

THE YEARS OF OPPRESSION

The Ban of Lithuanian Printing 1864-1904

Very Rev. Mykolas Vaitkus

Very Rev. Mykolas Vaitkus, born in 1883, was educated at the Seminary of Kaunas, Theological Academy in Petersburg and Innsbruck. Later he became professor of literature at the Seminary of Kaunas and taught religion at the Art Institute.

Started to write in 1906. Since then he has become known as an editor, writer, critic. Is author of several books and translations.

The author has personally experienced the period described in his article.

One of the darkest of Russia's barbarities was the attempt to destroy the spirit of Lithuanian nations in the bright 19th century, while the free, unobjecting West was looking on. The matter was as follows.

In 1795, after a long fight, Russia, one of the most aggressive nations of the world-always pushing westwards, finally annexed Lithuania, the country which through ages had defended the rest of Europe from Mongols and other Asiatics. Russia succeeded in her conquest because she was aided by Prussia and Austria, and because the rest of nations did nothing to prevent it.

During the 19th century. Lithuania tried three times to throw off the cruel yoke, revolting in 1812, 1831 and 1863 against its unwanted master. But incomparable Russian strength put down these revolts.

After the last revolt. Russia decided to annihilate Lithuanian nation by killing its soul. Lithuanians were ordered to accept the Russian religion and language. Russia tried to enforce this order by prohibiting Lithuanians the use of their own Latin alphabet. Through their governors, Muravjov and Kaufman, they almost accomplished their purpose. Thus, no books with the Lithuanian alphabet were allowed to be published, read or even kept. Books could only be printed in the Russian alphabet, which was not practicable for the Lithuanian language.

Maybe some of you might think that, after all, the Russian letters could be adapted to Lithuanian. What difference would it make how the letters looked so long as they conveyed the same meaning? However, this order had an inner purpose. Lithuanians understood that such requirement was the first in denationalization. If one would give in and take the first step, the Russians would immediately introduce even heavier demands. We all know the procedure of a tyrant. An oppressor has to go slowly so that the conquered will not revolt. First of all, the people would become accustomed to Russian letters and books; then, to Russian culture and religion. Thus, slowly, the goal, denationalization, would be attained.

The Lithuanians understood this perfectly and decided to fight against such Machiavellian measures. The opposition, of course, could be only passive. The people refused to accept books printed in the Russian alphabet and started to publish their own secretly. The long and silent battle continued for over forty years.

This battle united all of the Lithuanian nation, starting with the famous Bishop Motiejus Valancius and the Duke Oginskis from Rietavas and ending with the simple peasant. The Catholics and the Protestants, conservatives and liberals, all joined forces in expanding the circulation of Lithuanian books and protecting the persecuted. Even the Lithuanian Jews and Polish were sympathetic in this respect. They wouldn't betray the leaders but, on the contrary, often helped out.

Thus the movement continued. It was purely ideological and cost many sacrifices and lives. The Russian government tried to inflict their beliefs through books. The books were about Russia, her history, her culture, and her religion. At the same time, Lithuanian history, culture, and especially, the Catholic religion were depreciated. The Russians realized that the

difference of religion was one of the most important obstacles to their plan of denationalization. That was the reason why they tried to blacken and destroy Catholicism in Lithuania.

How did the Lithuanians accept these books? They simply didn't buy them; when given, didn't accept any; and did their best to destroy them. I remember that while in grammar school, a Russian teacher gave to my friends and me, as presents, books using Russian letters. When we brought them home, our parents explained that the books were not acceptable and should be burned. We were glad to do so. Seeing such an antagonistic attitude, the Russians stopped publishing altogether.

However, the Russians started taking other measures to try to denationalize the people. They started to persecute all who printed or wrote Lithuanian books. The people circulating them were sent to prison or Siberia. The Russians even started taking prayer books from people leaving church.

The Lithuanians acted according to the dictates of their consciences. The laymen and the clergy, the rich and the poor, all harbored and read only Lithuanian books. They paid fines, completed prison terms, suffered in Siberia, Caucasus and even lost their lives for the privilege of fighting for their country. They never lost hope that someday truth and justice would triumph.

In my youth, I saw the sufferings of the patriotic men. Perhaps the hardest hit were the priests. The Russians hoped that if they succeeded in quieting the religious leaders, the nations would become easier to conquer. Therefore, any communication of the clergy with the Pope was prohibited. Every move a priest made was restricted and every word he uttered was censored. Even the sermons were censored. A priest wasn't allowed to leave his parish at any time. He had to use Bibles sent by the government. For every transgression of the law, large monetary fines were imposed. Almost all monasteries were closed and no novices were accepted. Catholic churches were turned over to the Russian authorities and used by the government for storage. When the church in Kraziai was taken, Lithuanians protested. Many of them were killed and the rest were imprisoned or sent to Siberia. This event revealed to the civilized world the brutality of the Russian demagogues.

Because the remaining monasteries were becoming empty, Russians converted them into prisons, sentencing priests who had committed some "offense" against the inhuman orders. I remember such a monastery in a nearby town where the minister of my parish was imprisoned for circulating prohibited books.

Others, as the famous scientist and author, Jakštas-Dambrauskas and Dr. Jonas Šliupas, fled to America to avoid persecution. The United States was the nation which gladly gave asylum to the political and religious refugees escaping from their country. Here I must mention with gratitude the role this country played in the Lithuanian fight for freedom of the press. Lithuanians in the United States were free to use their language and to practice their religion. They were allowed to print books and papers and to send them to their suffering brothers in Lithuania. These books were circulated in the oppressed country. Eternal thanks to the United States of America!

However, even more books were printed in neighboring Germany. Germany, for some reason, allowed us to publish books in her eastern district, Prussia. All such books had to be carried across the border. A special group of "book carriers" was organized. They picked up Lithuanian papers in Prussia and transported them into Lithuania. Because the Russian gendarmes were very careful in watching the border, the mission was very dangerous. Many of the "book carriers" were caught and punished. I, myself, heard about such brutalities, and I have seen with my own eyes soldiers searching the woods for men with literature. But it was not enough just to get the printings across the border. They had to be distributed through the whole country, person to person. Despite the grave dangers, no a single person wavered or turned away from the cause.

We suffered oppression for forty years. I don't know how much longer we could have stood it, had the Russians not given in. They became involved in a war with Japan while trying to annex more land. The Russians weren't very successful in this undertaking, and a civil war almost occurred. The frightened government quieted the rebellion, not only with arms but also with promises. Thus, in 1904, Russia conceded to Lithuania freedom of the press. However, to win full political independence, Lithuania had to wait until after the first World War when great Russia started losing her authority.

Today the situation is similar. Communist Russia will never grant freedom peacefully to the countries she has conquered. Only with the intervention of the United States can the nations regain their independence.