

## 1885: Rebellion or Resistance?

The Métis uprisings in 1869-70 and 1885 are known as the “Riel Rebellions”, the “Red River Rebellion”, the “1885 Rebellion”, the Northwest Rebellion”, the “Manitoba Rebellion”, the “Saskatchewan Rebellion”, the “Red River Insurgency”, the “Red River Resistance”, the “1885 Resistance”, the “Resistance of 1885” and the “Northwest Resistance”. To make matters more confusing, “rebellion”, “resistance”, “revolution” and “insurgency” are synonyms and are used interchangeably. However, each word has slightly different connotations.

**Rebellion** is defined as “Open resistance to authority, especially organized armed resistance to an established government”<sup>1</sup>. Rebellions are always put down and the insurgents – usually peasants and working people – are depicted as pawns exploited by elites such as the nobility or the *bourgeoisie* (the upper middleclass). The word “rebellion” therefore generally has negative connotations. In fact, many Canadian historians called the Métis uprisings in 1869-70 and 1885 “rebellions” because they felt that Louis Riel and other Métis leaders used Métis’ grievances to further their own ends rather than those of their people.

Rebellions have existed throughout history. However, they normally take place during periods of transition. For instance, in Early Modern Europe (c 1492-1789) – a period of tremendous social, economic, religious and political change – there were dozens of peasant rebellions. In almost every occasion, the leaders were executed and the common people were given an

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<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 1998.

amnesty. Rebellions become “revolutions” when the insurgents are successful. The best examples in history are the American (1775-1783), French (1789-1795) and Russian Revolutions (1917). Thus, those who win normally term their uprisings as revolutions and those that lose have their uprisings called rebellions.

In Canadian history, there have been four events that have been termed rebellions. These include the 1837-38 Rebellion in Lower Canada (present-day Québec), the 1837 Rebellion in Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) and of course the Métis uprisings in 1869-70 and 1885. In all instances, poor farmers or labourers led by a segment of the middle class “rebelled” against distant government authority in London and Ottawa. In each case, once the government asserted or reasserted its authority, it severely punished those which it felt were responsible for disturbing the “Queen’s Peace”. For instance, dozens were hung in the aftermath of the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada, others were imprisoned and some were sent into exile; the Wolseley Expedition, which “pacified” Manitoba following the insurrection in Red River, was responsible for the deaths of two Métis and the destruction of Métis-owned property; and finally, after the 1885 uprising, Louis Riel and eight First Nations warriors were executed, while many more were imprisoned.

**Resistance** is defined as “the act or an instance of resisting; refusal to comply...the power of resisting...a secret organization resisting authority”<sup>2</sup>. Resistance is a term which has positive connotations. Resistances, such as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the French resistance movement during the Second World War, also have a romantic connotation because the insurgents fight in a just struggle against tyranny, and are known as “resistance fighters” or “freedom fighters” rather than “rebels”. The Third World Liberation, the American Civil Rights (African Americans), the Red Power (Native-Americans) and the Feminist movements of the 1960s all used the term resistance to describe their struggles for equality/independence. Sometimes these resistances were violent; other times they were peaceful struggles to liberate people from rigid thinking.

Since the 1960s, ethnohistorians and scholars in Native/Indigenous Studies Departments have used the term “resistance” to describe Indigenous uprisings. Aboriginal resistances are reactions against colonization imposed on Indigenous populations by “Newcomers” (Europeans, Euro-Canadians or Euro-Americans) whom use church/state policies to eradicate Indigenous languages, economies, spiritual systems and lifeways. From this point of view, the Métis uprising in 1885 was a resistance because the federal government forced the Métis to take-up arms after it failed to address the Métis’ many long-standing grievances.

Many historians now consider the Métis uprising in Red River as a resistance as well. Historians argue that the Métis Provisional Government served as a temporary government for the Red River Settlement prior to Manitoba’s entry into Confederation in 1870. Since there was no governing authority in Red River prior to the transfer of Rupert’s Land to the Dominion of Canada, the Métis had every right to set-up a Provisional Government and ask for terms of entry into Confederation. By contrast, most historians see

the 1885 Resistance as a rebellion because they believe that an established government was in place at the time and that the Métis' grievances were being dealt with, albeit slowly. This is a much different way of thinking than that of past historians who held **Ethnocentric**<sup>3</sup> and **Eurocentric**<sup>4</sup> views and believed that the Métis uprisings in 1869-70 and 1885 were the last gasp of a primitive people who rebelled against modernization.

As a result of the work of Native Studies scholars and ethno-historians, the dominant theme in Métis history is resistance. This theme can be traced from Métis history from their beginnings as a people. The Métis resisted others who attempted to infringe upon their lifeways. As early as the 1810s, the Métis believed that they constituted "*une nouvelle nation*" or "new nation" distinct from First Nations and Euro-Canadians/Europeans. They therefore fought to preserve their rights, which they felt were inherent in both the Indigenous and European worlds. For instance, at the Battle of Seven Oaks (June 19, 1816), the Métis, under Cuthbert Grant, resisted the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC)'s efforts to curb their livelihood as fur trade provisioners. In 1849, the Métis broke the HBC's trade monopoly by protesting in front of an HBC courthouse, and on June 19, 1851 at the Battle of Grand Coteau, they fought with and defeated the Dakota for the right to hunt on the rich bison-hunting grounds of the Dakotas. Armed with the psychological concept that they constituted a new nation, the Métis became a

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<sup>3</sup> **Ethnocentrism:** The attitude or opinion that the morals, values, and customs of one's own way of life are superior to those of other peoples.

<sup>4</sup> **Eurocentric:** The Eurocentric worldview emphasizes that every thing of value and virtue has come from Christian and capitalist-based Western-European and North-American society. This viewpoint devalues other cultures as being inferior.

dominant force on the northern plains. Such thinking contributed immensely to the Métis' actions in 1869-70 and 1885.

### References:

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