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'I don't want to cry any more': Russian sect in Canada to get historic apology

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British Columbia to say sorry to Doukhobors for 'injustices' including residential schools that shattered pacifist community

Leyland Cecco in Toronto

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📷 A fence was built around the school in New Denver, preventing parents from hugging their children. Parents could only visit once every two weeks. Photograph: Lorraine Walton

Betty Kabatoff was eight years old when she was rushed from her home and taken into the mountains to hide from Canadian police. She and some other children slept under a shelter made from tree branches, but within days, a helicopter appeared overhead and they were forced to move on.

Kabatoff, a member of a pacifist sect of Russian immigrants known as the Doukhobors, was whisked from one location to another. Eventually she was hidden in a tunnel under her family home in the town of Krestova, British Columbia.

“And then one morning, there was screaming and hollering in the neighbourhood,” said Kabatoff, now 78. “The next thing I saw was somebody standing with black pants with a yellow stripe. They’d found us. I still can’t deal with cops to this day.”

Torn away from her parents, Kabatoff and nearly 200 other children from the group were sent to a residential school, where the government set about stripping away their Doukhobor identity. Few spoke English, but Russian was banned.

Some experienced mental, physical and sexual abuse – degradations that mirrored the experience of the [150,000 Indigenous children](#) forcibly converted

to Christianity, given new names, and prohibited from speaking their native languages in government and church-run residential schools. More than seven decades after what British Columbia acknowledges were “historic injustices”, the government will on Thursday formally apologize for the policies that shattered the Doukhobor community and left a legacy of hurt. Kabatoff will attend the first of three public apologies by BC officials with her husband, children and grandchildren.

“I don’t want to cry any more about this. I want to move forward,” she said.

Q&A

Who are the Doukhobors?

Originating in Russia, the Doukhobors are a Christian sect known for their radical pacifism and rejection of the Orthodox church. Facing accusations of heresy, they were exiled to the south Caucasus before many of them migrated at the beginning of the 20th century to Canada, where they established a communal lifestyle. In Canada, a minority grew increasingly distrustful of the public school system, concerned their children might be indoctrinated to support militarism. They also resisted government regulation of their communes, refusing to register births, deaths and marriages. This group came to be known as the Sons of Freedom, or Freedomites. Members of the group staged nude demonstrations, and used arson as a tool to protest what they saw as excessive materialism. The group also planted homemade bombs in buildings and at railway stations in British Columbia.

The Doukhobors – derisively dubbed “spirit wrestlers” by an Orthodox archbishop for their perceived heresy – were expelled from Russia in the late 1800s for their radical pacifist ideologies and rejection of church dogma. The novelist Leo Tolstoy led a fundraising campaign that helped nearly 8,000 move to [Canada](#), where many eventually settled in British Columbia.

But the communal, self-sufficient nature of the Doukhobor lifestyle – and their distinct religious beliefs and practices – provoked concern among Canadian officials. Members of the group eschewed material wealth, were staunch pacifists and believed the Bible was more akin to a historical document than a holy text.

Divisions also opened up within the community. Some Doukhobors grew distrustful of public schools, fearing their children would be indoctrinated into militarism. They also opposed rules around land ownership and refused to register births, deaths and marriages in the community.

A breakaway group, known as the Sons of Freedom, began a campaign of nude protests, arson and public bombings, to protest against government policies and regulation.

In the 1930s, more than 500 Doukhobors within the Sons of Freedom (SOF) movement were arrested and sent to a prison on Vancouver Island. “Island colony of nudists forms Canada’s queerest prison,” ran a headline at the time, above a story referring to the group as a “communist vegetarian cult”.



Operation Snatch in 1955. Photograph: Lorraine Walton

By the 1950s, the SOF numbered roughly 2,500 and British Columbia decided to take a harder line, granting police the power to detain anyone under 18 who

was not in school. In 1953, nearly 100 children were seized after SOF parents staged a nude protest near a school.

With fear spreading through the community, the remaining children were hidden by relatives and neighbours. In response, police deployed nearly 70 officers for Operation Snatch, a night-time raid on Krestova in which 40 more children were seized.

“My mother was eight years old when she was finally caught. Police broke in and pulled her through a window at four in the morning,” said Lorraine Walton. “My grandmother pleaded with the police to at least allow her to get dressed. And then they walked her to a police car.”

Between 1953 and 1959, about 200 children, including both of Walton’s parents, were taken from their homes and delivered to a school in a former tuberculosis sanatorium.

“At the school, we were punished and abused. I didn’t know any English but we were forbidden from speaking Russian. Each time I’d say a Russian word, I had to put my hands out and was hit,” said Kabatoff. Seventy years later, her hands still tremble from the abuse.

Canada’s use of residential schools to [strip away a child’s culture and language](#) was already an established policy when it came to the country’s Indigenous population. Over decades, groups representing survivors have successfully fought for compensation and formal apologies, but full accountability for the perpetrators of abuse remains elusive.

The Doukhobor history is less well-known.

“People put it in the closet, they never told their kids. They were ashamed, scared and embarrassed to talk about the hurt,” said Kabatoff. “This is why it has to be brought out in the open. That’s the only way to heal.”

Soon after Kabatoff arrived at the school, a chain-link fence was thrown up around the perimeter, and children were only permitted to see their parents through the wires, once every other week.

“When they put the fence up, I could no longer embrace my mother,” she said.



Two hundred children were sent to the residential school in New Denver, including brothers Eddie and Larry Podovennikoff. Photograph: Lorraine Walton

In recent years, survivors have testified about mental, physical and sexual abuse within the school. In 1999, [British Columbia's ombudsman](#) concluded that "an unconditional, clear and public apology" – as well as compensation – was owed to the children.

"These children were victim of a situation not of their making nor within their control. They were caught in a web of conflicting values and political turmoil involving their parents, religious leaders, police and government," the report said.

But the government only issued a "statement of regret" in 2004, declining to formally apologize.

"I just want to know: why did they punish me as a child? It's left such a big scar," said Kabatoff. "I don't ever want to see another child go through what I did. That's why this apology would mean so much to me. I would like to put

everything behind me.” In November, after decades of lobbying, Doukhobor advocates were told an apology was imminent, but given less than a day’s notice. Then, at the last moment, the event was abruptly canceled when officials realized few survivors would be present.

“It’s an example of a government with all good intentions wanting to move forward, and losing track of making sure that it is done right,” the provincial premier, David Eby, said at the time. “We are going to do things right, and sometimes that means recognizing when you are screwing up, and this was one of those occasions.”

On Thursday, the province will finally make the first of three public apologies, at an event in the city of Castlegar.

The government’s attempts to extinguish Doukhobor identity failed, said Walton, spokesperson for the Lost Voices of New Denver advocacy group. But the efforts nonetheless left a trail of anguish.

“When those survivors are present for the apology, they might be adults, but they are still children inside, and they’re hurting,” said Walton. “And it’s time for them to move forward, for the government to admit it made a mistake, and to show the survivors who have suffered that they should have been treated like humans.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/31/canada-apology-doukhobor-russia-british-columbia>

Shows the mentality at play here, I think. To put it as nicely as possible—and to gloss over gross insensitivity and benighted self-righteousness—not the most enlightened of times and people.” The callousness of the ruling mindset is cruel and shameful. But they would say they “had to do something,” and were “left with no alternative.”

Shows too, I guess, that the Doukhobors and Mr. Tolstoy were mistaken if they thought Canadians would be much better than feudal Russians. As a Canadian nation took shape, the same homogenizing tendencies set in.

It didn’t help, I’m sure, that the Sons of Freedom (SOF) started protesting naked. Whatever the SOF rationale, this just struck the mainstream public as silly and laughable, evidence of the “derangement” or “stupidity” of Doukhobors. “How could these people be taken seriously?” Other pacifists (Hutterians, some Mennonites), it seems, avoided, escaped, or were spared similar fates.

TJB