

Manitoba Free Press

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JUSTICE FOR THE DOUKHOBORS.

Previous to their settlement in Canada the history of the Doukhobors was one long tale of persecution and suffering on account of their religious convictions. The character of the people themselves and of their principles was well known to the Canadian Government at the time that they came to this country. They were welcomed as settlers, granted immunity from military service and given land for homesteading in Saskatchewan. Owing to their scruples as to taking the oath of allegiance they were unable to become British subjects in the formal sense and as a result they lost in 1907 a large proportion of their lands, which they had cultivated carefully in the face of great difficulties. The Doukhobors then migrated from Saskatchewan to British Columbia in large numbers, settling on land purchased with the knowledge of the Provincial Government there and even from it. Now, according to apparently well-founded statements, they have been induced by severe pressure from neighboring townspeople, amounting to intimidation, to offer their lands to the Dominion Government for settlement by returned soldiers.

The Doukhobors came to Canada under well understood conditions and have been, with few exceptions, law-abiding, and peaceful citizens, especially when permitted to pursue their own ways of living. Though they are aliens, they are not enemy aliens nor have they shown the least sympathy with our opponents in the war. On the contrary, they have proved industrious and unoffending members of the community and an asset to the country. Their lands at Brilliant, B.C., have been turned from sterile, heavily wooded valleys into flourishing fruit farms. The Dominion Government would have no justification for disturbing them in the possession of properties rendered valuable and productive by hard toil while abundant unimproved lands remain for soldier settlement.

There is considerable suspicion that the pressure under which the Doukhobors made the offer to sell their lands in British Columbia was applied by persons anxious to exploit their known determination not to "resist evil" or go to law. Thus their dispossession would be a form of persecution. Peculiar as are their manners and customs, it cannot be truthfully alleged that these people are harmful or dangerous. They came here in good faith relying upon the assurance of the Canadian Government. It would not be creditable to the country if they were now to be compelled to begin all over again the struggles which have made them, seemingly, the envy of their neighbors. In justice to the Doukhobors

and for the credit of Canada, to which they came as to an asylum of safety from persecution, the Government should leave them in peace or, if they are really willing to sell their properties, treat them with absolute fairness. Land in plenty, frequently held by owners far less deserving of consideration than the painstaking Doukhobors, is to be had for soldier settlement.