WORLD HISTORY INSTITUTE

Stepping Stones in Christian History

FREEDOM STORIES

Eighty Year's War

Winter 1574

The Siege of Leiden: A Seedling of American Liberty

Historical Spotlight

The winter of 1574 holds a long forgotten story from the Netherlands that altered the course of freedom forever. During the Eighty Year War, the Spanish army had encircled the Dutch city of Leiden, determined to crush the growing Protestant resistance. These Dutch rebels believed that rulers were not divine, but accountable to God's law, and they shared a fierce belief in religious freedom. The Spanish forces aimed to starve the residents and by February, food had run out and the people of the town of Leiden had been reduced to eating rats and burning furniture for warmth. Leather was boiled to make broth, and grass was scraped from frozen ground. Spain offered them a full pardon for surrendering their liberty.

Historian John Motley records their response from the walls: "Ye call us rat-eaters and dog-eaters, and it is true. So long, then as ye hear dog bark or cat mew within the walls, ye may know that the city holds out. And when all has perished but ourselves, be sure that we will devour our left arms, retaining our right to defend our women, our liberty, and our religion, against a foreign tyrant..."

In an effort to free the starving town, William of Orange, a staunch Calvinist, ordered the dikes cut to facilitate a near impossible rescue. The rising water would swallow farms, homes, and fields that had sustained generations. But even this took months, and a shift of the winds, to facilitate. The Spanish, unable to hold their positions once the winds shifted to the west, finally retreated. Relief vessels entered the city carrying bread and herring, and on October 3, 1574, Leiden was delivered. These half-starved families marched solemnly to the steps of the church and wept in thankfulness.

These were the same men, who, 35 years later, gave a home to the Pilgrim fathers. Under the pastoral care of John Robinson, a congregation of English Separatists settled in Leiden, working modest trades, raising children, and worshiping without fear of imprisonment. They had left England because they believed that Christ, not the crown, governed the Church, and that conscience could not rightly be compelled by civil power.

In Leiden they encountered not only safety but a political culture shaped by Dutch resistance theory, partly born out of conflict with Spain, which argued that magistrates are ordained by God for the good of the people and that when they become oppressors rather than protectors they forfeit their legitimacy.

A people who had endured starvation and watched their own land disappear beneath floodwaters had learned to distinguish between lawful authority and tyranny. They carried an intellectual inheritance.

The Famished People after the Relief of the Siege of Leiden, Otto Van Veen

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(continued)

These Pilgrims who later established Plymouth Colony had been shaped in the crucible of Leiden. Their understanding of covenant, limited authority, and communal self-government did not appear suddenly in American soil. It had been refined in a city that once chose to drown its own countryside rather than bow to coercion. Over time, these ideas traveled through sermons, political pamphlets, and assemblies, eventually surfacing in the language of natural rights and just resistance that Americans would recognize generations later.

When the Declaration of Independence asserted that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed and that people may alter or abolish governments that become destructive of their rights, it echoed principles long argued within the reformed resistance tradition of the Netherlands. The American experiment did not spring from Enlightenment speculation; it grew from a much older conviction that human rulers are not absolute and that liberty of conscience is anchored in divine authority. The citizens of Leiden endured their darkest months without knowing how their story would ripple across oceans and centuries. The Pilgrims worshiped in borrowed spaces without foreseeing how their covenantal thinking would influence a future republic. We are reminded that history often turns on such winter faithfulness!

(The Puritan in Holland, England & America, by Douglas Campbell, Vol 1 & 2)

Why it Matters Today

The Siege of Leiden didn't happen to just any people. It happened to a covenantal people. They didn't just have a national declaration of freedom, but a systematic, biblical understanding of their responsibility in their own community. This self-governing spirit grew in households and congregations that refused, even at great cost, to hand over the keys to their city. They knew the Spanish invaders would decimate them, as they had other cities nearby. But, they did not know they were also shaping the future with their fortitude; they were simply holding their ground in a hard winter. Yet endurance has a way of traveling.

The men and women of Leiden chose to flood their fields rather than surrender. Their winter became a seed that was fertilized in New England with the separatists for 150 years until it reached the hearts of our own founders.

Uitval op de Boshuyser schans - Beleg van Leiden
Anonymous, first half of the 17th century