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Song Traditions of the Doukhobors: Commemorating the Past, Constructing the Future

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Stephanie Landucci

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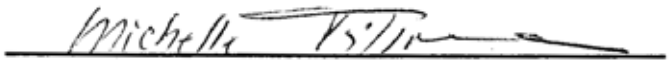

Dr. Michelle Fillion, Thesis Director

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Introduction

As a Canadian minority, Doukhobors take their place among the most misunderstood and neglected sects that make up the intricate cultural mosaic of our country. Frequently dismissed as ignorant peasants, nudists, or even terrorists, Doukhobors are often painted in an unflattering light in newspaper articles and documentaries focusing primarily an the sensationalist deeds of a radical few. Rarely are three industrious people acknowledged for their simple, idealistic message of brotherly love, family values, community and compassion. Nowhere are these ideals more apparent than in the tradition of Doukhobor song. An integral part of Doukhobor cultural identity, the large body of religious music regularly performed in Doukhobor communities conveys the strength and perseverance of its creators through haunting harmonies and powerful texts. At prayer meetings (or molenye), psalm-singing takes centre-stage as a vehicle for worship and spiritual communion. Indeed, at every Doukhobor gathering, event, and celebration, group singing functions both as a tool of unification and solidarity, and as a means of cultural preservation.

The study and analysis of Doukhobor song traditions presents a formidable challenge to the musicologist. Since Doukhobor singing relies entirely upon oral transmission of fixed melodic material and the expectation of an improvisatory harmonic framework, accurate transcriptions are difficult to obtain. The extensive Doukhobor choral repertoire can be divided into three distinct genres: psalms, hymns (*stikhi*), and folk songs (*pesni*). This study focuses on the psalm and hymn repertoire, omitting an examination of the pesni in the interests of time and topical relevance. Unfortunately, the pesni have received the least amount of attention from Doukhobor scholars, and remain an untapped source of information and discovery, to be explored at a later time.

From a musicological standpoint, Doukhobor psalmody is of particular interest. Characterized by slow, often laborious tempi, mournful melodies and extremely protracted combine pious texts and haunting tunes to produce an aural depiction of Doukhobor ideals. Syllables stretched over multiple pitches colour the psalms with a poignant, contemplative air, indicative of the plainchant aesthetic to which these peculiar pieces owe their heritage.

In modern practice, a complete psalm text will be recited by a member of the assembly before the psalm is sung. Typically, the singing of most psalms is abbreviated to include only the first few stanzas, sentences, or poetic ideas. Psalm texts are often direct or paraphrased Biblical quotations, and contain the doctrinal building-blocks of the Doukhobor faith.

In contrast to the doleful prosody of the psalms, hymn texts are most often comprised of poetic, four-line stanzas, with last two lines of each stanza sung as a refrain. Hymn texts are drawn from a variety of sources, including the poetry of Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) and other prominent Russian writers, as well as the prolific Doukhobor hymnodist, Ivan Sysoev (1894-1967). Subject matter spans a plethora of topics, and may range from prayerful contemplation or codes of spiritual conduct to historical allegory, honouring major events and leaders in Doukhobor history. Unlike the psalms, hymns are strophic and are usually performed in their entirety, albeit at a much faster, livelier tempo. Harmonic progressions are tonal (almost always adhering to a I-IV-V-I framework), and modality is limited, if it is employed at all. Melodies of both the psalms and hymns remain constant from generation to generation, but an absence of notated music allows for a wide range of harmonic variables. The fascinating and often improvisatory harmonies of both the psalms and hymns, resulting from the ever-changing practices of oral tradition, form the Basis for the musical analysis conducted in this paper.

In his article, "Changing Faces of Doukhobor Culture", Larry Ewashen explains that "Doukhobor culture expanded from a capella singing...to a level embracing all the modern means of communication and preservation as they became available." [1] Ewashen's decision to begin his cultural chronology with a mention of Doukhobor singing practices is telling, for it unwittingly serves to illustrate the significance of song in defining and shaping the tenets of Doukhoborism. For the Doukhobor of today, song traditions, and the powerful feeling of atavistic connectivity produced in the reenactment of such rituals, are the primary means through which cultural identity is defined, enforced and proliferated.

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[1] Larry Ewashen, "Changing Faces of Doukhobor Culture," in Doukhobor Centenary in Canada, eds. Donskov, Andrew et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995), 360.

This paper attempts to discover the ways in which Doukhobor sacred song reveals the sociological and cultural factors responsible for its creation. A thorough recounting of Doukhobor history, supplemented by relevant musical and textual examples, illustrates the ways in which song tradition has functioned as an indispensable tool of historical commemoration and as an ideological reinforcement for displaced and persecuted Doukhobors throughout history. This study is indebted to the ground-breaking work of historians and ethnomusicologists including Eli Popoff, Mark Mealing, Shirley Perry and Kenneth Peacock, as well as the existing transcriptions of this essentially oral tradition.2 A discussion of the fundamental tenets and at times contradictory beliefs of Doukhoborism is supplemented by an examination of textual examples and leads to a study of the importance of ancestral language in ritual and tradition. Several text collections have been instrumental in this regard. The 1978 publication of the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, "Doukhobor Psalms, Hymns and Songs", (or *sbornik*, in the colloquial), heralded the First definitive, thorough collection of more than 700 sacred and spiritual Doukhobor texts. Published entirely in Cyrillic, the sbornik is still regarded as the most important source of its kind today, and is occasionally supplemented by the U.S.C.C.'s 2001 Sunday School collection, "Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing". This modest book, published in both Russian and English, affords young Doukhobors access to the traditions of their faith and culture through explanatory passages and text translations of the most popular psalms, hymns and folk songs. In addition to these primary sources, field interviews conducted which several members of the British Columbia Doukhobor community confirm the importance of song traditions among the Doukhobors of today.[3] The paper concludes which a description of specific genres and performance practices facilitating an examination of the Doukhobor concept of 'memory', and finally, offering suggestions as to how cultural preservation might continue through established traditions of music.

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[2] Kenneth Peacock, Songs of the Doukhobors: An Introductory Outline. (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1970).

[3] Approval for interview sessions has been granted by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board. Please see appendix.

"We have lived and dwelt on Mother Earth ": Historical Background of the Doukhobor Faith

Although Doukhoborism was not recognized as an actual religious denomination until well into the eighteenth century, the movement can trace its origins back as far as 1471, when government documents reveal the existence of dissenting peasants in Novogorod, dissatisfied with the ritualistic trappings of church and state. Two hundred years later, in the period 1675 -1691, fanatics embracing the radical propaganda of the prominent schismatic Daniel Phillipov bumed themselves alive in their homes, in an act of defiance against an oppressive government. This horrific incident is regarded by some scholars as a ritualistic reenactment of the Biblical plight of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the blessed Isrealite youths chosen by God, and saved from the fiery furnace by Christ.[4]

During the late sixteenth century, iconoclasts rose to prominence in the Russian provinces of Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav, and, most notably, the Tambov region. Following the guidance of a charismatic leader, Pobirokhin, the first Doukhobors adopted as their own the ideals of Phillipov, thereby formally declaring their distaste for the constructs of religious authority. One of the earliest Doukhobor hymns, "A young man was walking," recounts Phillipov's rejection of Orthodoxy, thus revealing the importance of his teachings to the Doukhobor faith:

> A young man was walking,
> And as he passed he wept profusely,
> Letting forth sorrowful sighs.
> Jesus Christ Himself met him and asked
> "Why are you weeping, young man?"
> "How can I help weeping?
> I have lost the golden book,
> I have dropped the church key into the sea."

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[4] Although Doukhobor psalmody makes frequent mention of the concept of God's persecuted elect (as the following examples demonstrate), an actual reference to the Shadrach tale is at best implied: "Angels of God came for this Israelite soul; they lifted the soul with singing, carried the soul to Christ himself' (Peacock 40); "A Doukhobor is one whom Christ has chosen for the continued embodiment of his Spirit" (Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ 41); "It [a community] was brought into being by the Righteous Lord, and ... his faithful, His chosen, the selected ones out of all nations" (Perry 110).

"Do not weep any more, young man;
I shall write out another golden book,
I shall cause the blue sea to dry up,
And recover the church key,
And I shall put you on the road of truth." [5]

The growing prominence of peasant dissenters was met with severe opposition from Russian authorities. In 1785, Archbishop Ambrosius dubbed this troublesome group Doukhobortsi, or 'Spirit Wrestlers'. Although meant as a derogatory label, the sect embraced the name, claiming that they were indeed Spirit Wrestlers, since they wrestled against injustice, not by the power of carnal weapons, but by the power of love and goodness.[6] Perhaps ironically, it was this attempted condemnation from the Orthodox Church that lent Doukhoborism the Impetus it required to form a solid movement.

The First of many barrages of persecution, torture and exile began in the late eighteenth century. Doukhobors refusing to recognize the authority of the Tsar were relocated to the harsh Siberian tundra, where many languished and died in prison camps. Temporary relief came at the accession of Alexander I in 1801. The new Tsar, sympathetic to the cause of those simple, stalwart peasants, allotted the oppressed Doukhobors land in the fertile Milky Waters region of Tavria. It was hoped that here they might live in communal isolation, free from the dictates of authority. The Milky Waters community thrived under the leadership of Saveli Kapustin, an able orator who, it is said, "instituted the form of prayer worship that is still practiced; that is, the singing and reciting of psalms and the bowing to each other."[7]

The welcome respite of the Milky Waters proved a short-lived one for the early Doukhobors. Alexander's successor, Nicholas I (1825-1855), showed little mercy to those who did not respect his exalted position. The Doukhobors faced a second relocation, this time to the barren terrain and bitter weather of the Caucasus region.

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[5] Peacock, Introductory Outline, 39.
[6] Peter Legebokoff, "Introduction," Sound Heritage 4 (1977): 12.
[7] Eli Popoff, An Historical Exposition on the Origin and Evolvement of the Basic Tenets of the Doukhobor Life-Conception (Ottawa: National Museum of Ottawa, 1964), 14.

In 1887, the leadership of the Doukhobors passed to the revered Peter "The Lordly" Verigin (or *Gospodni*). Groomed from a tender age by the widowed leader Lukeria Kalmakova, Peter the Lordly proved himself the most influential leader in Doukhobor history. He is venerated to this day among the Doukhobor communities of Canada, both for his exceptional intelligence and communicative skills, and his natural leadership abilities. Many psalms and hymns, including "In the Garden of Gethsemane," are associated with his memory. It is telling that, in his "Historical Exposition on Doukhobor Beliefs," the renowned Doukhobor historian, Eli Popoff, makes mention of the fact that "The Lordly studiously learned all the psalms from memory that his mother taught him orally." [8] Clearly, an intuitive familiarity with and understanding of traditional psalmody is, in the Doukhobor estimation, a mandatory characteristic of strong spiritual leadership.

Peter the Lordly worked fervently to instill a strong sense of morality among his people. After his arrest and subsequent exile to Siberia, he continued to communicate his wishes through letters addressed to his followers. In addition to a denial of church and state, Peter the Lordly espoused ideals of sobriety, vegetarianism, and pacifism. It was he who, in 1895, ordered the mass Burning of Arms in the Kavkaz, as a resolute protest against the taking of all life. The popular hymn "It was in the Kavkaz Mountains" commemorates this revolutionary event.

News of the Arms Burning garnered international interest. Inspired by the Doukhobor message of "Toil and Peaceful Life," [9] the celebrated Russian author Leo Tolstoy began a fervent correspondence with Verigin. An idealistic belief in unity and brotherly love pervades the rhetoric of the letters exchanged between the two visionaries from 1896 onward. Tolstoy told Verigin that "to do God's will, to establish His kingdom an earth, people must be united among themselves", while Verigin concurred in his reply, "God is manifested in the unity of human hearts." [10] This mutual

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[8] Popoff, Historical Exposition, 16.
[9] Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing (Trail, British Columbia: Hall Printing, 2001), 24.
[10] Lidia Gromova, "Lev Tolstoy and Peter Verigin" in Doukhobor Centenary in Canada, eds. Donskov, Andrew et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995), 161.

belief in the physical and spiritual unification of humankind finds an artistic representation in the mass choral singing of the Doukhobors.

The Tolstoy-Verigin correspondence continued enthusiastically for several years, eventually culminating in arrangements for the migration of the Doukhobor people to the political haven of Canada. Thus, in 1899, the first shiploads of Doukhobors departed from a homeland for which they would forever feel a conflicting sense of abhorrence and longing.

"*Our haven of refuge": Toil and Peaceful Life in Canada*

When Peter the Lordly arrived in Canada in 1902, he found the Doukhobors already established on the Prairies, and demonstrating their capability as self-sufficient settlers. Initially lacking farming machinery or livestock, they had succeeded in constructing their villages from virtually nothing, and living communally an government-allotted lands. Throughout these early, trying days, the Doukhobor settlers drew strength from the haunting melodies and powerful texts of their traditional songs. In George Woodcock's study, "The Doukhobors", an early visitor to the new villages makes mention of the industrious work ethic of these settlers, remarking, "All through the summer days, working by relays from dawn to dusk, they trudge over the prairie, inspired by the eerie harmonies of their own singing." [11] Certainly, singing together served to relieve the monotony of daily physical labour. On a deeper level, however, the reenactment of ancestral ritual became a source of collective strength in adversity, and a solemn commemoration of the Doukhobor homeland. Traditional singing also functioned as an important educational tool. While touring the Doukhobor settlements in 1901, the Quaker author, Joseph Elkinton, noted in his memoirs that an elderly Doukhobor man of the village of Poterpevshe, responsible for the education of the young Doukhobors, "gathered the children around him, and taught them the hymns which formed so important a part of their education".[12] Although the prospect of mandatory government schooling

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[11] George Woodcock, The Doukhobors (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), 163.

[12] Joseph Elkinton, The Doukhobors (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, Publishers, 1903), 61.

importantly, the following example, composed in 1925, during the period of anticipation prior to The Purger's migration from Russia to assume his leadership duties:

> We're awaiting you, our
> Saviour, From your homeland,
> come to us: It's so lonely, our
> dear teacher, In this strange
> land without you.
> Soon he will come
> And bring us peace. [14]

This example is of particular interest for several reasons. It demonstrates the curious contradiction of undaunted faith in Doukhobor leadership, despite a purported rejection of authority. Moreover, the desperate tone of the first stanza reveals a desire for guidance resulting from displacement anxiety, and, in a deeper level, an underlying belief in ideals transmitted from the ancestral land. In her anthropological study of the Doukhobor consciousness, Julie Rak confirms the notion of musical expression as a means of cultural commemoration, suggesting that Doukhobor psalms and hymns might function as a sacred memory of migration experiences. [15] Certainly, the above example supports this conclusion.

"From the beginning of time till now ": Canadian Doukhobors Today

The estimated 30,000 Canadian Doukhobors of today form a diverse and geographically divided minority, with the greatest concentration of the population dwelling in the Kootenay regions of British Columbia. Although no longer reliant upon the presence of a spiritual leader, the Doukhobors recognize the importance of the current chairman of the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ and a direct descendant of *Gospodni*, John J. Verigin. Verigin and his son, J.J. Verigin Jr., assume active leadership roles in the community through regular public speaking, fundraising and outreach work, and yearly involvement in the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ Cultural Festival, held in Castlegar each May. The main activity at such Festival weekends

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[14] Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, *Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing*, 79-80.
[15] Julie Rak, *"Vechnaja Pamjat in the Diaspora: Community Doukhobor Autobiography,"* in Doukhobor Centenary in Canada, eds. Donskov, Andrew et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995), 329.

centres almost exclusively around choral performance. Choirs from various regions of British Columbia (and occasionally as far away as Saskatchewan), gather together to celebrate collectively the uniqueness of their cultural identity through the sharing of traditional songs. Despite a marked change in the Doukhobor way of life over the last fifty years, group singing and oral traditions still survive as the primary means of solidarity across geographic and generational gaps. As Shirley Perry affirms, "Doukhobors sing whenever they gather together to celebrate or commemorate life." [16] Before examining the unique traits of Doukhobor song, a discussion of the fundamental spiritual beliefs of Doukhoborism will serve to clarify the reasons for specific methods and performance practices.

"The holy temple of the living God ": Spiritual Beliefs of the Doukhobors

Although the spiritual origin of Doukhoborism remains unclear, the movement bears some similarities to the ideas of the German Anabaptists and other revolutionary sects. It is also entirely likely that many revolutionary ideas may have filtered into the Milky Waters region by way of the Ukraine. (Evidence of this supposition can be found in the Doukhobor habit of softening the hard "guh" consonant of the Muscovite Russian to a soft "huh" sound, similar to a Ukrainian dialect.) Despite extreme permutations in Doukhobor ideals during the last two centuries, the fundamental core of the movement has managed to remain intact, preserved from corruption through the oral transmission of song content. Crucial to the Doukhobor vision are the notions of brotherly love and a limitless respect for life, inspired by the concept of the spirit of God dwelling in each living thing. Doukhobors are adamantly opposed to weapons, violence and military service, and have, since the 1895 Burning of Arms, rallied for the cessation of all violence and oppression an earth. In fact, in interview sessions conducted for this paper, all subjects cited pacifism and kindness toward others as the primary ways in which they enact the ideals of Doukhoborism in their daily

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[16] Shirley Perry, "The Importance of Song in Doukhobor Life," in Doukhobor Centenary in Canada, eds. Donskov, Andrew et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995), 351.

lives. These responses demonstrate that the pacifist beliefs of their forebears have had a direct and lasting influence an the Doukhobors of today.

The following textual example, "Let us honour peace and freedom's triumph," has been selected from countless hymns devoted to this topic as a succinct musical affirmation of Doukhobor pacifist ideals:

> Let us honour peace, and freedom's triumph,
> Over strife and age-old hate aflame;
> World-wide brotherhood is now the answer; Love, forgiveness, let us all proclaim. We'll assemble as one human family,
> And create a brotherhood of man.
> Toil and Peace shall be our foremost emblem;
> Love shall reign, supreme in all the land. [17]

Since its composition in 1930, this hymn has remained a central fixture of the Doukhobor spiritual repertoire, and is regularly performed at festivals, community meetings and peace rallies, often concluding the proceedings. The second stanza shown is now commonly sung in English, perhaps as a means of ensuring the accessibility of its message to a wider audience, or to younger generations whose grasp of the Russian language is rudimentary at best. The pivotal role that this piece plays in communal gatherings signifies the fundamental importance of pacificism to the Doukhobor consciousness.

In addition to the ideals of friendship and tolerance, Doukhoborism espouses a fervent desire for a direct dialogue with God, unencumbered by the material trappings and fallible structures of the Orthodox Church. Rejection of Scripture reading is a central fixture of Doukhobor belief systems; although curiously, it is most often explained by a contradictory reference to the Paulian text, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." 18 The hierarchical institution of the priesthood is considered superfluous, for the Doukhobor does not recognize the authority of any one man over another, particularly in matters of religion. Clerics are, therefore, rendered ineffectual in the process of

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[17] Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing, 74.

[18] Popoff, Historical Exposition, 12.

communicating with the Holy Spirit, which the Doukhobors regard as a kind of Supreme Wisdom, spread everywhere without an independent existence.[19] The physical constructs of Orthodoxy, including church buildings, elaborate raiments and icons, are also rejected for their dazzling and garish properties, and are considered barriers to the soul's direct communion with God. The symbol of the cross, in particular, is met with disdain, since the Doukhobors claim that Christ's true mission an earth was not to redeem, but to teach. An acknowledgment of Jesus' death as a penance for the sins of the world is considered a convenient means of dismissing individual responsibility. Moreover, Doukhobors do not acknowledge the Trinity as three separate spiritual entities emanating from one source. Instead, the Trinity is regarded as three blessings given to man by God: the Son is perceived as wisdom, the Spirit as will, while the Father is always associated with memory. [20]

"I shall tell to all the story" Doukhobor Treatment of Song Texts

Despite a purported aversion to Biblical texts, it cannot be denied that many ideas found in Doukhobor psalms and hymns trace their origins back to specific Scripture passages, some even directly quoting or paraphrasing certain Bible verses. The popular hymn, "Brothers, all Rejoice!" has recently garnered a significant amount of attention from the Doukhobor community for blatant references to Biblical passages. Lyrics such as "In the Book of Life he has written our names with his own hand", [21] directly correspond to Revelation 21:17, "but they which are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.", [22] as well as Malachi 3:16, "and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord." [23] More distressing to the Doukhobors of today is the repeated refrain, "We are saved by the blood of Christ", [24] which appears to be an obvious contradiction of the Doukhobor belief in the nature of Jesus and his mission among men. Some choirs have even

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[19] Svetlana Inikova, "Spiritual Origins and Beginnings of Doukhobor History," in Doukhobor Centenary in Canada, eds. Donskov, Andrew et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995), 7.
[20] Inikova B.
[21] Anna Markova and Peter Legebokoff, eds. Doukhobor Psalms, Hymns and Songs (Grand Forks, British Columbia: Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, 1978), 215.
[22] Rev. 21:17 KN 2s Mal. 3.16 KN 24 Markova, Psalms, Hymns and Songs, 216.

gone so far as to reject the literal translation of these lines, opting instead to replace the inflammatory "blood of Christ" with the ambiguous "Christ's eternal love."

Although puzzling at first, the seemingly paradoxical attitude of the Doukhobors toward Biblical texts is most readily explained by the catechetical psalm, "What manner of person art thou?" In this lengthy examination, the interrogator (presumably an authority figure) asks, "Do you have a New Testament in your midst?", to which the interlocutor (the persecuted Doukhobor) responds, "We have. Christ hath said: 'I myself am the New Testament to you, and the Light to the whole world'." [25] Thus, it may be inferred that Doukhobors are less resistant to the Bible than to its direct associations with the perceived fallibility of the Orthodox Church.

As part of the cultural cargo to cross the Atlantic in 1899, the Doukhobor dialect, an archaic peasant tongue with noticeable hints of Ukrainian influence, has remained relatively intact to this the Muscovite tongue. Therefore, the antiquated dialect of Doukhobor psalms and hymns remains a linguistic heirloom for Doukhobors of today; but one which, upon a closer inspection, is revealed as an esoteric and often overlooked treasure.

The peculiar ambiguity of the Doukhobor attitude toward song texts gives rise to the question of the importance of linguistic meaning to the collective singing experience. Interview sessions revealed a surprising lack of knowledge on the topic, with most respondents claiming only a vague acquaintance with the meaning behind the words they regularly intone. One particular young Doukhobor claimed that he often does not pay attention to the texts he sings, since, while singing, he is "lost in the soul communion with [his] fellow singers." He went on to cite the case of "Brothers, All Rejoice!", admitting that since several concepts presented in the Song are "too close to the things of the Church which the Doukhobors have rejected", he would prefer not to pay attention to the words at all. It can be inferred, therefore, that for this Doukhobor and many like him, the process of singing together in the language of ancestry, regardless of fluency, is often the primary focus of the

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[25] Popoff, Historical Exposition, 38.

Doukhobor spirituality. Other respondents echo this view, in statements such as "It's not so much the words, it's the experience of it that's important", and "It's more about the singing than the knowing. You're praying to God." [26]

From these responses, it will become clear that the experience of forming the sounds of an arcane Russian dialect has more resonance for Doukhobors than the actual meaning behind these sounds. Every respondent surveyed claimed that, if the psalms and hymns were to be performed in English, they would immediately lose their spiritual and cultural impact. One subject claims, "There are certain expressions or cadences that...are unique to one's language... many of the harmonies and melodies become more stirring when they are sung in Russian." Additionally, a belief in the preservation of the Russian language as a vehicle for the commemoration of one's elders can be detected in individual interview sessions. When questioned as to the importance of the Russian language to Doukhobor song, a young respondent stated, "I picture my Baba [grandmother] singing it, and I can't picture her singing in English". [27]

It is evident from the interview data presented above that, although the texts of Doukhobor psalms and hymns do exist as important doctrinal statements, the act of creating such statements which others, and ultimately honouring the elders from whom such statements originated, is regarded by the Doukhobor consciousness as the primary function of ritualistic singing. Before examining the repertoire which forms the basis of Doukhobor beliefs, it is necessary to discuss the methodology employed in the practice of Doukhobor choral singing.

`*Zhivotnaja Kniga': The Living Book and its Musical Legacy*

The rejection of the written word, arising from an aversion to convoluted Biblical passages and misinterpreted Scriptures, permeates the Doukhobor treatment of traditional music. Initially, Doukhobors did not agree with the notation of their music at all, preferring instead to commit the tunes and texts of their sacred songs to memory. When asked to

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[26] Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.

[27] Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.

justify the rejection of written music, a Doukhobor is likely to respond with the celebrated adage, "Write it on the heart, reveal it through the mouth." [28] Thus, the personal archive of psalms tunes and hymns penned upon each individual heart is referred to as *Zhivotnaja Kniga*, or "The Living Book". An extant antithesis of the 'dead' words of the Bible, The Living Book is imbued with the vitality of those who possess it, and passed on by oral transmission to subsequent generations. During interview sessions with young Doukhobors aged twenty to twenty-eight, it was revealed that those who had had a life-long exposure to cultural singing traditions were able to recall between twenty and forty spiritual song tunes with confidence. [29]

The Doukhobor attitude toward text preservation is somewhat less rigid. Since the language of most psalms and a great majority of older hymns is considered obscure, Doukhobors have always accepted and regularly employed text collections published for the benefit of choral performance. Despite the fervent protestations of old, threats of social assimilation and the possible loss of precious cultural gems have served to mollify attitudes toward musical notation. Doukhobors of today have begun to recognize the need for visual preservation of their musical heritage, acknowledging the importance of the notational field work conducted by Kenneth Peacock, Shirley Perry and others. Nevertheless, Doukhobors would never consider leaning or reading their vocal parts from a musical score; a great majority of them are, in fact, musically illiterate, and lack the rhetoric necessary for theoretical discussion or analysis. Despite this apparent ignorance, it appears that most Doukhobors are perfectly capable of singing well, instantly mastering the melodic contours of a given piece, and added improvisatory harmonic lines, with successful and beautiful results.

"Life is worth living while we are singing ": Performance Practices and Methods

The process of performing with a choir is, for many Doukhobors, the ultimate expression

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[28] Mark Mealing, "Our People's Way: A Study of Doukhobor Hymnody and Folklife" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 27

[29] Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.

of creativity and emotion. The Doukhobor historian and author, Eli Popoff, describes this feeling of spiritual elation in his novel, "*Katya*". In the story, the protagonist has just experienced an epiphany, following a choral performance with her brethren. She muses upon the event, realizing for the first time the power of her heritage as conveyed through song:

> Why couldn't the Doukhobors give their message of peace and brotherhood to the world in an artistic manner?... The Doukhobor soul wanted to express itself to the world... there should be some way to integrate sincere soul expression by way of music, art and drama. [30]

Katya's heart-felt desire to express the messages of her forebears through song is echoed by other Doukhobor authors. Marjorie Malloff writes, that, in singing together in a common goal, "the human soul reaches out to God and Creation in unification of all that is physical with all that is spiritual".[31] Several interview respondents also support this claim. When questioned as to the importance of singing together, one subject replied, "We start to sing ... and there's a resonance that happens. It just kind of pulls you in to that oneness, and it's a very moving experience." Other responses are less prolific, but nevertheless support the notion of the cathartic properties of Doukhobor choral singing. Several respondents claimed that singing together as Doukhobors is an integral part of the socialization process, while others simply stated, "It's what we do!" [32]

Regardless of wording, it is apparent that the traditions of Doukhobor song, engrained in the childhood subconscious through participation in Sunday school meetings and other gatherings, are defining characteristics of what it means to be a Doukhobor. Moreover, chordal structures which allot importance to each vocal line are indicative of the Doukhobor belief in shared responsibility and human equality. It is possible, then, to regard the peculiarities of Doukhobor song as artistic representations of communal ideals.

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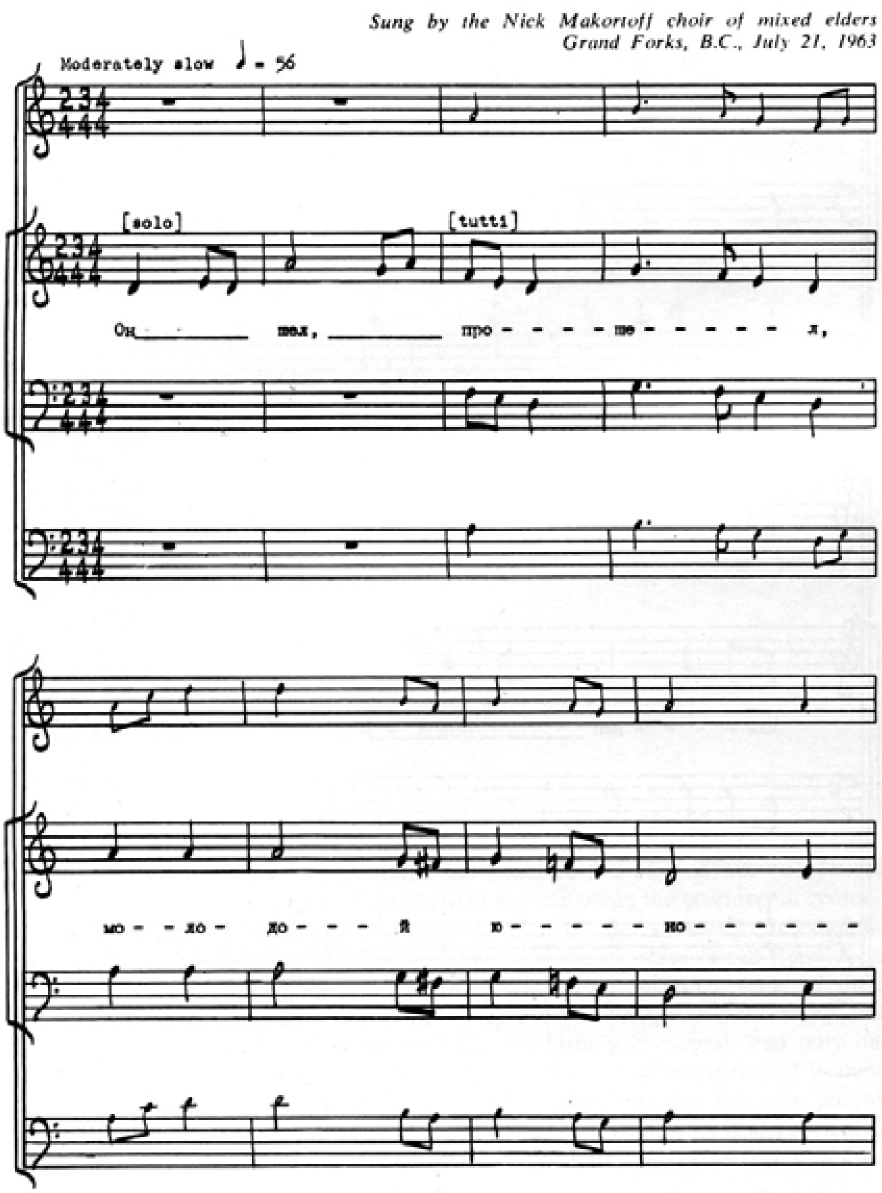
[30] Eli Popoff, Katya (1991) in Myler Wilkinson, "Written on the Wind: Word and Belief in Doukhobor Literature" (Canadian Ethnic Studies 27 (1995): 206-217), 206.
[31] Marjorie Malloff, "Doukhobor Song Archive - Update". ISKRA - Voice of the Doukhobors 1936 (2003): 3.
[32] Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.

Doukhobor choirs are inclusive structures, featuring a variety of vocal ranges, ages and abilities to form a tableau of unique sounds. Choirs may be comprised solely of children or elders, and may consist of women, men, or mixed genders. Choral divisions do not follow the traditional SATB structure of notated chorale music, and although an established melody line, generally carried by alto voices, is always prevalent, the nature of the harmonic framework will vary from performance to performance, based upon the number of singers and their individual experiences and abilities. Since Doukhobors frown upon the notion of instrumental accompaniment, regarding it as a barrier to a true communion with the Holy Spirit, songs are, without exception, performed á capella. Moreover, the Doukhobor distaste for hierarchical constructs renders the concept of a choral director cumbersome and unnecessary. Thus, a member of the ensemble is selected to begin each piece, as a means of establishing pitch, tempo and stylistic considerations. The responsibility of beginning a piece, which involves intoning the first several words, or else the entire first line of text, can fall upon any member of the choral ensemble, although generally stronger, more experienced voices are employed.

Although harmonically improvisatory, all Doukhobor pieces share certain fixed characteristics. In larger ensembles, voices are generally separated into three or four individual parts, with the possibility of further subdivisions at key points in the music. The main melodic line is most often found in the inner voice (usually the lower females) and is generally doubled by the basses. The ubiquitous practice of octave coupling, derived from the unison chanting style of the Orthodox church, harkens back to the very origins of the Doukhobor choral tradition. The primary harmonic line, referred to as *verkh*, a rough equivalent of a female soprano line, functions as a sort of drone-like descant, hovering above the lead line at intervals of a fifth or octave, occasionally reaching upward as far as a tenth. Between the melody and *verkh* line, an alto harmonization called *polu verkh* (literally, "*below verkh*") fills in the important third of each chord. *Polu verkh* is sung by both lower female and upper male voices, creating a sonorous, organum-like effect. Further divisions within the harmonic lines are also possible, especially as a means of embellishment during the traditional repetition of the last two lines of each poetic stanza.

The following transcribed example, "A young man was walking", is taken from Kenneth Peacock's "Songs of the Doukhobors: An Introductory Outline", and illustrates the particular vocal divisions discussed above. Note that Peacock has allocated the lead line to the second treble staff, thereby corroborating the notion of a melodic core around which all other harmonies are structured. The first treble staff shows the *verkh* line, doubled in the second bass staff by *polu verkh* voices. Peacock's notational examples are, for the most part, largely successful. Nevertheless, this excerpt is demonstrative of the inherent difficulties present in studying and notating an oral tradition.

Kenneth Peacock, <u>Introductory Outline</u> 57:



As the example states, this particular transcription is derived from the audio recording of a specific choral performance, and is, therefore, unlikely to be a definitive representation of the piece. Peacock's use of three separate time signatures indicates a problematic tendency toward rhythmic ambiguity in traditional Doukhobor music. Wisely, Peacock has avoided the use of a key signature. Selecting a suitable "key" for performance is an arbitrary decision, and is determined solely by the solo voice which begins the piece. Moreover, the use of modality in the second system (where an F# appears to function as leading tone to the temporary key of G, but is negated almost immediately by a return to F natural) renders the concept of a key signature ineffectual. In an attempt to properly demonstrate the elusive nature of Doukhobor harmony, a discussion of the characteristics of psalm and hymn-singing follows.

In his examination of the elaborate melismas of Doukhobor psalmody, Mark Mealing suggests that the "heaping up" of phrases in psalm-singing is meant to convey extreme emotion.[33] However, the melismatic passages characteristic of Doukhobor psalmody arose primarily from necessity, as opposed to mere stylistic concerns. During the period of Siberian exile, Doukhobor prisoners were forbidden to pray, or communicate with their fellow inmates. Thus, a flowing, unpredictable style of singing functioned as an effective means of obscuring textual meaning. Moreover, the slow, meditative practice of psalm singing became a form of spiritual connection and strength among isolated prisoners. In a 1971 interview conducted by Mark Mealing, Peter Kolodinin summarizes this curious concept:

> "A man, [imprisoned], down in like a box [in which] he could scarcely turn around, they handed down food from above... He would sing, along the syllables or notes, and from time to time put in a word, and at last the other [prisoner] who listened, he would come to understand." [34]

It is evident from the following example, "The singing of psalms beautifies our souls", that a performance of such a piece today would be anything but brief or lighthearted. Peacock himself tells us that, although modern practice limits the singing of this psalm to only two 'verses', it still takes

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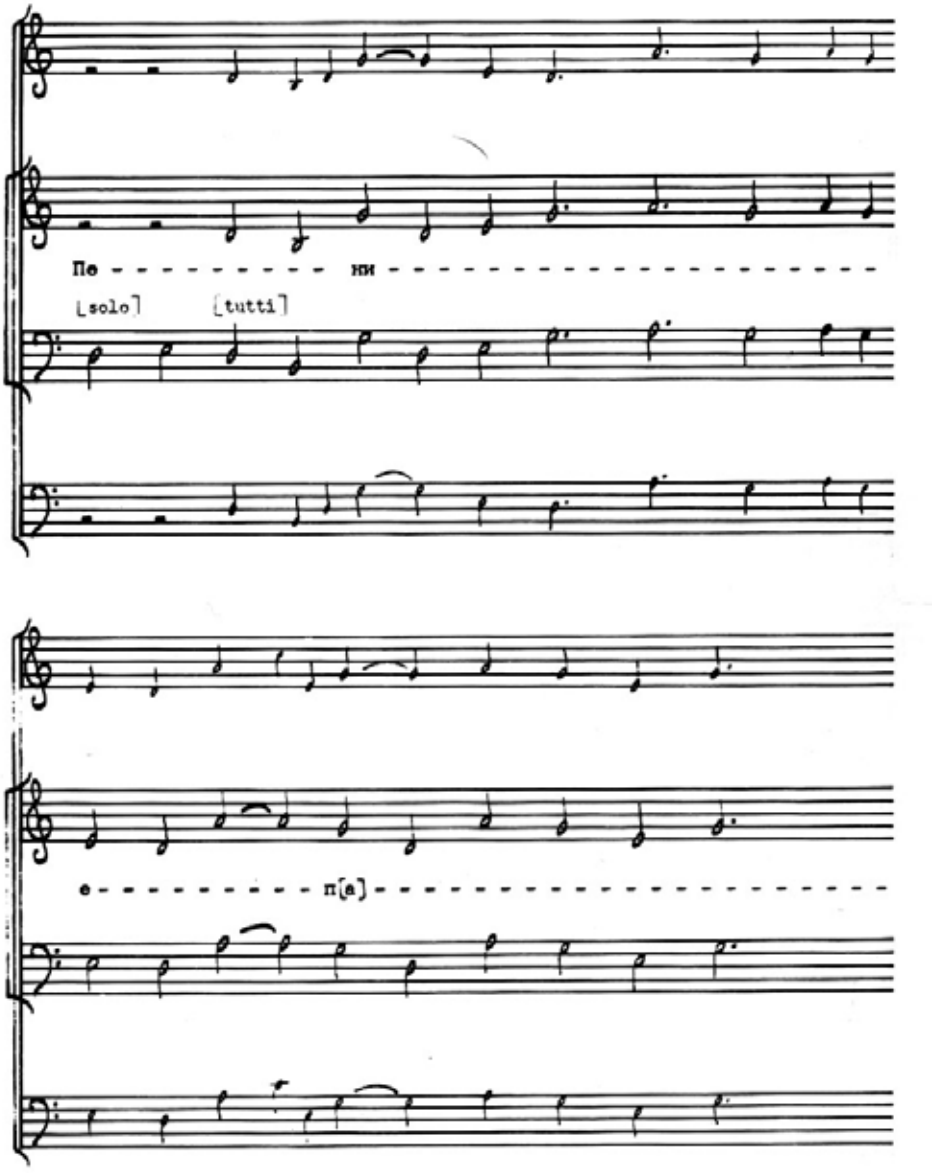
[33] Mark Mealing, *Hymnody and Folklife*, 364.

[34] Mealing, 317.

over five minutes to sing just the first five words. [35]

Kenneth Peacock, *Introductory Outline*, 24.



Despite the fact that concealment of text is no longer necessary, Doukhobor choirs continue to employ related techniques in the performance practices of psalmody. Another common method of achieving this effect is the use of staggered breathing, employed by each chorister to create the sensation of a continuous melodic line, undaunted in its final purpose. Additionally, the occasional

[35] Mealing, 328.

use of non-text syllables (most often an added vowel connecting two consonants) lends ambiguity to psalm texts, while further enhancing a sense of uninterrupted sentiment. In her 1992 thesis, Shirley Perry states that, during the twentieth century, the use of extra syllables has "undergone attrition", although in the recent experience and studies of the researcher, the use of non-text syllabification still seems to occupy a prominent place in the psalmody of today. [36]

By virtue of the fact that the methodology of Doukhobor psalm-singing stemmed from a need to obscure textual meaning, it is safe to conclude that attempts to replicate the style might be considered daunting, at best. Given both the archaic and often inaccessible language of the psalms, and the obvious difficulty in mastering the performance of such amorphous and complicated melodic phrases, it is small wonder that the art of Doukhobor psalm-singing has suffered a recent and lamentable neglect. One can hardly blame younger generations of Doukhobors for feelings of frustration and even distaste which might arise while attempting to master such material. Distinct modality and lack of an obvious melodic framework are naturally disconcerting factors for the ear weaned on the comfortable I-V-1 matrices of hymns, folk tunes and popular music. Moreover, the exceptionally somber tone of the psalms does not readily appeal to a generation unable to consider the social context out of which such melancholic pieces were born. As one Doukhobor, interviewed by Koozma Tarasoff, states, "Psalms are sad and not easily understood. People desired more joy, in keeping with the times, for the time of severe suffering has passed." [37]

The purpose of Doukhobor psalm-singing is multi-faceted. Aside from the obvious cathartic effects of prayerful incantation, the psalms have always occupied a special place within the Doukhobor consciousness. Perhaps this reverence springs from a solemn recollection of ancestral tribulation, or joyous sensations created by a deliberate evocation of the past. A more immediate reason that the Doukhobor might regard his or her own personal song repertoire as "treasures for the

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[36] Shirley Perry, "Selected Psalms, Old Verses and Spiritual Songs of the Canadian Doukhobors" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1992), 56.
[37] Koozma Tarasoff, Traditional Doukhobor Folkways: An Ethnographic and Biographic Record of Prescribed Behaviour (Canada: National Museum of Man, 1977), 33.

soul" stems from the repositive properties of the psalms.[38] Carried and preserved within the psalms is the doctrinal life-blood of Doukhoborism, a life-blood which, through the transfusive process of group performance, is shared and preserved among the faithful, prompting one Doukhobor subject to regard the psalms as "A living museum." [39]

The text given below is perhaps the most relevant to the study of Doukhobor psalmody, since, unlike the cryptic nature of many psalm texts, it clearly and unabashedly defines the reasons for psalm-singing in the Doukhobor culture:

> "The singing of psalms beautifies our souls, brings the angels to our help, drives away darkness, creates holiness, strengthens the mind of man, effaces sin...As which sunlight it illuminates, so with water it cleanses; as with fire it scorches, so with holy oil it anoints. It shames the devil; it reveals God..." [40]

"Come, sing with joyful emotion ": Hymns of the Doukhobors

In response to the changing tastes and needs of Canadian Doukhobor society, a second genre, that of the hymns (or *stikhi*), has gained prominence within the last fifty years. Certainly the hymns can be regarded as a reflection of the psychological and sociological climate of Doukhobor evolution in Canada.[41] Diatonic, predictable harmonies, lyric and joyful melodies, and a bright, declamatory performance style display the evolving social status and prosperity of the Doukhobors in Canada. Doukhobor hymnody shares many similarities with its musical predecessor, especially since both genres are meant to educate and enlighten. However, upon considering the chronology of Doukhobor composition, it stands to reason that a large portion of hymn texts describe pivotal points in Doukhobor history. In fact, nowhere does the Doukhobor zeal for eternal memory, or *vechnaja pamjat*, reveal itself with such startling clarity as in traditional hymn texts.

In the following textual examples, several distinct types of memory are discernable. "How fortunate is he", composed by Peter the Lordly Verigin during his Siberian exile, voices the inherent,

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[38] Mark Mealing, *Hymnody and Folklife*, 40.
[39] Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.
[40] Peacock, *Introductory Outline*, 30.
[41] Tarasoff, *Doukhobor Folkways*, 50.

atavistic longing for a sacred homeland and spiritual innocence long denied the Doukhobor people:

> How fortunate is he who meets each dawn
> Surrounded closely by love;
> Which, like a brilliant light within his soul
> Reflects the joy of days gone by,
> The past, like a sweet dream.
>
> He recalls to mind those former years,
> And virtually blossoms out.
> Why have sorrow, why have hate?
> Such flaming thoughts carry him
> Back into the Land of fantasy.
>
> His cherished land, his childhood home,
> The known, beloved garden,
> The village by the quiet stream;
> In wistful meditation he
> Gladly weeps from happiness. [42]

The next text example, "It was in the Kavkaz Mountains", also espouses the concept of memorial homage, although this time, it is directly linked to an affixed point in time; specifically, the 1895 Burning of Arms. This passage demonstrates how the reenactment of historical occurrence through song proclaims the gravity of the event. It is particularly interesting to note the second line of the second stanza, where a sudden, reverential outburst, meant to reinforce the commemorative ritual, interrupts the Syntax:

> It was in the Kavkaz Mountains
> That a great event took place;
> Our forefathers bumt their weapons,
> Guided by our leader - Peter.
>
> He, our great spiritual leader,
> Lasting honour to his name!
> Stepping forward, ever undaunted,
> Bearing truth's cross without shame.
>
> For us youth, so free and eager,
> These basic outlooks we must hold,
> Peace and Toil's serene, bold banner,
> With love and forgiveness in every fold. [43]

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[42] Peacock, *Introductory Outline*, 59.
[43] Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, *Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing*, 56.

A final example, "Sleep on, you brave fighting eagles", also demonstrates the importance of ancestral commemoration. Popular among Doukhobors for the resonance of its message and the chilling beauty of its melodic line, this hymn is one of many which makes reference to forebears as eagles. Just as *Book of Life* texts are often derived from specific Scriptural passages, the metaphoric image of a nurturing elder as an eagle appears several times throughout the Bible.[44] It is likely that the Doukhobors may have adopted the eagle metaphor as a reference for their venerated elders due to the common Biblical notion of the eagle as a wise and supportive creature, bestowing great care upon its young while training them to act for themselves.[45]

Sleep on, you brave, fighting eagles,
Sleep in the arms of the Lord;
You have received from your master
Peace and the promised reward.

Today, as we think of your suffering,
We pray to abide by your message,
And join in the great common task. [46]

'Vechnaja Pamjat': Eternal Memory

We have seen that the memorization of psalm and hymn tunes is not only a desirable skill, but a necessary one, if traditional melodies are to survive for the enjoyment of future generations. However, we have also determined that the term 'memory' takes on deeper connotations within the Doukhobor consciousness than a mere desire to learn by rote. Doukhobors take great pains to remember not only the struggles and triumphs of their heritage, but the individual people responsible for the creation of their faith. At each prayer meeting, the congregation practices the *vechnaja pamjat* ritual, proclaiming "Eternal memory to the deceased martyrs who struggled for truth!" [47] One interview subject states, "The whole Doukhobor experience has to do with the persecution in Russia, and the development of the psalms as a result of that persecution." [48]

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44 Deut. 32:11-12 KN, Exo. 19:4 KJV
45 Henry S. Gehman, ed. New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 234
46 Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, Lord, Give Us Thy Blessing, 143-4.
47 Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ 28.
48 Interviews, 4-12 December, 2004.

Thus, it can be seen that through repeated commemoration of past struggles and hardships, Canadian Doukhobors of today are able to effectively reinforce the ritualized suffering that justifies their cultural existence.

The future of Doukhoborism in Canada remains unclear. Many elders fear that the gradual dissipation of the Russian language will prove detrimental to the survival of tradition and belief. The linguist, Gunter Schaarschmidt, also cautions that, as many young Doukhobors have begun to study Russian in colleges and universities, the threat of assimilation from Standard Russian should not be underestimated.[49] Moreover, many Doukhobors of older generations lament the loss of the frugal and communal lifestyles originally espoused by the early Doukhobor immigrants.

Despite the fears of many traditionalists, the spirit of Doukhoborism continues to thrive, evolving and changing to meet the requirements of the twenty-first century. Cultural assimilation and perceived materialism aside, it cannot be denied that more young Doukhobors than ever before are displaying a heightened awareness of, and voracious interest in their unique cultural make-up, studiously learning to prepare traditional dishes and produce handicrafts as their forebears did several hundred years ago. Nevertheless, some Doukhobors worry that, although they have "mastered the passing on of rituals and traditions from one generation to the next, it has proved more of a challenge to pass an the meaning and understanding of their significance". [50] These fears seem largely unfounded, however, when one considers the phenomenon of Doukhobor choral singing.

Although the minutiae of doctrinal specifics is often neglected, Doukhobors of today cannot deny the importance of group singing rituals to a healthy sense of their cultural identity. As long as song texts and melodies are recited, performed and proliferated, the spirit of brotherly communion

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[49] Gunter Schaarschmidt, "Aspects of the History of Doukhobor Russian" (*Canadian Ethnic Studies 27* (1995): 197204),198.

[50] Ernie Verigin, "Psalm-Singing - The Foundation of Doukhoborism" *ISKRA - Voice of the Doukhobors* 1959 (2004): 17.

which is the true spark of Doukhoborism can never be extinguished. Carried within the hearts of the Doukhobor people, song traditions form an enduring path between the atavistic struggles of the past, and the perennial hope for a peaceful future.

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