By a series of historical accidents, the tiny dissenting sect of the Doukhobors was drawn out of the obscurity in which most Russian peasants lived during the nineteenth century and into the glaring light of twentieth-century North American publicity. If a dynamic young leader, Peter Vasil'evich Verigin, had not galvanized them into open defiance of the tsarist state in the 1890s, and if Tolstoy had not been there to denounce their persecution with all the weight of his world-wide reputation, they might well have been crushed out of existence as other sectarian groups had been before them. If the Russian émigré geographer and anarchist Peter Kropotkin had not travelled over the Canadian prairies in 1897, the idea of a migration to the Northwest Territories might never have occurred to their friends in western Europe. If the Doukhobors had not come to Canada, they might never have entered the kind of situation in which their bizarre behaviour—as it appeared to most North Americans—would have been opposed and stimulated for decades by conservative prejudices on the part of large sections of the population and by a government policy that was once described aptly by Elmore Philpott as fluctuating 'between long periods of ignorant indifference and short official bursts of frenzied hostility'. However exotic the more violent actions of the Sons of Freedom, the zealot wing of the Doukho-
bors, may appear to us, it is sobering to reflect that none of these extremer types of behaviour—nudism, arson, dynamiting—was part of the Doukhobor pattern of life before the sect reached Canada. Fire-raisers and nude paraders have never represented more than a small minority of an otherwise peaceful (indeed pacifist) community, anxious only to live according to its own beliefs. Today the arsonists and the nudists may well be a minority moving towards extinction, but they are as peculiarly Cana- dian, as demonstrably the products of stresses generated in a society emerging from the pioneer stage, as any of their more conformist neighbours in the prairies of Saskatchewan and the mountain valleys of British Columbia.

But the story of the Doukhobors has its general as well as its national significance. It is arguable that if they had migrated anywhere else than Canada they would have encountered very similar difficulties; in vital respects their history in Canada resembles that of the early Mormons, another theocratic sect, in the United States. Since well before the Reformation, sects like the Doukhobors and the Mormons have posed the inevitable conflict of loyalties between a monolithic church or state and a minority group that seeks not merely to follow its own way of life but also to challenge external authority in the name of its own inspired system of internal customs. It has been suggested that the Doukhobors fell into conflict with Canadian society because they insisted on following a pattern of behaviour different from that approved by the modern state, a pattern based on local rather than centralized loyalties; a pattern that rejects industrialism in the name of a mystique of the soil, a pattern that has no room for any conformity but its own. Certainly, in the peculiar form it has taken during the past two generations, the Doukhobor problem reflects the history of a land where the spacious makeshift life of the pioneers, which had room for quite large pockets of eccentricity, began to disappear as soon as land grew scarce and authority moved in. The Doukhobors, as much as Louis Riel’s Métis, can be seen as representatives of simple cultures caught in the trap of a closing frontier, with nowhere farther to go in their efforts to escape from the modern state.

But the situation cannot be seen entirely in simple terms of ancient versus modern, or even of the free individual versus the regimented state. The medieval church was even more ferocious than the modern state in its pursuit of theocratic heretics whose doctrines resembled those of the Doukhobors; Canada, after all, has not yet imitated the Albigensian crusade. And the Doukhobors first came into conflict with authority, not in any modern state, either democratic or totalitarian, but in autocratic,
agrarian, Holy Russia, where the shadows of the Middle Ages hung more heavily than anywhere else in nineteenth-century Europe.

The history of the Doukhobors therefore alerts us to the existence of an element in common between past autocracies and modern democracies, which makes them, in some cases at least, share the same enemies. In themselves, the Doukhobors have never represented a real threat to either the Russian or the Canadian governments; the majority of Russian peasants, like the majority of Canadians, were actually hostile to the Doukhobors and unlikely to be influenced by their actions, and in both countries the members of the sect have, like radical sects elsewhere, remained a tiny minority of the population. Yet Canada and Russia, despite such widely divergent systems of government, both felt impelled to bend this small, resistant minority into the pattern of conformity. The tsarist government appeared willing, as a last resort, to destroy the Doukhobors rather than condone their dissent, and, when world publicity made that impossible, it was glad to expel them. Even the Canadian authorities have allowed themselves to be provoked into such rigorous measures as seizing the children of Doukhobor zealots in an attempt to re-educate them into conventional good citizens. This fact brings us to those profound questions about our own society that the history of such a group as the Doukhobors can hardly fail to imply. How well has a democracy succeeded when it has failed to reconcile its most extreme dissenters? How far has the majority—or those who claim to act on its behalf—the right to impose its principles and its way of life on a small and at first harmless minority? (Here we must remind ourselves that the destructiveness of the Sons of Freedom arose during a long battle with the Canadian authorities in which the errors were not all on one side.) Is uniformity in education, or the need for vital statistics, or such a formal point as demanding an oath of allegiance in exchange for a homestead, sufficient justification for penal action, which inevitably creates bitter and lasting resentment?

The fact that the story of the Doukhobors has such wider resonances should not blind us to its intrinsic significance. The Doukhobors are the most interesting of Canada's smaller minorities, and not merely because, by resisting assimilation so obstinately, they have acquired the special romantic appeal that belongs to lost causes and to forlorn hopes. They are also living examples of a type of messianic and millenarian Christianity that in western Europe was largely moribund by the end of the seventeenth century and that elsewhere has long lost its revolutionary character. And, though in the 1960s their attachment to the land is a matter of sentiment rather than of practice, they were until recently the last of our
agrarian rebels. Finally—and here the Doukhobors float in one of the important streams of the North American tradition—they have a long past of practical religious communism.

The tradition of self-contained Utopian communities, which was dying in the eastern United States by the 1850s, followed the frontier into the West during the latter part of the nineteenth century and enjoyed a last flowering in western Canada during the 1890s and the early part of the twentieth century. Some of the Canadian communities, like the Finnish Utopia of Sointula on Malcolm Island off the coast of British Columbia, were founded by groups following the traditions of secular socialism, but the most interesting—and the most successful—were undoubtedly those that attempted to create a Christian communism. Among them the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood, which the Doukhobors established in the prairies and later moved to British Columbia, was not only one of the largest ventures of its kind ever undertaken in North America, in terms both of membership and of achievements, but was also, for almost twenty years, astonishingly successful. The story of its achievements and its eventual failure is one of the most fascinating aspects of the Doukhobor record.

The failure came in part from the unrelenting hostility of Canadians devoted to free enterprise (in and out of the government) to the Doukhobor experiment in Christian communal living, but it was also precipitated by disintegrative influences within the ranks of the Doukhobors. This interplay of external pressures and internal weaknesses appears in other aspects of Doukhobor history. While it is true that the Doukhobor situation has exposed Canadian society in the undignified stance of a giant caught bullying an admittedly rather provocative pygmy, the Doukhobors' own struggle against assimilation—whether carried on desperately or in resignation—illuminates some of the difficulties that a small minority defending its position with mainly pacifist tactics is bound to encounter.

These tactics have aroused the sympathies of some intellectuals and have at times created doubts even in the minds of government administrators who were near to the situation, but there seems no reason to assume that nude parades and house burnings, the characteristic protest activities of the Sons of Freedom minority among the Doukhobors, have won from the general and uninformed public anything better than increased antagonism. On the other hand, it may also be argued that, by maintaining cohesion among the hard core of Doukhobors, such tactics have helped to preserve them as a distinctive group and have delayed
assimilation as long as the powerful trends towards social uniformity (which are deeper and less visible than those towards political uniformity) will allow. Such considerations clearly have a profound bearing on the question of the effectiveness of civil disobedience, particularly if it is carried out in a provocative manner by a small minority whose way of life marks them off clearly from a hostile or indifferent majority.

One of the characteristics of the Doukhobors as a community that has aroused particular hostility is an evasiveness regarding their own affairs that is often interpreted as evidence of dishonesty. In fact, this characteristic is a heritage of the deviousness that life under the tsars made a necessary self-protective device among Russian peasants, whether they were Orthodox or sectarian.

Who is it that the Russian deceives . . . ? [wrote Alexander Herzen in 1851.] Who, if not the landowner, the Government official, the steward, the police officer, in fact the sworn foes of the peasant, whom he looks upon as heathens, as traitors, as half-Germans? Deprived of every possible means of defence, the peasant resorts to cunning in dealing with his torturers, he deceives them, and he is perfectly right in doing so. . . . It could not be otherwise; if he spoke the truth he would by so doing be acknowledging their authority over him.¹

To Doukhobors the violent persecutions they underwent under the tsars were a traumatic experience remembered from generation to generation, and this memory—reinforced by their many unfortunate encounters with officials and neighbours in Canada—has tended to freeze their attitude towards those in authority, or even towards non-Doukhobors of any kind, in the pattern of distrust and deception appropriate to the Russian environment of the 1890s and doubtless also of the 1960s.

For the historian, this attitude presents difficulties that are compounded by the fact that the Doukhobors not only sprang from a predominantly illiterate peasant society, but also developed a principled objection—rather like that of the Brahmins—to the transmission of doctrine or even history by written means. The letter, they said, kills; and the principal means by which traditions and beliefs are even now preserved among them is through orally transmitted hymns and psalms, which often convey their messages with such obliquity that even Doukhobors disagree on their interpretation. Before the sect begins to figure in non-Doukhobor accounts and to draw the attention of Russian historians in the early nineteenth century, its record is nebulous; and even after 1800 many important events in Doukhobor history have come down to us only through
the oral tradition. Because of their attitude towards written literature and their tardy acceptance of education, the Doukhobors themselves have produced very few scholars. Three histories of the sect written by Doukhobors exist; two have been published, but only in Russian, and one, in English, has only been produced in a mimeographed, privately circulated form. All of them contain valuable information that it might have been hard for a non-Doukhobor to collect, but all of them are amateurish in presentation and apologetic in intent, designed to portray the Doukhobor movement as favourably as the facts permit.

For this approach, it can be said that it at least helps to offset the tendency of the printed literature in English to dwell on the dramatic, and even melodramatic, elements in Doukhobor history and to neglect other necessary aspects of a balanced view. Because their actions have been sensational, the Sons of Freedom, who constitute possibly an eighth of the people of Doukhobor origin now living in Canada, have in recent years received the lion's share of attention; the more numerous 'Orthodox' or Community Doukhobors, who have tried to remain peacefully self-contained, have received correspondingly less publicity, and the Independents, the most assimilated of the three Doukhobor groups, have been almost ignored by English Canadian writers. It would be unfair to class all such writers as hostile to the sect. Aylmer Maude, though disillusioned when he came to write A Peculiar People (1904), went out of his way to be fair and objective, and the same applies to J. F. C. Wright, whose Slava Bohu was a balanced even if somewhat excessively popularized presentation of Doukhobor history. But since Slava Bohu appeared in 1940, no book published in English has viewed dispassionately the whole scope of Doukhobor history; we have had to be content with the limited studies of sociologists, the propaganda utterances of politicians, and the reportages of journalists. No ethnic group outside the two founding races of Canada has attracted so much attention as the Doukhobors, but the attention has been so directed as to produce an effect of historical chiaroscuro, highlights set off by deep obscurities. We have tried, as far as the records allow us, to make the light even.