



An Attack against the Dragoon Detachment on December 20, 1905 at the *Provodnik* Factory in Riga

D a i n i s P O Z I Ņ Š
The Latvian War Museum

Keywords: *Revolution of 1905, protest demonstrations, Provodnik factory, Riga, dragoons, the Russian Army.*

The Revolution of 1905 began in Russia when on January 9, 1905 troops started firing at a peaceful crowd of workers, who, led by priest Gapon, were marching to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to petition Tsar Nicholas II. After a couple of days similar events took place in Riga. On January 13, 1905 participants of a protest demonstration inspired by the bloody events in St. Petersburg were marching to the city center. The demonstration was stopped by the troops of Riga Non-commissioned Officers Training Battalion at the Iron Bridge near the Daugava River. As the protestors tried to break through, soldiers opened fire and killed around 70 protesters and injured at least two times more. Rather big part of society was shocked by these events and lost any illusion about the authority of the Russian Empire.

From the beginning of the Revolution of 1905, Riga, the largest economic and political center on the territory of Latvia, became the heart of clashes between the authorities of Imperial Russia and illegal organizations (Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party, Latvian Social Democratic Union, Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, Jewish Social Democratic Organization *The Bund* and other underground groups). Several authors and collective research works have touched upon the theme of armed struggle during the Revolution of 1905 in Riga, but some events have not received full and detailed coverage (C i e l ē n s 1961). It especially pertains to the events on December 20, 1905, when underground fighters attacked a unit of soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army at the *Provodnik* factory in Riga. Until now most of publications were based on participants' memories and contradicting reports on casualties published in different newspapers soon after the attack.

The Gendarmerie Department of the Liefland Gubeernya of the Russian Empire carried out investigation immediately after the incident. These documents are kept in archives so the author took an opportunity to present a more detailed report on an armed attack of revolutionaries against the Russian troops.



Picture 1. Leaflet's illustration "Russian bear swallowed Poland, Baltic, Caucasus, Finland and now at last choked by Manchuria have forgotten exit to his own home" against Russian Japanese War issued by Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party around 1904–1905. *LKM RM 20322/10292 – VII*

Characterizing a general situation in Riga on the eve of the Revolution of 1905, we should keep in mind that it was a fast growing industrial city. In 1897 Riga had 282 000 inhabitants, in 1914 – already 520 000. The city attracted a lot of workers from the rural areas of Latvia, people from other parts of the Russian Empire came there as well. According to some estimates, Riga was the third largest industrial center of the Empire (*Rīga 1860. –1917.* 1978, 51).

Discontent with the Tsarist authority was manifested not only by a growing number of political parties striving to overthrow the monarchy but also by industrial strikes for better wages and working conditions, protests and riots, university demonstrations and assassinations of government officials, often done by revolutionary combatant groups. When gendarmerie and police forces were unable to suppress mass political and social unrest themselves, authority tried to do that using military forces. In the middle of 1905, the Russian Army had approximately 13 676 officers and soldiers stationed in Riga and its vicinity. Army

barracks were located in such a way that in fact the city was encircled by the Russian Army. The headquarters of the 24th, 29th, 45th Divisions were stationed in Riga as well (Bērzis 1992, 83). Such a concentration of government and opposition forces in Riga created a favourable setting for armed confrontations.

In the spring and summer of 1905, armed clashes between the Russian authority and revolutionary combatant groups became more violent. Sometimes explosives would be thrown at the Russian troops and police officers patrolling the streets. Officials and nobles, who were against a revolutionary movement, were threatened and some were attacked by revolutionaries. Factories stopped their work because of political strikes in Riga. These clashes caused widespread repercussions in society. After the manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II on October 17, 1905, the political situation in Latvia remained tense. Popularity of the Russian authority was low and different parties strived for real changes.

November and December of 1905 were marked by the culmination of the Revolution, escalation of armed clashes between government and opposition forces. On November 19-20, 1905, the Congress of Latvia Parishes Representatives took place in Riga. After the Congress, the Committees of Action became more active in the rural parishes of Latvia. In fact, the Russian government lost control over the rural areas of Latvia. By the beginning of December 1905, armed uprisings against authority took place in Tukums, Talsi, Rūjiena, Mazsalaca, Lielvārde, etc. As a response, the Russian Army sent Punishment Expeditions, started oppressing uprisings and launched repressions against members of the revolutionary movement and used brute force.

During that period the Russian authorities had control over Riga despite strikes in its factories and several attacks against officials by revolutionary combatants. Contrary to hopes of revolutionary organizations, the units of the Russian Army stationed in Riga remained loyal to the Tsarist authority. Fighters from the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party decided to launch assault against the Russian troops stationed at the *Provodnik factory in Riga*.

The factory was established in 1888. *Provodnik* manufactured rubber goods for the Russian Empire's internal market. Since the 1890s, the factory had a cartel agreement with the *Treugolnik* factory in St. Petersburg. *Provodnik* mostly employed female staff (*Latvijas PSR mazā enciklopēdija* 1970, 95–96). According to the memories of A. Veinberga (Jerste), former workwoman at this factory and participant in a revolutionary movement, most of employees came from rural areas, especially from Lithuania (*Veinberga* 1956, 38). Working conditions were severe because of chemicals used in the production process. Workers were attracted to *Provodnik* by little higher salaries compared to those at other factories in Riga. At that time an average salary of a workwoman was some 40–60 kopecks per day, but at *Provodnik* it was approximately a rouble per day. Workers received approximately 1 rouble and 50 kopecks per day. Many workers were employed under temporary contracts at *Provodnik*. They hoped to save up some money and move back to the countryside. Temporary workers had no big interest in politics.



Picture 2. House burned by Russian troops in the center of Talsi on December 5, 1905. *LKM RMRM* 4306 – f

Despite that, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party managed to increase its influence on factory workers.

In Riga, the Russian authorities were worried about a deteriorating situation and a loss of influence on the troops stationed right at the enterprises, including *Provodnik*. Unit commanders received orders from the police to organize troop patrols at the guarded factories. Officers were obliged to prevent direct contacts between the workers at the guarded factory and privates (*LVVA* 51. f., 1. apr., 26647. l.).

Documents of Gendarmerie investigation show that on December 20, 1905, *Provodnik* was guarded by the soldiers of the 9th Elizavetgrad Dragoon Regiment (*LVVA*, 4568. f., 1. apr., 988. l., 3). The Regiment units were sent to Riga to reinforce the Russian troops that had been already stationed there. In the territory of *Provodnik*, the dragoons lived in a small building on the right side from the factory's main entrance (*Ibid.*). Inside the building a narrow corridor was leading to the living room of 24 dragoons and a little forward to the factory guardsmen room. The windows of the both rooms were facing the side of the factory yard. The stables stood nearby, it was a separate building.

Early in the morning, at 6 o'clock of December 20, 1905, revolutionary combatants unexpectedly launched an attack against the dragoons of the 9th Elizavetgrad Dragoon Regiment. A survivor, feldsher from the 3rd Squadron, later testified that before the attack one soldier was keeping sentry in the corridor and another in the stables. A patrol had just come back and another group of soldiers



Picture 3. Barrack of 9th Elizavetgrad Dragoon Regiment's soldiers at the *Provodnik* factory around 1905–1907. *LKM RM 301 (111) – I*

were cleaning their horses and making preparation before patrolling, but the rest of the detachment was sleeping in the barrack. The feldsher said that suddenly a big crowd filled the yard of the factory, “encircled the room with the dragoons and opened fire“ (Ibid.). At the beginning of the attack the both sentries were killed by the attackers. After that they went into the corridor and opened fire at a close range on the dragoons. The attackers who stayed outside the barrack opened fire on the dragoons through the windows. It was easy to do because, as we can see in the photo, the windowsills were low, at the level of man's waist (*LKM 307-I: 111*). Three dragoons who had just come from patrolling returned fire on the crowd of the attackers. Immediately the revolutionary fighters retreated capturing the factory sledges, and went away from the site of the attack without losses.

As a result, this attack became one of the largest armed actions against the Russian Army in Riga. According to a Gendarmerie report, 12 dragoons, a police officer, a factory foreman and an unknown worker were killed and 7 dragoons wounded. The attackers captured 12 rifles (*LVA, 4568. f., 1. apr., 988. l., 4*).

The first group of soldiers of the 115th Vyazma Infantry Regiment arrived to *Provodnik* at 8 o'clock in the morning. The troops brought in two field canons and two machine guns. By this time the attackers had already fled from the site. The police and the Russian Army officers interrogated the factory workers. Gendarmes

arrived in the afternoon, at 3 p.m. According to the reports, the Russian Army took representatives of the factory workers as hostages. During the investigation and interrogation actions some workers managed to escape from the factory through the backyard fence towards Sarkandaugava. The troops opened machinegun and rifle fire killing several fugitives. During the investigation a woman apprentice was wounded but the gendarmerie report does not give a clear picture of the circumstances of this accident. During the interrogation the Russian officers demanded information about the attackers, carried out a search of the workers, the factory premises and the territory, but the investigation at this stage was not successful. Even an intimidation attempt with six rounds of canon fire did not help. The authorities arrested 53 suspects accused for political propaganda among the workers at *Provodnik* but the identities of the attackers still remained a mystery for the investigators.

Several Latvian newspapers published contradicting reports on the events at *Provodnik*. For example, on December 21 *Pēterburgas Latvietis* newspaper informed its readers that shooting occurred outside the factory at the moment when the dragoons were trying to carry out a search of the workers (*Pēterburgas Latvietis* 1905). Important and rather popular *Baltijas Vēstnesis* newspaper published several articles on the events at *Provodnik*. However, these articles were based mostly on rumours circulating in Riga. *Baltijas Vēstnesis* was forced to admit that, under present circumstances, it was not possible to obtain detailed information on the events at *Provodnik* because “individuals are locked out from the factory and contacts with the workers are prohibited” (*Baltijas Vēstnesis* 1905).

The gendarmerie investigation did not achieve any big results. People were arrested hastily by the troops without proper evidence. Thus later the majority of the detained were freed. In connection with the investigation of the attack against the dragoons, only 11 persons remained in custody (*LVVA*, 4568. f., 1. apr., 988. l., 61). Most of them were suspected as agitators against the authorities. The investigation was complicated because eyewitnesses could not precisely describe the attackers. So, the identities of the perpetrators remained unknown for the investigators even by the beginning of 1906. At that time Gendarmerie hoped that mass arrests of revolutionaries, carried out by the authorities accidentally, could give new evidence against the detained but that did not happen. So, the suspects were sent to exile outside the Liefland Gubernya (*Ibid.*, 66). Actually, Gendarmerie did not find out precise answers to a question how many fighters had attacked the Russian dragoons on December 20, 1905. The question still remains properly unanswered because of scarce information gathered by the investigators.

Hristians Treimanis, participant of the attack against the dragoons, wrote that the actions were organized by Pēteris Lapsa and Jānis Čoke and carried out by 60 combatants (*Latvijas revolucionāro cīnītāju piemiņas grāmata*, 66.-68). In his turn, Fēlikss Cielēns, one of the combatants of this attack, mentioned only 30 armed fighters (*Cielēns* 1961, 244). It shows how contradicting these numbers were even in the memoirs of the participants that later were published.

From a tactical viewpoint the combatants achieved success defeating a small unit of Russian soldiers during a surprise attack. Of course, losses of the Russian Army caused by the revolutionary combatants were disturbing for the authorities but the achievements of this combat could not impair the capabilities of the Russian Army in Riga. Although the workers at *Provodnik* did not know about the combatants, later they suffered from repressions carried out by the authorities. Cielēns admitted that “support for revolutionaries fell since the combatants threatened the lives of the workers” among the workers at *Provodnik* (Ibid., 225). Persecutions by the authorities were quite effective and groups of revolutionary combatants were no more able to launch major attacks against the units of the Russian Army stationed at the factories in Riga.

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Dainis Pozinis

Dragūņu pulko puolimas „Provodnik“ fabrikē Rygojē 1905 m. gruodžio 20 d.

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinēs sąvokos: *1905 m. revolūcija, protesto demonstrācijas, „Provodnik“ fabrikas, Ryga, dragūnai, Rusijas armija.*

1905 m. revolūcijas sākumā Ryga, lielākais pramonēs ir politikas centrs Latvijas teritorijā, tika apvienota starp imperālās Rusijas valdības ir nelegālās organizācijās (Latvijas sociāldemokrātās darbinīkās partijas, Latvijas sociāldemokrātās sajungas, Rusijas sociāldemokrātās darbinīkās partijas, Žydu sociāldemokrātās organizācijas ir kt.) centru. Nepasītenīnāmā carīnē diktatūrā rodē ne tik augantās politīnās partijas, kurās sīkē nuverstī monarhijā, skaičūs, bet ir streikai dēl didesnīo atlygīnīo, geresnīo darbo sājygu, protestai ir rīausēs, studentu demonstrācijas, pasīkēsīnīmai į valdības pareīgūnus ir kt. akcijas, kurās vykde revolūcīnēs karīnēs grupuotēs. Valdžia pasītelkē karīnēs pajēgas, mēgīndama slopīntī masīnūs politīnūs ir sociālīnūs neramumus. 1905 m. vīduryjē Rygojē buvo dīslokuota 13 676 Rusijas Armījas karīnīkai ir karēīvīai.

Tokā valdības ir opozīcīnās jēgu koncentracija Rygojē buvo palankī rengtī gīnkluotus susīrēmīmus. Carī Nikolajū II pasīkelbus 1905 m. spalīo 17 d. manifestā, politīnē situācija Latvīojē buvo ītemptā. 1905 m. lāpkričīo ir gruodžio mēn. ītampa pasīkē aukščīausīā taškā, paastrējo gīnkluotī susīrēmīmai tarp valdības ir opozīcīnās jēgu.

Ankstū 1905 m. gruodžio 20 d. rytā revolūcīonīerīai kovotojai užpuolē dragūņu pulkā, saugojusī „Provodnik“ fabrikā Rygojē. Tai buvo vīna stambīausīo gīnkluotū atakū prīeš Rusījas armījā Rygojē. Žuvo 12 dragūņu ir 1 policījas karīnīkās, 7 dragūnai buvo sužēstī. Atakos metu žuvo ar buvo sužēstā keletas fabrikos darbinīkū. Rusījas valdžia areštavo daug „Provodnik“ fabrikos darbinīkū.

Nuostolīai, kurīos patyrē Rusījas armīja, kēlē nerīmā valdžīai, bet nesumažīno jos karīnēs galīos. Parāma revolūcīonīerīams tarp „Provodnik“ fabrikos darbinīkū sumažējo, kadangī revolūcīonīerīu veiksmāi kēlē pavojū darbinīkū gyvybei. Valdības vykdytī persekīojīmai davē rezultātū: revolūcīonīerīu grupēs nustojo rengtī dīdesnūs īšpuolūs prīeš Rusījas armījas dalīnūs Rygojē.

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An Attack against the Dragoon Detachment on December 20, 1905 at the *Provodnik* Factory in Riga

S u m m a r y

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From the beginning of the Revolution of 1905, Riga, the largest economical and political centre in the territory of Latvia, became the heart of clashes between the authorities of Imperial Russia and illegal organisations (Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party, Latvian Social Democratic Union, Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, Jewish Social Democratic Organisation *The Bund* and other underground groups).

Discontent with the Tsarist dictatorship was manifested not only by a growing number of political parties that sought to overthrow the monarchy but also by industrial strikes for better wages and working conditions, protests and riots, university demonstrations and assassination of government officials, often done by revolutionary combatant groups. The authorities made attempts to suppress mass political and social unrest by military force. In the middle of 1905 the Russian Army with approximately 13 676 officers and soldiers was stationed in Riga and its vicinity.

Such concentration of government and opposition forces in Riga created a favourable setting for armed confrontation. After the manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II on October 17, 1905, the political situation remained tense in Latvia. November and December 1905 were marked by the culmination of the Revolution, escalation of armed clashes between government and opposition forces.

Early in the morning of December 20, 1905, revolutionary combatants attacked the detachment of the 9th Elizavetgrad Dragoon Regiment, stationed on guard at the *Provodnik* factory in Riga. The attack was one of the biggest armed actions against the Russian Army in Riga. 12 dragoons and 1 police officer were killed, 7 dragoons were wounded. The casualties of the attack also included several factory workers who were killed or wounded. In the aftermath many *Provodnik* workers were arrested by the Russian authorities.

The losses of the Russian Army caused by the revolutionary combatants were disturbing for the authorities but could not impair its military capabilities. Support for revolutionaries fell among the workers of *Provodnik*, since the combatants threatened the lives of the workers. Authority prosecutions were rather effective and groups of revolutionary combatants were unable to launch major attacks against the units of the Russian Army in Riga.

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