Appeal on Behalf of the Dukhobors
by Leo Tolstoy

A population of twelve thousand men, the Christians of the Universal Brotherhood (as the Dukhobors now living in the Caucasus call themselves), is in a terrible plight at the present time.

Governments recognize the compatibility of Christianity with prisons, executions, and, above all, wars and preparations for them. The Dukhobors recognize the obligatoriness of the Christian law, which denies every form of violence, and, moreover, every murder, and so refuse to do military service. Without entering into discussions as to who is right, we cannot help but see that this contradiction is very hard to solve. No government can permit people to shirk duties that are fulfilled by everyone, thus undermining the foundations of the state, while the Dukhobors, on their side, cannot reject a law that they consider divine and, therefore, obligatory in their lives.

So far the governments have found two ways out from this contradiction. Some governments make those who refuse military service out of religious conviction do harder duties than those of military service, but such as are not opposed to their religious convictions. This has been done in Russia in relation to the Mennonites, who are made to pass the time of military service in some work for the Crown. Other governments, not recognizing the legality of religious refusal, punish those who do not fulfill the common law of the state with imprisonment for the period of their service, as is being done with the Nazarenes in Austria. But the present Russian government has used a third way out from this contradiction against the Dukhobors, which, it would seem, was abandoned long ago. It not only subjects the refusers to the most painful sufferings, but also systematically causes pain to the fathers, mothers, and children of those who refuse, in all probability intending to shake the determination of the recalcitrants with the torture of their innocent families.

The Dukhobors have been subjected to floggings, incarcerations, and all kinds of tortures in the disciplinary battalions, from which many have died. They have been deported to the worst places in Siberia. Two hundred reservists pined away in prisons for two years, are now separated from their families, and are sent away in pairs to the wildest parts of the Caucasus where, earning no livelihood, they literally starve to death. These punishments are meted out to those who are directly guilty of refusing to do military service, and yet the families of these Dukhobors are systematically ruined and destroyed. They are all deprived of the right to leave their communities, and are specially fined and locked up in prisons for not fulfilling the strangest demands of the authorities: for not calling themselves by the names they are commanded to give themselves, for going to the mill, for visiting one’s own mother, for going from the village to the woods to collect fuel, and the like. The last means of these once wealthy people are soon exhausted by this harassment. Four hundred families, who were deported from their homes and were settled in Tartar and in Georgian villages, had to rent themselves houses and support themselves with their own money, having no land and no income, and are in such hard straits.
that, in the three years since their deportation, one-fourth of them, especially their old men and children, have died from want and from diseases.

It is hard to believe that such a systematic annihilation of a whole population of twelve thousand people should enter into the plans of the Russian government. It is very likely that the higher authorities do not know what is going on in reality, or, if they guess it, do not wish to know the details, feeling that they cannot admit the continuation of such acts, even though what is being done is what they want to be done.

But it is incontestable that, in the course of the last three years, the authorities in the Caucasus have not only tormented those who refused, but also their families, and just as systematically have ruined all the Dukhobors and have starved to death those who have been deported. All the interest in the Dukhobors and every aid sent to them have only brought about the expulsion from Russia of those who have attempted to help the Dukhobors. The government of the Caucasus has surrounded the whole recalcitrant population with a magic circle, and this population is slowly dying out. Three or four years more, and nothing will be left of these Dukhobors.

Thus it would be, if an event had not occurred that evidently was not foreseen by the authorities in the Caucasus. Last year the dowager empress visited her son in the Caucasus, when the Dukhobors succeeded in handing her a petition, in which they asked to be permitted to emigrate in a body to some distant place, and if that could not be, to emigrate abroad. The empress transmitted the petition to the highest authorities, and the highest authorities found it possible to permit the Dukhobors to leave Russia.

It would seem that the question was solved and that a way out was found from a situation that was oppressive for both sides. But that only seemed so.

In the situation in which the Dukhobors are now, emigration is impossible for them. They have no means for this, and, being shut up in their places of deportation, they are unable to attend to this matter. They were wealthy, but in recent years the greater part of their means has been taken from them by the courts and has been used up in the support of their deported brothers. They have no way of discussing matters in common and settling upon the conditions of their emigration, since they are not allowed to leave their communities and no one is allowed to visit them.

The people are allowed to leave, but they have been previously ruined so that they have no means for their journey. The conditions under which they live are such that they are unable to find out anything about places to emigrate to, and how and under what conditions they can do so. They are even unable to make use of outside help, since the men who want to help them are immediately expelled, and they are put in prison if they leave to meet with potential benefactors. Thus, if these men receive no aid from abroad, they will be completely ruined and will all die out, in spite of the permission to emigrate.

I accidentally know the details of the persecutions and sufferings of these people and am in communication with them. They have asked me to help them, and so I consider it my duty to address all good people, both of Russian and of European society, asking them to help the Dukhobors to get out of that painful situation in which they now are. I have addressed an appeal to Russian society through a Russian newspaper, but I do not know yet whether or not my appeal will be printed. I now address all the good people of the English and American nations, asking for their aid. In the first place, I ask for financial assistance, since a great deal of money is
needed for the transportation of ten thousand people over a long distance.\footnote{Transcriber’s note – This emigration began in 1899 and continued for several years. Tolstoy arranged for the royalties from some of his writings to go toward the emigration, and, together with money raised from wealthy friends, his efforts provided half of the necessary funds.} In the second place, I ask for direct guidance in overcoming the difficulties of the emigration of a people who do not know any languages and have never been outside of Russia.

I assume that the highest Russian authorities will not interfere with such aid and will temper the zeal of the government in the Caucasus, which now allows no communication with the Dukhobors. Until then I offer my mediation between the people who wish to aid the Dukhobors and enter into relations with them, since my relations with them have so far never been interrupted.

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