

## Kastus Kalinouski

### Leader of the National Uprising in Byelorussia 1863-64

BY

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Of recent years, considerable material and numerous treatises and works concerning *Kastuś Kalinoŭski* have appeared in academic periodicals in various languages.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore an impossible task adequately to portray this great heroic figure in a short article; and because of this fact a brief survey of the salient events of his life must suffice.

Vincent Constantine *Kalinoŭski* was born on the 21st of January, 1838 in the village *Mastaulany*, in the county of *Vaŭkawisk* in the *Grodno* province. His parents, *Symon* and *Veronika* were members of the lesser Byelorussian gentry who had lived in Byelorussian from time immemorial. A recently discovered document shows that one of their ancestors, *Ambrose-Samuel* bought the estate *Kalinoŭa* in 1679 and *Ludvig*, the grandfather of *Kastuś*, sold this property in 1774.

The father of *Kastuś* owned a weaving *atelier* at *Jakusauka* near *Świsłačy*, and before long he settled there with all his large family.

Little is known about the youth of *Kastus*. He studied in the pro-gymnasium of *Świsłačy*, and completed this part of his education in 1855, exactly at the time when the claims of his family to nobility were recognised.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in the pro-gymnasium of *Świsłač* there was a long-standing tradition among the students of forming groups having as their objects the struggle for freedom and the welfare of their country.

With the aid of his elder brother, *Viktar*, *Kastuś* in the space of one year completed the courses prescribed by the gymnasium, and

<sup>1</sup>) The leading authorities are: *W. Kordowicz*, *Konstanty Kalinowski*, Warszawa 1955 and *A. Smirnov*, *Kastuś Kalinowski*, Moskva 1955.

<sup>2</sup>) Members of the aristocracy in Tsarist Russia were entitled to substantial privileges, both in the affairs of the State and in social life. In consequence the Imperial Office of Heraldry decided at the end of the XVIIIth century to recognise the nobility only of those persons who were able to produce proper documents showing that they were of noble birth. Person lacking such documents were entitled to accede to the aristocracy whenever the Court Board of Deputies published a suitable finding on the noble origins of a given family, and that finding was endorsed by the Court of Heraldry of the Imperial Senate. Such a finding was made in favour of *Kastuś*' father, *Symon Kalinoŭski*.

in 1856 entered the faculty of Medicine of the University of Moscow as an external student. After one semester he moved to St. Petersburg where his elder brother was living, and there, after passing the entrance examination, he joined the faculty of Laws.

Kastuś' material position during his years of study was precarious. He lived on a small scholarship and what he was able to earn by giving private lessons. Several times, because of illness, he was obliged to ask the Rector of the University for assistance.

Kastuś came under the political influence of his elder brother Victor who has nominally matriculated at the University of Moscow, but in fact lived in St. Petersburg and busied himself with the organisation of a revolutionary group. Unfortunately he died of tuberculosis in 1862 and, as we shall see, Kastuś took over all his activities.

Having completed his studies at the Faculty of Laws in 1860 with the degree of Candidate of Law, Kastuś Kalinoŭski went to Vilna and tried to enter the civil service. On being refused, he made no more attempts in this field, but devoted all his energies to organising a movement for the liberation of his country and the welfare of his people. In 1861 he went to Grodno and soon founded there a society, whose program was similar to that of the Polish secret organisation which had adopted the name of "the Reds".<sup>3</sup> Similar secret organisations began to spread in the provinces of Grodno, Minsk, Vilna and Kovno. The founders of these groups were mostly students, who purposely infiltrated military positions and notarial offices. The leadership of the organisation was in the hands of Kastuś' friends at the University of St. Petersburg. Its center was located in Vilna. Under the influence of Kalinoŭski the leaders of the organisation resolved to devote their whole attention to spreading propaganda among the villagers. In pursuance of this policy the members of the organisation, and especially Kalinoŭski himself, went frequently to the villages, dressed as peasants, in order to disseminate their ideas among the inhabitants. The villagers gladly listened to them, because their program favoured the handing over of land to the peasants without payment, and the selection from among the villagers themselves of the leaders who were to fulfill their scheme.

The Warsaw committee,<sup>4</sup> which even before Kalinoŭski had been organising a revolt, disagreed with the Byelorussian Patriot in the most important points of their program: — namely, national independence for the people, distribution of land among the peasants and readjustment of boundaries. It therefore formed its own organisation in Byelorussia and Samogitia, principally among the landed gentry. This resulted in the two organisations impeding each

<sup>3</sup>) There were two distinct factions in the Polish clandestine organisation — the "Whites", who had conservative leanings and sought to uphold all the privileges of the magnates, and the "Reds" who adopted a programme of social reform.

<sup>4</sup>) This was the name given to the leadership of the Polish clandestine organisation in Warsaw who proclaimed the Uprising on 23rd of January 1863.

other in their activities. To set matters aright, Kalinoŭski twice sent his representatives to Warsaw for consultations. However, the leadership of the Warsaw Committee was at that time in the hands of right-wing "Whites", who in approaching the problems of the peasant and land boundaries, refused to recognise the proposals of Kalinoŭski's group. So it was that, on the very eve of the uprising, discord reigned between them.

Notwithstanding this, Kalinoŭski began to set on foot his preparations for the uprising. For the better dissemination of propaganda, he organised with his supporters the publication of the first illegal Byelorussian newspaper *Mužyckaja Praŭda* (Peasants' Truth), under the assumed name of "Jaško, yeoman from near Vilna." The first issue of the paper appeared in June 1862 and in all, seven issues were published. The greatest part of *Mužyckaja Praŭda* is devoted to unveiling the true facts about the plundering of the villages by the Tsarist authorities. The sixth issue is completely consecrated to the defence of the old Byelorussian Uniate faith. *Mužyckaja Praŭda* proved to be very popular among the people and consequently attracted the full fury of the Tsarist regime.

The Imperial authorities were aware of the preparations for an uprising, and in order to forestall it they drafted a levy of recruits for the army in October 1862. The youth of military age at once began to take to the woods and form bands, so hastening the outbreak of the uprising.

When on the night of the 23rd of January, 1863 an uprising broke out in Poland, Kalinoŭski at once condemned it as premature and ill-conceived on the grounds of its unsatisfactory program as set out in the Manifesto. But the course of events could not now be checked. The agents of the central Polish Committee were extending their activities to Byelorussia and as a result on the first day of February, Kalinoŭski together with his supporters joined in the uprising, making themselves known to the temporary provincial office for Samogitia and Byelorussia. They published an appropriate manifesto, in which they proclaimed that the villagers, townsmen and all good people regardless of faith or origin, should be as free as the former Polish gentry, that the land should be given to the peasants for ever, without interest, tax or purchase, and that the landless were to receive an allotment of three acres of land.<sup>5</sup>

Because of insufficient preparation, the uprising spread unevenly, breaking out spasmodically in different places. Nonetheless, the peasant movement in Byelorussia at once constituted a serious threat to the Tsarist regime. On the 4th of February the Governor-general of Vilna, Nazimoff, declared a state of war in the provinces of Vilna and Grodno and called for substantial military reinforcements. At the same time, the Tsar on the 1st of March proposed to

<sup>5</sup>) In Poland, Byelorussia and Lithuania the unit for measuring the area of land — the *morh* — was variable. Originally the *morh* was equivalent to 0.5985 hectares or 1.48 acres.

the senate the abolition of all compulsory unpaid labour of the peasants for the benefit of their feudal overlords, and the reduction by 20% of the redemption price on land.<sup>6</sup>

The insurgent groups stood firm but in the leadership of the uprising there were serious disagreements. From March 1863 in the territories of Byelorussia and Samogitia there were two poles of attraction: Kalinoŭski's group and a section of Warsaw officers under the command of Gejsztor. In the middle of March, Gejsztor, supported by the magnates, retreated, leaving Kalinoŭski completely alone. Kalinoŭski at once addressed a protest to Warsaw complaining that the leadership of the uprising was split to such a degree that it would lead the revolt to perdition. Kalinoŭski's prophecy quickly came true. The new leaders failed to achieve anything: they placed their hopes in France and England, who at that time reiterated diplomatic representations on the "Polish question", but they did not get anything more than words.

In the meantime Kalinoŭski could not stand idly by, and so he agreed to go as commissar for the Grodno province. There the uprising had reached its highest pitch, whereas in the Vilna region it was almost completely subdued, especially after the arrival in Vilna on the 26th of May, 1863 of the new governor general Muravioff.

To give a new impetus to the uprising, in June 1863, the representative of Warsaw in Vilna, Diuleran, summoned Kalinoŭski to Vilna and appointed him head of internal affairs. Turning his new position to his advantage, Kalinoŭski quickly assumed supreme command. Whereas previous leaders had hindered him in his work, now in mid-June Kalinoŭski and his supporters were able to stand firm against "the interference of Warsaw in the affairs of Byelorussia and Samogitia." They refused to obey orders and formed an independent Committee to lead Lithuania.

This act provoked strong misgivings in Warsaw. Quickly Avejde was sent to Vilna for consultations together with two armed divisions as a warning. The consultations resulted in some measure of agreement, but it was already impossible to re-ignite the uprising; the peasant masses had been paralyzed by the activities of the Warsaw agents and the savage repression and propaganda campaigns of Governor Muravioff.

Although Kalinoŭski realised that in Autumn 1863 the uprising was seriously impaired by the overwhelming power of the Russian soldiery and the brutality of Muravioff, he never lost hope of renewing the struggle. To his friends he would say: "All true sons of the nation must be ready to lay down their all on her altar to prolong the struggle." One of his typical utterances at this time took

<sup>6</sup>) When serfdom was abolished in the Russian Empire in 1861, the ownership in land was not transferred to the peasants gratuitously, but for a relatively high fee calculated on the basis of an official tariff, and which the peasant was obliged to pay off by instalments over periods of several years.

the form of a rhetorical question: "Whom should we love? — Love Byelorussia! — and one another."

Even before the uprising Kalinoŭski wrote in the third issue of "Mužyckaja Praŭda": "We have nothing to expect from anyone, for only he who sows can reap. So, my friends, when the time comes, let us sow with full hands, not sparing any labour so that the peasant may be free, as men are the whole world over. God will help us!" With such convictions, Kalinoŭski reorganised the insurrectional forces so as to be able to renew the armed offensive in the spring of 1864. But it so happened that in January 1864 the Tsarist gendarmes succeeded in arresting in Minsk one Parafianovič, a student who belonged to the insurrection's organisation in Mahileu and had seen Kalinoŭski. Under duress Parafianovič revealed to the gendarmes that Kalinoŭski was residing in the Vilna Gymnasium under the assumed name, Ihnat Vitažaniec. The information was quickly transmitted to Vilna, and during the night of the 28th of January, soldiers and gendarmes surrounded the Gymnasium building and took Kastuś Kalinoŭski prisoner.

Under interrogation he bore himself courageously, not betraying a single one of his friends. The military court sentenced him to be shot, but Muravioff altered the sentence to death by hanging.

While sitting in prison awaiting death, Kalinoŭski did not give up dreaming about the struggle for a better future of the Byelorussian nation. In prison he wrote a profoundly patriotic verse:

O, land of Byelorussia, o my dove,  
Where perished both your happiness and fate,  
All, all is gone, as it had never been,  
Only the smart still burns within the breast.

Do not complain of your sad lot, my people.

Should you remember me, say but a prayer,  
And I shall call you from the world beyond.  
So I must bid you all farewell, my friends —  
Live out your lives in freedom and in joy,  
But do not quite forget your faithful Jaško,  
And in that time when words must turn to actions,  
Then stand up manfully and fight for truth,  
For only with the truth in common counsel,  
Shall you in freedom live your length of days.

He also wrote the following: "Letter to the Byelorussian people from under the gallows" — which was in a sense Kalinoŭski's political testament.

"Friends, my brothers! From under the Russian gallows I am writing to you for the last time. It is sad to leave my native land and you, my dear people. My breast sighs and my heart is sore, but

it is not a sad lot to perish for your truth. Hear my last words in sincerity, my people, for it is as if they were written from this world only for your good. You will never have more happiness on this earth, my brothers, until man has understanding and learning in his head. Only then can he be equal and live in plenty, and only then, praying for the truth of God, can he deserve heaven, for once he has enriched his intellect and heart, he can truly love his country. But as day and night do not reign together, so also true learning does not go together with Russian slavery. As long as this lies over us, we shall have nothing. There will be no truth, no riches, no learning. They will only drive us like cattle not to our well-being, but to our perdition.

"When you see... your brothers struggling for truth, do not remain behind, but seizing what ever you can... go and fight with the whole people for your human and national rights, for your faith, for your native land. For I say to you from beneath the gallows, my people, you will only then live happily, when no Russian remains over you!"

With these thoughts Kastuś Kalinoŭski went bravely to his death at the age of 26 years. The sentence was carried out on the 10th (22nd) of March, 1864 on Lukiski Place in Vilna.

But his memory lives on in the Byelorussian nation and will be eternal. His firm faith in the truth and victory of his country and in a better future has inspired and still inspires the noblest sons of Byelorussia to achieve the goals for which he fought and died.