

THE LITHUANIAN REVOLT OF 1831

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At THE TURN of the 19th century, the spirit of liberty was much alive throughout Western Europe; and it was by no means extinct in the countries like Lithuania or Poland, which had been subjugated by Russia. Though for a long time unsuccessful, revolts flared up time and again, bearing witness to the people's desire for liberty, freedom, and independence. A revolt in one country inspired another somewhere else, and the watchword of liberty was passed like a torch from the hands of one people to another, originally having been ignited by the ideas of the American and the French Revolutions.

Each revolt produced its crop of political emigrants to other countries of Western Europe; Lithuania and Poland had its share of them, — most went to France, some to Switzerland, and some even to England. As to the accomplishments of such a political emigrant, the former professor of the University of Vilnius, J. Lelewel, at a meeting of the Lithuanian Society in Paris in 1832, said to Lafayette: "We fled to France not only to save ourselves personally, but also to find a refuge from which we could fight for the interests of our nation and to explain the true temper of our fellow countrymen." The political emigrants kept the ideas of liberty alive by publishing pamphlets and newspapers, by organizing societies, by promising help, if needed, to those at home, and by influencing foreign public opinion in favor of their country. Later unsuccessful revolts produced only one other group of political emigrants ready to bear witness to the desires of their people and the despotism of the Russian rule, but the aim and the task continued to be the same at home as well as abroad — liberty and independence.

Nineteenth century's European history is partly told by the movement for liberty in various countries; Lithuania shared in this movement for its subjugation as well as its independence has its roots in the struggle between liberty and the European autocracies. As the French Revolution shook the stability of Europe, the Eastern despotic monarchies decided to use this instability as their opportunity to partition Lithuania and Poland, two countries with old traditions of independence, among themselves. The year 1795, with the watchwords of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity still in the air, signifies the subjugation of these countries to a harsh, despotic rule. The Russians themselves believed that Lithuania would never be able to rise to independence again but would remain known only in scholarly volumes for the oldness of its language. But this was not to be. A nation with a long tradition of independence, a nation with a history, a nation which understood the meaning of freedom, Lithuania did not want to bow its head to the wishes of the despots; it wanted to live, though for this wish and for the desire to be a Lithuanian one had to pay dearly and to suffer greatly.

In 1794, even before the final partition of 1795, the so-called Kosciuszko rebellion occurred in Lithuania and Poland; this revolt was, even then, partly led by political emigrants. It flared up not only in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, but in other parts of Lithuania as well. As soon as this revolt was put down, the Russian government discovered another plot in Lithuania's capital; it was the 1797 plot of Reverend Cicierskis for which 70 people were arrested and sent to Siberia. In 1824, wholesale arrests of university students and pupils of other schools were designed in order to crush the idea of liberty which had taken refuge in the places of learning. In 1812, at the time of Napoleon's march to Russia, great hopes were placed in Napoleon, for he managed to pose as the defender of liberty; and it was believed that he would grant independence to Lithuania and to Poland. These hopes toppled together with the Napoleonic Empire. In Europe, reaction set in with the Congress of Vienna and with its talk of legitimacy, compensation, and guarantees.

The Russian Tsar, Nicholas I, like Alexander I before him, considered himself the defender of the reactionary principles of 1815 and was prepared to fight liberty not only in Russia, but also in other countries. His despotic government prohibited any kind of freedom, and Russia was a typical police state with a wide net of spies and harsh punishments for any thought or action against the government. (Such modern Soviet accusations as thinking against the government and unreliability were very much in vogue, and the punishment was often, then as now, deportation to Siberia.). Any kind of learning or pursuit of knowledge was stifled. The Tsar was the head of the Church; and, here on earth, he took the glory of God for himself because, in official prayers, etc., he received more praise than God.

This despotic atmosphere weighed on all Russia, but even more so on the subjugated countries, for they were culturally more advanced and, because of their traditions of liberty, found despotism even harder to bear. It must be also noted that the Tsar directed specific measures against the enslaved countries, because they not only had to be subjected to his despotic rule, but they also had to be made a part of Russia and lose their national identity. This was the last thing the subjugated people would let happen; it led to the numerous revolts against the Russian oppression, some of which have already been mentioned. The revolt of 1831 was neither the first nor the last. Others followed. The revolt of 1863 was probably even more famous than one of 1831, and it sent further political emigrants to Western Europe. But each revolt was a step up the ladder to independence; Lithuania managed to remain Lithuanian throughout the 125 years of the harshest Russian despotism and, at the opportune moment in 1918, to rise again free and independent among the other nations of the world.

In 1830, the flames of revolution engulfed the countries of Western Europe again. The July revolution in France and the Belgian revolution for independence brought the Russian Tsar to such a point of indignation that he was ready to intervene at any moment. But the French and the Belgian revolutions also had their influence on the people of Lithuania and Poland; all classes of society were influenced so that almost everyone was ready to take up arms and follow the example of the free nations. Revolt first started in Poland and it had international significance, for it tied down not only Russia but also its allies, Austria and Prussia — with their own troubles at home trying to keep the lands they had enslaved. The Russian Tsar lost his desire to intervene elsewhere, and had to turn his attention to Poland; thus France received safety, and Belgium independence.

If the revolutions in France and Belgium encouraged Poland to revolt, the Polish revolt was encouragement enough for Lithuania to rise up in arms against the Russians. It has to be noted that Lithuania was in a different political situation from Poland; Lithuania was incorporated into Russia without any international guarantees of self-government, while Poland had received from Tsar Alexander I, according to the agreements of the Congress of Vienna, a constitution and the right to maintain a small regular army. This regular army now formed the nucleus of resistance against the Tsar. But Lithuania had no such privileges, and it was under the complete control of the Russians. Thus the revolt in Lithuania was started not by any armed forces, but by civilians themselves.

News of the Polish revolt which started in November of 1830 in Warsaw, reached Lithuania in December of the same year. The peasant rebellion around Telsiai must be considered as the first indication of revolt.

In February of 1831, a group of peasants from Salantai and Gintališke refused to go into the Tsar's army as recruits. The years of service were very long and the life in the army was very hard. Led by the nobleman, Borisevicius, and the peasant, Giedrimas, they rebelled. But after several skirmishes with the Russian police who were backed by the Russian army regiments stationed at Telšiai, the rebels were forced to flee to Prussia and hide themselves there, for those caught were handed over to the Russian government by the Prussian authorities.

Despite the regiments of the Russian army which were stationed throughout Lithuania, the country feverishly armed itself, because all desired freedom and self-government. The peasants hated the long years of service in a foreign army, the Russian colonists who took their land, and the different religion; the lower nobility longed for its former privileges and hated the Russian officials who took their various governmental posts away from them. As in almost any other revolt, here too, aside from the ideological leadership, economic and religious grievances united to arouse the whole country the oppressor.

The Russian government felt the temper of the people and it took various measures to prevent the impending revolt. Not only weapons, but axes and long knives were confiscated. On December 1, 1830, martial law was proclaimed in Lithuania. The Lithuanian people were ordered to provision the Russian army and help in numerous other ways; death was to be the penalty for disobedience of any of these laws. But at the moment the Russian army was needed in Poland to suppress the revolt there, and only the reserves and Regiments of the Invalids were left in Lithuania. Samogitia (a part of Lithuania) was left almost free of the Russian army, providing the opportunity for Lithuanians to revolt as well.

In March of 1831, the Russians demanded requisitions of food, horses, and wagons, and the time for the drafting grew near. On March 26, 1831, armed noblemen and peasants from around Raseiniai (in Samogitia), attacked the city of Raseiniai, disarmed the Russian regiment stationed there, and took over the government of the city. The example of Raseiniai was followed by other Lithuanian cities, and finally the whole Lithuania was in revolt. Everywhere political prisoners and recruits for the Russian army were freed; Russian officials and soldiers were taken prisoners; and government treasuries fell into the hands of the revolting people. At Varniai, a weapon factory was built and cannons were cast from church bells. Craftsmen worked long hours making weapons and clothes for the Lithuanian rebels. The Russians remained in control of only the two largest Lithuanian cities — Vilnius and Kaunas.

The Prussian government went hand in hand with the government of Russia and hindered in various ways the sale of arms and gunpowder to the Lithuanian rebels. But the people of Prussia, especially those along the frontier, showed much sympathy to the rebels.

The port of Palanga, closely guarded by Russian regiments, was greatly desired by the rebels, because they hoped to receive foreign aid through this port; but Palanga and Kaunas had been occupied by the rebels for only a short time. The rebels understood that without a regular army they would not be able to hold out against the Russians very long, nor would they be able to take the capital, Vilnius. This was also understood by the rebel government in Poland and, therefore, some regular army was sent from Poland to help the Lithuanians. General Chlapowski, on his way to central Lithuania, took Lyda on May 31, 1831. He was joined by several outfits of Lithuanian rebels and by a unit formed entirely by the students from the University of Vilnius. From these units a Lithuanian battalion was formed and armed by the General. From another direction Generals Gelgudas and Dembinski marched into Lithuania. General Gelgudas became the head of the whole expeditionary force. But discord appeared among the generals as to further military operations. Dembinski wanted to march immediately and take the port of Palanga together with the whole Kuršas seacoast (Kurland), and then wait for foreign help. General Chlapowski wanted to take the capital, Vilnius, first, and this course was finally adopted; but it was too late. While they had been arguing among themselves, the Russians had received re-enforcements; and, during the unsuccessful siege of Vilnius, not only the cause of Vilnius was lost, but the whole revolt as well.

The last encounter of any significance with the Russians was on July 8, 1831, near Šiauliai; it fought mainly by Lithuanian volunteers, and it, too, was lost because of the incapability of those in command. On the 9th of July, a conference of the generals took place at Kuršėnai. General Gelgudas was relieved of his command; he and General Chlapowski then crossed the Prussian frontier where they were disarmed and interned. About 7,000 soldiers crossed the Prussian frontier with them, were also disarmed, and their weapons were sent to the Russians. The rebels interned in Prussia found themselves in an extremely bad situation. The amnesty proclaimed by the Russian Tsar in November of 1831 was valid only in a small part of Lithuania (Augustavas district) and in Poland. Since the rebels came from the whole of Lithuania, most of them stayed in Prussia, for few wished to risk the persecutions of the Russians by daring to return. Those who found themselves in Prussia were gathered at three points — Pyliaiva, Danzig, and Graudenz.

In Paris, a committee was formed under the leadership of Lafayette to help the former rebels who found themselves in Prussia. Their representative, Klein, was sent with 30,000 francs to Prussia to help these rebels. An American Aid Committee, whose president was Samuel Howe, was also formed; he penetrated as far as Elbing and helped the former rebels with food, clothes, shoes, etc., until he himself was forced to leave Prussia. Those that were left in Prussia saw no other recourse but to go to France.

Accordingly, a ship with 164 former rebels left Pyliaiva in 1832 for France; almost all of them were from Lithuania, including quite a few students. Another ship sailed from Danzig with 426 people heading for Havre. Those who had not left by ship for France or England travelled in small groups through German territories heading for France. The reception of these emigrants by the German people in various places was very friendly: in Leipzig, a concert was organized to honor the former rebels; at the University of Jena, 500 students came out to greet the former rebels; and, in the evening, various fraternities organized meetings and cheered the rebels; in Hessen, a committee was formed to look after the students among the former rebels, and even scholarships were provided to enable them to finish their studies.

In France, certain places were designated for the former rebels to stay, and it was extremely hard to get a permit to move to any other place, especially to Paris. The largest camp of these emigrants was at Besancon; here, about 1,000 former rebels, almost all from Lithuania and many students from the University of Vilnius among them, were settled. The emigrants lived in the still standing "camps of the prisoners" (Depots des prisonniers de guerre). Only the former officers could live separately in the cities. The French and English governments spent sums of money yearly to aid these political emigrants.

The political emigrants from Lithuania, in France, England, and other countries kept in close touch with similar organizations of political emigrants from other countries and used their help in bringing up the question of the enslavement of Lithuania and Poland by Russia in the press and the parliaments of the free countries of Western Europe. They used every opportunity to inform the people of Western Europe about conditions in subjugated Lithuania and Poland. But news from these countries was hard to get, for letters usually ended up in the hands of either Russian or Prussian police. But the emigrants' love and longing for their homeland was so strong that most of them tried to get at least a handful of earth from their own country to carry around with them.

In December of 1831, initiated by C. Plateris, a Lithuanian Society in Paris was founded; later, emigrants from other lands occupied by the Russians were admitted too. The need to inform Europe about their country and to gather information about the revolt of 1831 in Lithuania and in other lands under the Russians prompted C. Plateris to form the Society. He was the first president, and L. Chodzka was the secretary. An announcement of this Society to the Lithuanian emigrants reads as follows: Sons of Lithuania!

A tyrant has seized our country; in Siberia live our countrymen. All human rights are trampled; tortures, death, and massacres are everywhere. Being emigrants, we keep our courage, and from here we watch our empty homes and our tormented families. Our desire to conquer the enemy has not vanished. Our country will soon rise again!

In Lithuania, not only were the people themselves persecuted in various ways, but all cultural institutions were also closed. In 1832, the University of Vilnius and many secondary schools were closed. Thus, the Vilnius Library Society was formed in France in order to gather books and preserve them until they could be turned over to the Library of Vilnius, because all cultural objects, including books, were taken from Lithuania to Russia.

In Lithuania, after an unsuccessful revolt, the people suffered also. Numerous families were deported to Siberia and other Russian lands. The families of the rebels who had fled were also punished. The property of the former rebels was also confiscated, and even children were sometimes taken away and sent to special Russian schools in order to make them Russians and to prepare them for the Russian army. Confiscated estates were given to Russian generals; churches to the ecclesiastics of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was to serve the new Russian colonists.

The conditions in Lithuania right after the revolt of 1831 were well described by a Lithuanian nobleman, Tomas Hernulevicius, who also fled to Western Europe — England. He writes in *Kronika EmigTacyi Polskiej* 1839, p. 172: "To oppression, persecution, and cruelty there are no limits; the barbarism of the ages reigns in Lithuania today. There is no class of society in Lithuania which does not burn with hatred of Moscow and which is not ready to offer the greatest sacrifice for freedom. But the people of Lithuania and Samogitia are full of faith in the resurrection of their country."

The Lithuanians 125 years ago suffered terribly under the Russian yoke, but they still believed in freedom for their country. Today, the Lithuanian people are no less persecuted by the Russians than were their ancestors. But we share one feeling with the Lithuanians of 125 years ago — we believe — we believe Lithuania will be free again.

Are our Western allies prepared to stand against a condemnation to perpetual slavery behind the Iron Curtain of the people of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary? Or will we be outvoted 3 to 1?

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