

ETUDES
sur
la situation intérieure, la vie nationale
et les institutions rurales
de la
RUSSIE

par

Le Baron Auguste de Haxthausen

Extract from Chapter XI
on visit to Terpenie.

I took advantage of my stay among the Mennonites of the Malotschna to approach the Dukhobors, whom Mr. Kornies offered to introduce to me.

On July 26 (old style), August 7, 1843, we went to the village of Bogdanovka, where a Dukhoborets, particularly known to my companion, received us with great hospitality. Soon half the village gathered at my host's house and around it. The appearance of the dwellings, their interior arrangement and distribution, differed in no way from the houses of other peasants in the vicinity. Only a greater comfort, more order and cleanliness, were noticeable. The men, women, and children I saw, both in the street and in the houses, struck me by the beauty of their forms, their vigor, and an air of health truly remarkable *).

**) One cannot be astonished at this when one knows that the Dukhobors kill, without any form of trial, all rachitic, deformed, or unhealthy children. They say: "The soul, this image of God, must always inhabit a noble, healthy, and strong body. If we find it enclosed in an envelope unworthy of it, our duty is to free and deliver it from this prison. The soul thus freed from the bonds that hold it captive can at least, by the law of metempsychosis, choose a more suitable body. It is not murder, for the child has not yet self-consciousness. It would be another matter if we took the life of a grown man: then we would commit an assassination."*

The interior of the house where we stopped resembled all Russian peasant dwellings; only I did not see there the holy icon with a little lamp burning, which always adorns one of the corners of the room. The conversation soon turned to a religious subject, and though my ignorance of the Russian language prevented me from understanding its meaning, I could not but marvel at the

ease and assurance with which the sectarians expressed themselves and at the intelligence shining in the gaze of the two principal orators of the group, one an old man with a white beard, the other a man aged at most thirty. Whenever they had to touch upon principles of a lofty order and the fundamental beliefs of their doctrine, they did so with a skill, reserve, and tact truly admirable. They expressed themselves with a profusion of metaphors, allegories, and words of double meaning that would have done honor to the most practiced dialectician. Fearing to give them umbrage and startle them, I unfortunately could take no notes in their presence. I shall therefore speak only of the general impression this interesting conversation produced on me. It was a singular mixture of truly sublime thoughts and the grossest, most material applications, especially when, descending from the sphere of abstraction, they came to practice or real life. Here I at last understood how excessive mysticism can lead to atheism! The worship they render to themselves leads them to deny the real existence of God. Good or evil, virtue or crime, have meaning and value only insofar as they relate to the self or the non-self. The Dukhoborets is as impeccable as God, and he who does not belong to their sect is the wicked one, incapable of acting honestly, and all he does, even apparent good, is but crime and sin *).

**) Would they not have reached the point where reconciliation with the Christian church would be easy? Having, so to speak, developed their doctrine to its ultimate consequences and finding there no satisfactory solution, would they not naturally be led to return to Christianity, so consoling, so fruitful, so well adapted to all the needs of the soul? Such, at least, is my opinion. But to attain this end, the cooperation of the government is necessary, as I have already observed above. What a noble task and what a work of humanity it would accomplish if it accepted the role of reconciler and brought back into the bosom of the Orthodox Church these strayed sheep. To succeed, it would suffice to institute good schools and send among them enlightened and wise priests to prepare the way. Russia should not lose sight of this grave question nor shut its eyes to the dangers that may arise from the depths of this doctrine.*

After this colloquy, we visited several dwellings to acquaint ourselves, as far as possible, with the mysteries of the domestic life of the Dukhobors. On this occasion, Mr. Kornies pointed out to me the singular relations existing among them between parents and their children. This singularity stems from the nature of their religious principles. The act of procreation serves by itself as the basis of no bond. The soul, the image of the Divinity, knows no earthly father. The production of the physical body, borrowed from the matter of which it is the son, establishes no kinship, save that which exists between the seed of the plant and the soil in which it is born. It matters not to the soul what prison or body it must inhabit. It has but one father *),

**) As they always have biblical citations on their lips, they cite on this subject the following verse: "You are all brothers, and call no man on earth your father; for you have one Father, who is in heaven."*

God, and one mother, matter, nature, or the earth. This is why the Dukhobors never give the name of father and mother to the authors of their days; they call them only the old man and the old woman. For their part, the parents never say: my children, but: our children, that is, belonging to the commune. Husbands call their wives sisters.

Yet the laws of nature, the instinctive love for children, prevail against principles and triumph over the subtleties of the spirit: thus I noticed among them only the greatest affection for children and filial respect, which particularly characterizes the lower class of the people in Russia. The only difference is that they carefully avoid all outward signs and demonstrations.

I asked them why they did not submit to the regulations of the Russian church, since, according to their principles, it is perfectly indifferent to observe or not observe religious practices and ceremonies. Having accepted secular authority and submitted to the political laws of the country, they might just as well have admitted the established worship and recognized the spiritual power. They replied that Silvan Kalmykov had taught them to submit to the laws and regulations established in the country and to accept, at least as regards external worship, the ordinances of the church. *"He preached to us,"* they told me, *"to be of the Greek religion in Russia, Roman Catholics in Poland, and Muslims in Persia or Turkey."* Moreover, they claimed to know from a reliable source that some of their co-religionists settled in Persia had submitted to the worship of Islam *).

**) The Bohemians have, as is known, the same religious principles. In Turkey they let themselves be circumcised; among Christians, baptized; in Catholic countries they pass for Catholics, and for Protestants in regions subject to Protestantism.*

Despite their superb disdain for the goods of this world, the Dukhobors are nonetheless litigious, greedy, and ill-disposed toward their neighbors of another religion. When a part of the Malakans of the Tambov governorate came to settle on the Malotschna, the Dukhobors made so many complaints that the newcomers had to be installed between the Mennonites and the Tatars.

The steppe formerly belonged to the nomadic tribe of the Nogai Tatars. Those of the Budjak horde had settled not far from the Malotschna. Extending more and more, the Dukhobors soon invaded the rich pastures of their neighbors, which they had long coveted, and expelled the poor Tatars. The latter complained to the local authorities, but the Dukhobors, adroit and mostly wealthy, managed through lies, cunning, false oaths, and perhaps corruption to have the disputed lands awarded to them. The poor Tatars, whom this unjust act deprived of pastures necessary for their herds, were obliged, to the number of 600 individuals, to emigrate to the banks of the Danube.

On July 28, I visited with J. Kornies the village of Terpenie, which for many years had been Kapustin's residence and the principal seat of the sect's internal government.

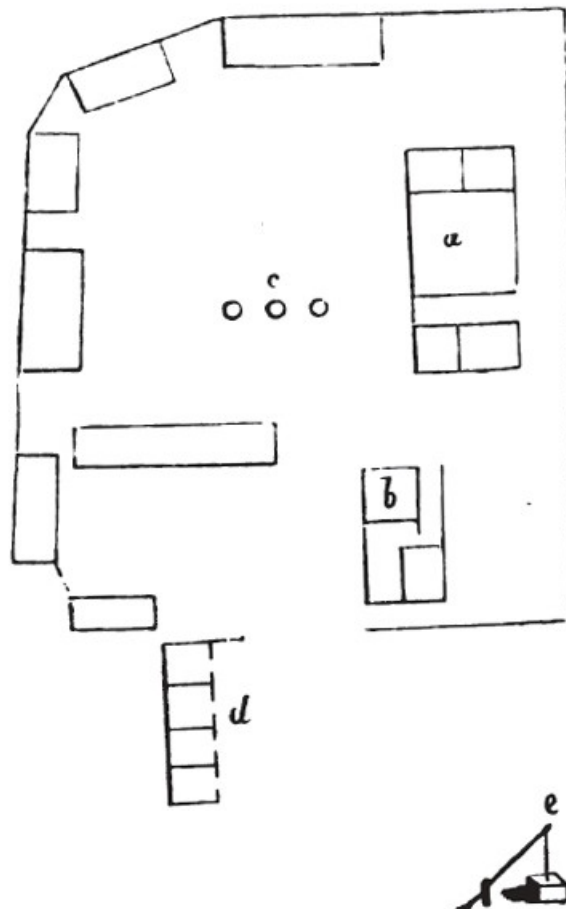
Terpenie is situated in a very picturesque region, on the steep banks of a rather swift little river. The bank is crowned with trees and shrubs. The village resembles all Russian villages; only it had a sad and uninhabited air, for the greater part of the inhabitants had been transferred to the provinces of the Caucasus. The small number of peasants who remained had preferred to convert to the Greek religion. We directed our steps toward Kapustin's dwelling. It stood in the center, on a little elevation dominating the village and backed by an angle formed by the junction of two hillocks. To the right of the road and a hundred paces from the main entrance was a well, and opposite, on the other side of the road, three or four little wooden huts, lined up side by side, with a door and a single window. A wooden carriage gate also led to the interior of the square or courtyard, surrounded by a plank fence. To the left were a few more cells like those I have just described, and to the right, Kapustin's house. Then came inside a second courtyard, with Kapustin's main house, before which were placed three shapeless stone statues, like those sometimes encountered in the midst of the solitary steppes of southern Russia, rising as mute testimonies to the existence of a people erased from the earth and whose very name has been forgotten. Opposite were ranged the rest of the cells, once inhabited by Kapustin's twelve apostles and thirty counselors. We entered with a Dukhoborets who had passed to the Orthodox Church into the house of their former leader. The interior was sad and solitary; the doors and windows, open for many years, let in the wind, which whistled on all sides. It had two stories, and a long gallery, in the form of a balcony, extended along the second. It was on this gallery that Kapustin would place himself to preach and speak to the sectarians gathered in the courtyard. When he had finished, the crowd fell to its knees and adored him. At other times he would sit in a large hall: the men entered by one door and the women by another; then all advanced in procession to come, one after another, to kiss his hand and receive his blessing. It was also in this hall that later sat the terrible tribunal of the inquisition and that was installed "paradise and torture." Every corner, every place, every partition had, it was said, a name and a particular significance, but the Dukhoborets, our cicerone, whom J. Kornies questioned on this subject, gave us only an evasive reply and then retreated into a somber silence. Below was a room without windows, destined for the mysteries and secret practices of the sect, and in which Kapustin and his confidants sometimes indulged in disgusting orgies.

The morning was fine, the sky pure and serene, but the sight of this deserted dwelling, forgotten in the midst of a gloomy solitude, with its three hideous statues and the memory of the lugubrious and bloody scenes that had taken place there, produced on me a painful impression.

This Kapustin bore a striking resemblance to John of Leiden, the king of the Anabaptists of Münster. Even the religious principles of that sect have much analogy with those of the Dukhobors.

Is it not very surprising that this simple Russian peasant, whom, according to our modern ideas, we rank in the class of semi-barbarians, should have succeeded in founding a theocratic state of

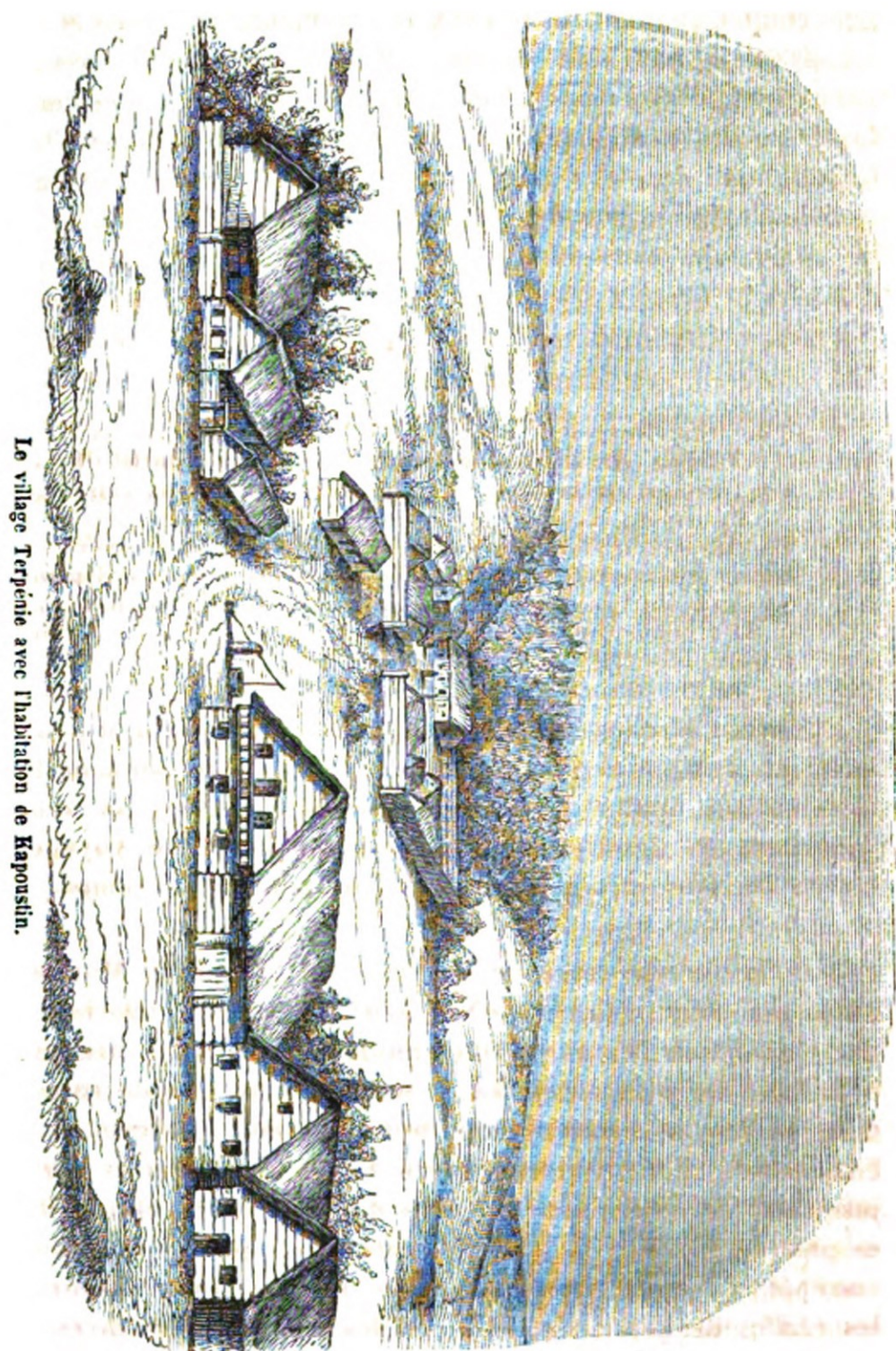
4,000 souls, or in realizing a Platonic utopia based on Gnostic-Christian principles, and in maintaining it flourishing for so many years!



Habitation de Kapoustin dans le village de Terpénie :

- a. Maison principale de Kapoustin.**
- b. Petite maison de ce chef.**
- c. Les trois statues ou babas.**
- d. Maison contenant les cellules.**
- e. Le puits.**

Les autres bâtiments étaient habités par les disciples et les conseillers de Kapoustin, et dans quelques autres se trouvaient les granges, les remises, les écuries etc.



Le village Terpenie avec l'habitation de Kapouslin.