

Why did the 1885 Resistance Happen?

The 1885 Resistance did not happen overnight. Its origins began as early as the 1870s with the lack of Métis representation in the government of the North-West Territories. Even after representation was granted in the 1880s, Ottawa still ignored the Métis. The clergy supported the Métis' desire to have better political representation in the territorial government well into the early 1880s, however, the federal government remained non-committal. Petitions – to address the Métis' desire to recognize tenure to their lands – were sent in the early 1880s as well, but were met with inaction or negative replies. The 1885 Resistance occurred because the Métis were frustrated that the federal government did not address their many petitions regarding their lack of formal title to their lands and their desire for proper political representation.

In the 1870s, the Métis of the Saskatchewan District (of the North-West Territories) did not have a voice in the territorial government. From 1870-76, Manitoba's Lieutenant Governor and his councilors, all of whom were appointed by the federal government, administered the Territories. Even though the Métis living along the South Saskatchewan River were the majority in the area, they still had no political representation. In 1872, a Métis, Pascal Bréland, from St. François-Xavier, Manitoba, was appointed to the council. However, he did not represent the Métis of the Saskatchewan District. With the help of Archbishop A.-A. Taché (St. Boniface, Manitoba), two Métis and one French Canadian – Pierre Delorme, James McKay and

Joseph Royal – were appointed in 1873 to the Territorial council. While active in the council, these men, all from Manitoba, were no more able to defend the interests of the Métis of the Saskatchewan District than Bréland.

In 1881, the electoral District of Lorne – which included Prince Albert, Carlton, Duck Lake, St. Laurent and Batoche – was created. The Métis of the Saskatchewan District finally received local political representation. With Métis support, the chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company post in Carlton, Lawrence Clarke, won the seat and held it until 1883. Clarke asked if the land along the South Saskatchewan River could be surveyed, or in some instances resurveyed, to better meet the needs of his Métis constituents. This inquiry proved unsuccessful.

The Métis also sent dozens of petitions to Ottawa, Battleford and later Regina regarding title to their lands. The Métis in the Saskatchewan District (and in the Assiniboia District in what is now southern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta) did not have formal title to their lands. The Métis desperately wanted title to their lands because they did not want to be dispossessed of their lands like those that had been in Manitoba following the Red River Resistance – when the region became flooded by Euro-Canadian settlement. The first petition was made by Louis Schmidt, Louis Riel's friend and the Secretary of the Provisional Government during the Red River Resistance (1869-70), and was submitted to the Minister of the Interior in Ottawa by Joseph Royal, who was the member for the federal constituency of Provencher, Manitoba. Schmidt, whose actions were witnessed by Father

Vegreville, said that neither Royal nor the Deputy Minister, A.M. Burgess, acknowledged ever receiving this petition.

The Roman Catholic Church also supported the Métis' petitions. In 1879, Archbishop Taché wrote to the federal government with a plan to preserve the Métis' title to the land. He argued that there were 1200 Métis families in the Northwest Territories and that they should be put on reserves where they could better maintain their culture. This plan called for the creation of twelve reserves, with each reserve consisting of a hundred families living on twelve square miles (19.3 kilometres). Before they could be put on the reserves, all Métis men, women, and children who were living in the Northwest Territories on January 1, 1879 would be granted two non-negotiable land Scrips for eighty acres (9.8 hectares) each. Taché's last recommendation was that the lands could not be sold, mortgaged, or taxed for three generations. This final measure would ensure that the Métis would not have their lands taken away by land speculators.

In 1882, all the inhabitants of Batoche, including Father Moulin, signed a petition and sent it to the federal government. They did not receive a response. Father André then protested the federal government's inaction regarding this matter in Ottawa. Bishop Grandin also agreed to transmit the St. Laurent area (near Batoche) Métis' grievances the next time he traveled to Ottawa. The federal government's response to these numerous Métis petitions was vague and non-committal.

In 1883, D.H. Macdowall replaced Clarke as the elected member of the Territorial government. The Métis supported him and in return he contributed \$1,100 to the building of the Batoche church. He also promised to plead the Métis' case in Ottawa. However, only vague promises of redressing the Métis' grievances were given by the federal government.

The lack of a clear response to their numerous petitions made the Métis further determined to press the government. In the winter of 1883-84, Charles Nolin and Maxime Lépine organized a committee consisting of the leading Métis inhabitants of the Lorne District. These Métis leaders held several meetings in which they sought ways to recognize their rights as a people, drew up a list of grievances, and voted in favour of sending a delegation to Ottawa and for bringing Louis Riel back from the Montana Territory.

In the summer of 1884, Bishop Grandin brought a petition to Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald that outlined the Métis' grievances. In the petition, the Métis demanded that the North-West Territories, which was governed by a federally-appointed council, become a province with a full responsible government, that the Métis be granted full title to their lands, that these lands be surveyed to recognize the Métis' river lot land-holding system, and that Louis Riel's leadership be formally recognized through either his appointment to the territorial council or to the Canadian Senate. The petition also protested the federal government's failure to properly address the Métis' many previous petitions.

In 1885, Louis Riel drafted a new petition, which had the same principles as the preceding ones, but was more urgent in tone. The government responded in January 1885, saying it would not negotiate with Riel and would only consider the Métis' demands if they were presented at the proper time and place. It is for this reason that Louis Schmidt and other Métis felt that the federal government had precipitated the outbreak of the 1885 Resistance.

The government ... stalled for too long, for tempers were finally beginning to flare up. It brought the agitation to its peak when it finally told the Métis that it would perhaps be disposed to give favourable consideration to their demands, but had no need to see Riel for that purpose....The ministers were strangely deceived in this instance. They should have done the opposite and granted immediately what was demanded of them, which was not at all exorbitant. The troubles could thus have been avoided.
[Translation] Payment, *The Free People*, p. 158.

On March 18, 1885, the Métis along the South Saskatchewan River established a provisional government with Pierre Parenteau Sr. as president, Phillipe Garnot (a French Canadian) as secretary, and Gabriel Dumont as the Adjutant-General or military leader. Louis Riel also set up a twenty-member people's council or "Exovedate" (which is Latin for "one of the flock"). After the Battle of Duck Lake on March 26, 1885, the federal government finally took action and sent in the Canadian militia under General Middleton to crush the Métis' resistance. In the end, using the military to address the Métis' grievances proved tragic not only because many lives were lost, but also because the Métis would become even further socially, economically and politically marginalized.

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