian, asking them to help the Dukhobors out of the terrible position in which they now are. I have attempted to address myself, through the medium of a Russian newspaper, to the Russian public, but do not know as yet whether my appeal will be published or not ; and I now address myself once more to all sympathizers, asking for their assistance first, in the form of money, of which much will be needed for the removal to a distant place of ten thousand people ; and secondly, of advice and guidance in the difficulties of the coming emigration of people who do not understand any foreign language and have never left Russia before.

I trust that the leading authorities of the Russian government will not prevent such assistance from being rendered, and that they will check the excessive zeal of the Caucasian administration, which is, at the present moment, not admitting any communication whatever with the Dukhobors⁴

April 1, 1898.

⁴ Count Tolsto'i's appeal was heeded. A considerable sum of money was collected; the English and American Quakers with especial alacrity came to the aid of those who were persecuted for practicing the Quaker principles of nonresistance; a large tract of land was granted by the Dominion of Canada for their settlement. Ships were chartered to bring the exiles across the ocean, and finally, in the spring of 1899, the Dukhobors were landed on the shores of America and, like the Pilgrim fathers, given freedom to worship God in their own manner and to wrest a living from the abundant though latent resources of the as yet unbroken wilderness. ED.

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