

## **The Language(s) of the Doukhobors in Canada**

The Doukhobors are a pacifist ethnic minority in Canada whose belief system developed when they split off from the Russian Orthodox Church, possibly as early as the mid-seventeenth century, a period of considerable dissension in that organization. The Doukhobors do not have churches, priests or pastors but assemble in community halls where their communal singing of psalms signifies the essence of their belief system. They do not have a bible but a collection of hymns, psalms and prayers called “Životnaja kniga” (“The Living Book” or “The Book of Life”). In 1802 Tsar Alexander granted them a homeland in the fertile Crimea. Less than 50 years later Tsar Nicholas banned them to barren Transcaucasia where the group created a huge bonfire of weaponry in 1895 as a gesture to the government that they opposed conscription. Fearing extermination for the group, Leo Tolstoy with the aid of the Quakers in Great Britain enabled the Doukhobors to leave Russia and settle in Canada in 1899. Following a dispute with the Government and after living in the Province of Saskatchewan for 9 years, the colony split into two groups, with the larger group (approximately 4,000) moving to the Province of British Columbia (BC) in the years 1908-1913. There are currently no more than 25,000 Doukhobors living in Canada. In the late 1990s language maintenance was estimated to be at 60%. No doubt that percentage has in the meantime shrunk considerably and includes many semi-speakers and speakers of Standard Russian (SR). Since its formation in the early 1800s, Doukhobor Russian (DR) had been transmitted orally from generation to generation, both in its colloquial style based on a South Russian dialect and in its ritual style based on Russian Church Slavonic. The latter was first recorded in the above-mentioned Životnaja kniga by Vladimir Bonč-Bruevič, a Russian land surveyor. The oral language began to be recorded by linguists in the late 1960s, especially by a graduate of the University of Washington, Alex Harshenin, a Doukhobor. The oral language is now on the verge of extinction while the ritual language is still used (at least in the Province of British Columbia) but in a modernized version approaching Standard Russian (SR).

We shall trace the history of DR since its formation period to the start of the loss-of-maintenance period in the 1960s, concentrating on the factors that have impeded the prestige status of this language in comparison with SR both in the community and outside of it. This work constitutes a continuation of earlier research in the changes in Doukhobor Russian before and after their mass exodus from Russia to Canada in 1899. We shall concentrate here on the kinds of sociolinguistic developments that occurred in each of the periods discussed.