

# Courland during the Reign of Peter von Biron (1769-1795)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article deals with the period of Peter von Biron's rule in the Duchy of Courland. It analyses the Duke's relationship with Courland nobility, his foreign policy and the reasons for the ending of the independence of the Duchy. Great emphasis is also placed on the influence of the issue of Courland on the foreign policy of Russia, Prussia and Poland. This article's research was conducted on the basis of Latvian and Polish archival sources.

**Keywords:** Duchy of Courland, Russia, Poland, Prussia, Peter von Biron, Catherine II, nobility, fief, 18th century.

## Introduction

The period of Peter von Biron in Courland culminated with Russian-Polish rivalry which took place throughout the 18th century. Although Courland was a Polish fief, it had attracted the attention of Russian rulers for a long time because it was an important strategic point, the control of which would allow Russia better access to the Baltic Sea, which would in turn strengthen its power. Empress Catherine II therefore tried to tie Courland to Russia as much as possible. The Polish King was aware of this and naturally tried to prevent this but lacked the resources to do so.

The period of the reign of Peter von Biron has not yet been monographed because the majority most of scientific literature usually focuses on the history of Courland as a whole (i.e. from the establishment of the Duchy in 1561 to the end of its independence in 1795). Literature on the history of Courland is not very extensive. To this day it has been marked by the fact that the history focuses mainly on the second half of the 19th century. The materials and analyses gathered are still used today and their interpretive framework is still seen as being valid.

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The earliest scientific work dealing with the history of Courland called *Curland unter den Herzögen* was written by Carl Wilhelm Cruse. The author discussed some events of the history of Courland in great detail. Unfortunately, his work contains partial factual inaccuracies. Copies of various documents issued by the Courland Duke or the Courland Landtag are attached. The publication *Die Geschichte des Herzogtums Kurland (1561–1795)* by August Seraphim can still be beneficial today. The author focused mainly on political history. He based his work on the memoirs of those that took part in the events, records of the meetings of the Courland Landtag and older German literature. Valuable information was also provided by a two-volume book by Alexander von Richter entitled *Geschichte der dem russischen Kaiserthum einverleibten deutschen Ostseeprovinzen bis zur Zeit ihrer Vereinigung mit demselben*. The third part of the second volume extensively discusses the history of Courland. The author used resources written in German and Latin and also dealt mainly with political history.

The most useful publication written in Russian is *Kurljandskij vopros v XVIII veke* which was written by the Latvian historian Heinrich Strods. The author worked with historical sources that are archived in Latvian and Russian archives. For foreign policy he referred to the administration of the Duchy of Courland.

In comparison to literature written in German and Russian, Anglo-American productions are briefer and do not go into too much detail. I consider the monograph *The History of the Duchy of Courland 1561–1795* by the American historian of Latvian origin, Alexander Valdonis Berkis, to be a great overview of the history of Courland. In addition to political history, he also focused on culture and education.

Despite the relatively extensive factual elaboration of the history of Courland in the aforementioned publications, even for the basic assessment of the period of the reign of Peter von Biron, it is necessary to also work with sources that are archived in the National Archives of Latvia in Riga, specifically with the materials of the fund *Courland Ducal Archive*. This archive includes records of the meeting of the Courland Landtag, laws and regulations of the Courland dukes, contracts with European countries, instructions for Courland delegates dealing with various European monarchs, letters to and from delegates in which they provided information about the results of meetings, or documents of Polish kings and Polish major chancellors, etc.

Valuable sources can also be found in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, especially in the fund *Crown Archive*. This archive includes documents on Russian-Polish negotiations, reports by the Russian and Polish ambassadors working in Courland, Courland's legal codes or documents issued by the Polish King, Stanisław August Poniatowski, and the Russian Empress, Catherine II.

Some documents on the history of Courland have also been published. One of the latest editions is the publication *Kurland: vom polnisch-litauischen Lehnherzogtum zur russischen Provinz: Dokumente zur Verfassungsgeschichte 1561–1795* compiled by the German historians Erwin Oberländer and Volker Keller, leading experts on the issue of Courland. The aim of the edition was not to provide a complete range of documents, but to choose only the most important ones for each time period.

Besides editions of legal and administrative documents, it is also possible to use the published memoirs of Baron Karl-Heinrich Heyking entitled *Aus Polens und Kurlands*

*letzten Tagen* which describe the period 1752–1796. In addition to the family history and his own life, Baron Heyking also focused on the major events of his time. Due to the fact that he worked in both the Russian and Polish services and was in contact with senior representatives of both countries, it is not surprising that he gives information that is not found elsewhere.

From the Czech literature, the monograph *Kateřina Zaháňská* written by Helena Sobková can be recommended. Catherine Wilhelmine of Sagan, known as Princess in the book *The Grandma* by Božena Němcová, was the daughter of Peter von Biron. She inherited the Náchod Estate from her father. In her monograph, the author quite understandably focused on Catherine's personality. However, some chapters also examined the policy of Peter von Biron which the author tried to put into a broader context.

This article focuses primarily on the relationship between the Duke and the nobility. It aims to answer the question of why there were constant disputes between those that took part in events and how those disputes were resolved. It also addresses the influence of the issue of Courland on the foreign policies of Russia, Poland and Prussia. It aims to clarify how these states interfered with the issues of Courland and how these interventions were legitimised.

## Results

The life of the last Duke of Courland, Peter von Biron, stands on the edge of the attention of European historians. Our scientific environment does not focus on Peter von Biron even though he is closely tied to Czech history. He owned the Náchod Estate and his daughter was Catherine Wilhelmine, Duchess of Sagan, known as Princess in the book *The Grandma* by Božena Němcová. The lack of knowledge of the existence of Peter von Biron in the Czech lands is the main reason for writing this article.

Peter von Biron was born on 15 February, 1724. He was the eldest son of Ernst Johann von Biron and his wife Benigna Gottlieb von Trotta-Treyden. Both parents lived at the court of the Duchess of Courland, Anna Ioanovna. His mother was her maid of honour, his father, chamberlain, and also Anna's lover and confidant. The godfather of the newborn was the uncle of Anna Ioanovna, the Russian Emperor, Peter the Great, after whom he was named.

In 1730, Anna Ioanovna became the Empress and moved to Russia. She quickly invited her favourite, with his family, to join her. Peter spent his youth in Saint Petersburg where his family enjoyed the favour of the Empress. In 1737, Anna Ioanovna arranged for his father to be elected the Duke of Courland (SIRIO 1892, 81, No. 8, p. 31; Kuruin 2014, pp. 43-44; Sobková 2007, p. 18).

Ernst Johann von Biron had big plans for his son. He decided to try to get the Russian crown for him. He therefore asked Anna Ioanovna, who was childless, for her permission for her niece, Anna Leopoldovna, to marry his eldest son, Peter. This was because Biron assumed that Anna Ioanovna would appoint her niece, who was her closest living relative, as her successor. However, this plan did not succeed because Anna Leopoldovna resolutely refused Peter and the Empress did not force her into the marriage (Russkij dvor 1907, pp. 37-38; Pavlenko 2002, p. 104).

Anna Ioanovna died in 1740. Before her death, she appointed the then two-month-old Ivan Antonovich, the son of her niece Anna Leopoldovna of Mecklenburg and her husband Anton Ulrich of Brunswick, as her successor. According to the wishes of the Empress, the Duke of Courland, Ernst Johann von Biron, became the Regent for the minor Tsar. However, he was in power for a mere three weeks. After that, he was thrown out by his opponents, who were led by the Tsar's mother. Based on her instructions, the family was sent into exile to the small Siberian village of Pelym (Münnich 1874, p. 59; Manstein 1875, p. 208; SIRIO 1893, 85, No. 62, p. 236).

In 1741, there was another palace revolution that brought Elizabeth Petrovna, the daughter of Peter the Great, to power. The new Empress had always had good relations with Ernst Johann von Biron. It was therefore assumed that she would call him back from exile and allow him to once again rule over the Duchy of Courland. To everyone's surprise, Elizabeth Petrovna prohibited Biron and his family from returning to Saint Petersburg and ordered them to move to Yaroslavl. Despite this, the living conditions of the family improved significantly. Part of their property was returned to them, they were allowed to receive and send mail and move freely around the city and its surroundings.

Biron's family were not allowed to return to Saint Petersburg until after the death of Elizabeth Petrovna in 1762. The new Emperor, Peter III, granted Ernst Johann von Biron an official pardon but did not go so far as to reinstate Courland. It was Empress Catherine II who finally did so in 1763 (Biron 1829, pp. 155-156; Kurukin 2014, pp. 365, 372, 385-386, 391, 398).

When Peter returned to Courland, he was already 38 years old. He decided to get married quickly. Unfortunately, he was not too lucky in his married life. His first wife was Princess Caroline Louise of Waldeck and Pymont. The spouses had very different personalities. They divorced after seven years. In 1774, Peter married a second time. This time, his chosen one was the Russian Princess, Evdokia Borisovna Yusupova. She had an intolerant nature, could not get used to living in Courland and was not very popular there either. She returned to Saint Petersburg very soon after the wedding. They divorced in 1778. The marriage also remained childless. In the following year Peter married for the third time. He married Anna Charlotte Dorothea von Medem, a member of an old Courland aristocratic family. The age difference between the spouses was 37 years, but the marriage was initially happy. Dorothea gave birth to a total of six children, of which four daughters lived to adulthood. The father of the youngest daughter, Dorothea, was not Peter von Biron, but the Polish nobleman Alexander Batowski. The Duke of Courland considered divorce. Eventually, to prevent a scandal, he officially took little Dorothea as his own and treated her the same as his other daughters. Dorothea also always considered Peter as her father. The relationship of the Biron couple became considerably more distant after Dorothea's infidelity and from then on they lived separately and met very little (Wilpert 1917, pp. 47-48; Arbusow 1908, p. 253; Sobková 2007, pp. 27-28, 60).

Although Peter von Biron was not an ugly person, as described by his contemporaries, he was not sensitive to the needs of his time. He did not achieve the same qualities of his father, Ernst Johann von Biron, even though he had a much better education than his father. He lacked Ernst's characteristic energy and slightly ruthless ambition. The long years spent in exile had adversely affected his character. Peter was often petty, sulky,

not sufficiently patient, did not know the right time to compromise and lacked practical political skills. He supported the arts, sciences and construction activity. He had most of the palaces that he owned magnificently rebuilt. His tender love for his children was also characteristic for him (Seraphim 1896, pp. 631, 633-634; Wittram 1973, p. 122; Berkis 1969, p. 262).

On 25 November, 1769, Ernst Johann von Biron passed the rule in Courland to his son Peter. He was tired of the constant disputes with the nobility and wanted to enjoy his old age in peace. However, part of the Courland nobility refused to recognise Peter von Biron as the new duke and sent a delegation with a complaint to Warsaw. The mission failed because the Polish King, Stanislaw August Poniatowski, issued a decision in February 1770 in which he ordered the Courland nobility to recognise the new duke and take the oath of allegiance to him. Peter von Biron also had the support of the Russian Empress, Catherine II. The Russian delegate in Courland, Simolin, was given the task to warn the nobility not to oppose to the Duke. The nobility, however, still refused to obey. Otto Hermann von der Howen<sup>2</sup> spoke out against the Duke most actively. He was arrested in July 1771 based on an instruction of the Russian Court in Warsaw. Correspondence with the Saxon electoral court and plans to overthrow Peter von Biron and reinstate Charles of Saxony<sup>3</sup> were found amongst his documents. Von der Howen was imprisoned in Riga for three years and was then released. After some time, he joined the pro-Russian-oriented party of Courland nobles and defended the interests of Catherine II. He was a man with great political skills, but of poor character. He was willing to sacrifice the interests of the Duchy for his own personal gain (Cruse 1837, p. 180; Berkis 1969, p. 263).

The entire reign of Peter von Biron was marked by disputes between the Duke and the nobility who sought to limit the Duke's power and get the so-called ducal domain<sup>4</sup> under their control. In 1740 – 1758, Courland experienced a period of interregnum during which the nobility tried what it is like to have power in their hands. They did not want to lose the power after the Duke's return. A great inspiration for the Courland noblemen was also the position of the Polish nobility. They often blamed the Duke for violations of their land and their economic rights. The Duke of Courland also often asked the Polish King, his feudal master, for help. The mutual disputes led to the weakening of the Duke's power and were beneficial to the neighbouring states that had a defence for intervention. The Duke did not have a sufficiently large army at his disposal and was therefore not able to defend the Duchy, in particular from Russian interventions (Strods 1993, pp. 147-149).

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<sup>2</sup> Otto Hermann von der Howen (1740-1806) came from an old Courland family. His father Otto Christopher von der Howen was the Hofmeister and often stood in opposition to the Duke of Courland. Otto Hermann studied in Strasbourg and Kiel where he gained a doctorate in International Law. He held many important offices and acted as the diplomat of the Courland nobility. He was often sent out on extraordinary missions to Warsaw.

<sup>3</sup> Charles of Saxony (1733-1796) was the son of Augustus III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. In 1758, the King of Poland declared the Duchy of Courland as vacant feud and arranged for his son to be elected the new Duke. However, in 1762 Catherine the Great ascended the Russian throne and decided to return Courland to Ernst Johann von Biron because she expected he would be grateful and would defend Russian interests. In 1763, Charles of Saxony was expelled from Courland by the Russian Army. He repeatedly tried to get back the Duchy of Courland.

<sup>4</sup> Ducal domain was movable and immovable property that belonged to the Duchy of Courland. The Duke could rent out or pawn off these homesteads, fields and forests for his own gain. It was however not his personal private property. One third of Courland belonged to the ducal domain.

In 1772, the first partition of Poland occurred. This idea is usually attributed Prince Henry, the brother of the Prussian King, Friedrich II. Prince Henry suggested that Prussia, Russia and Austria should split off part of the Polish territory, thereby reducing tensions between the superpowers and averting the threat of a European war. The agreement on the partition was signed on 5 August, 1772, in Saint Petersburg. Poland lost 30 % of its territory and 35 % of its population. After the first partition of Poland, the Russian influence in Courland intensified. The Duchy was now surrounded by Russia which had gained some Polish territories in western Livonia. The first partition of Poland also showed that Poland was facing complete disintegration. The cessation of Poland would result in there being very little chance of Courland maintaining its independence. Furthermore, it was widely known that Russia was interested in the ice-free ports of Liepaja and Ventspils in Courland (Stellner 2009, p. 261; Berkis 1969, p. 290).

In 1775, Peter von Biron founded the Academy of Sciences in Mitau<sup>5</sup> and wanted to establish a university there as well. However, to do this, he needed the consent of the Polish King because Courland was formally a Polish fief. The Polish King feared the animosity of the Pope. Had he agreed to the establishment of a Protestant university, he would, as a Catholic ruler, have been in violation of canon law. He therefore refused to approve the establishment of the university (Seraphim 1896, p. 638; Wilpert 1917, p. 46).

The year 1776 was a turning point for Duke Peter. The Russian Empress, Catherine II, who initially supported the Duke, decided to change her tactics in the 1770s. On 2 May, 1776, she informed the Russian delegate in Warsaw, Count Stackelberg, that she had decided to reward Prince Potemkin for his loyal service by granting him the Duchy of Courland. The delegate was instructed to cease support for Duke Peter and to begin pointing out his shortcomings. At the same time, he was supposed to inform the Courland opposition against the Duke that they did not need to fear Russia at all. The delegate was also supposed to seek the resignation of Duke Biron and ensure that Prince Potemkin was elected as the new duke. The Courland nobility was horrified by this idea because the powerful Potemkin would pose a greater danger for them than Duke Peter von Biron. The Courland noblemen therefore sought reconciliation with the Duke. Finally, an agreement was mediated by von der Howen for which he was rewarded by Peter von Biron with an annual income of 1,000 talers. On 8 August, 1776, the Duke signed a document that declared hereditary land ownership to all its current holders. This order also applied to some goods from the ducal domain. In return, the nobility supported Peter von Biron and did not insist on his resignation. The plan of the Russian Empress had failed. However, from that point onwards she always acted against the Duke.

On 27 September, 1782, Catherine II issued an imposition on the protection of the borders between the Riga governorate and the Duchy of Courland. Six border guard points were set up and Russian troops were deployed to the territory of the Duchy of Courland. The purpose of this move was to prevent illegal Courland and Polish-Lithuanian trade in Riga and to limit the escape of peasants on the routes between the Duchy of Courland and Riga. This regulation restricted the independence of the Duchy of

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<sup>5</sup> Mitau was the capital of Courland.

Courland, but the Duke was powerless against it (Bilbassow 1895a, pp. 293-294; Strods 1973, p. 150).

In 1783, a Russia-Courland agreement relating to trade and their shared border was concluded. Russian buyers acquired the rights to the free transport of goods across Courland. On the other hand, Courland goods had to be exported through the Russian port in Riga. The area around the city of Sloka was attached to Russia.<sup>6</sup> Russia concluded this agreement with Courland without the permission of the Polish King. Poland therefore did not want to ratify the agreement. It did so only after the insistence of the Courland delegate Ziegenhorn (Berkis 1969, p. 266; Mattiesen 1957a, p. 204).

The dispute between the Duke and the nobility escalated further in 1788. In 1784-1787, Duke Peter took a journey across Europe during which he visited places such as Berlin, Dresden, Munich and Italy. During this journey he tried to strengthen his position and gain allies. Leaving the Duchy for so long was considered a very thoughtless step and Peter's closest relatives attempted to talk him out of it. However, the Duke had his way. In his absence, the Duchy was to be ruled and the ducal domain managed by the highest ducal councilman and the Courland provincial council.<sup>7</sup> The nobility, of course, tried to enrich themselves at the expense of the Duke. The salaries of the officials of the ducal office were raised without his consent and knowledge, new office jobs were created, wood from ducal forests was deliberately timbered and the ducal property was leased to noblemen for too long under disadvantageous terms. During the Duke's stay abroad, the noblemen destroyed about 60 ducal estates. They were very cheaply leased to the Duke's opponents. The debt of the Duchy increased from 73,000 to nearly half a million talers. After returning home, the Duke requested the property back and the nobility, of course, refused to return it. Peter therefore appealed to the Polish King who issued a decision in favour of the Duke on 15 January, 1788. At the beginning of the judgement, Stanislaw August Poniatowski emphasised that he hoped for a reconciliation of the dispute between the Duke and the nobility. He went on to express his wish that similar clashes would no longer occur in the future. After considering the arguments of both sides, the King said that although the highest ducal council was authorised to manage the ducal domain in the absence of the Duke under the applicable laws of Courland, it was not authorised to approve regulations that would restrict or challenge the rights of the Duke. The Polish King accused the highest ducal councilman and the Courland provincial council of a breach of the oath of allegiance to the Duke because they had failed to defend his rights. Stanislaw August insisted that the Duke had the right to freely manage the ducal domain and establish institutions for its management as well as lease his estate to whomever he wanted. The nobility did not have the right to make such extensive changes. Although the Polish King believed that the salaries of some officials were unsatisfactory and advised the Duke to increase them in the future, he condemned their autonomic increase. Finally, the King urged both parties to settle their disputes. The nobility were supposed to respect the Duke's decisions and protect his honour, reputation and rights (Heyking 1897, p. 320; Berkis 1969, pp. 266-269; Strods 1993, pp. 153-154; Cruse 1837, pp. 191-193; Richter 1858, p. 201).

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6 The Empress confirmed the treaty on 3 August, 1785. Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, *Crown Archive*, Part Russia, folder 11, signature 23/6, 3 August, 1785, pp. 5-6.

7 National Archives of Latvia in Riga, *Courland Ducal Archive*, folder 1570, 4 August, 1784, pp. 10-12od.

The Courland nobility was outraged by this decision and accused the Polish King of overstepping his powers because, in their opinion, such a dispute was supposed to be handled by the Polish Sejm. To support its position, Peter sent his wife Dorothea, who had excellent diplomatic skills and quick wits, to Warsaw. The Duchess of Courland made an excellent impression on the Polish noblemen. As a result, the council eventually ruled in the Duke's favour. Dorothea also charmed the Polish King with her beauty and fell in love with her (Heyking 1897, p. 343; Sobková 2007, pp. 46, 55).

Throughout the 18th century, Courland was the subject of Polish-Russian rivalry because it was an important strategic area. After the expulsion of Charles of Saxony from Courland and the death of Augustus III, the Polish influence on the Duchy weakened because the new King, Stanislaw August Poniatowski, was rather passive. Conversely, the Russian Empress, Catherine II tried to strengthen Russian influence in Courland. She actively interfered in Courland matters with the aim of weakening it as much as possible to be able to attach it to the Russian empire at the right moment. Courland also attracted the interest of Prussia, but suitable conditions for the more active promotion of Prussian interests only occurred after the first partition of Poland. Contacts between Courland and Prussia were conducted through the University of Königsberg and Prussian immigrants who had great cultural influence. A number of Courland noblemen also served in the Prussian army which, of course, caused displeasure to Russia (Strods 1993, p. 160).

Peter von Biron continued with the traditional Courland foreign policy of focusing on cooperation with Prussia. After the first partition of Poland, it was also clear that only Prussia was able to maintain Russian influence on the Duchy within certain limits. At the end of the 1780s, the interest of Russia in Courland weakened as a result of wars with Sweden and Turkey<sup>8</sup> (Tuchtenhagen 2005, p. 46). Prussia therefore decided to seize the opportunity. On 26 September, 1790, the Prussian Legation was established in the capital of Courland, Mitau, and Carl Ludwig Hüttel was appointed the head of the legation. His task was nothing less than to weaken the Russian influence on the Duchy. The delegate was also assigned the task of acquainting the Duke with a plan to create a marriage alliance. According to this plan, Prince Frederik of Orange, the nephew of the Prussian King, Frederick William II, and Wilhelmina, the eldest daughter of the Duke Peter von Biron, were supposed to marry. This marriage was supposed to protect the independence of Courland and prevent its attachment to Russia. After the Duke's death, his son-in-law was supposed to take over the Courland ducal throne. The Duke of Courland agreed with this idea and Prussia began to explore what the opinions of such a marriage would be in other European countries. In the end, the marriage did not take place because the Russian Empress was opposed to it, referring to the fact that she had to protect the interests of the children of the Duke's uncle, Charles Biron<sup>9</sup> (Bilbassow 1895a, p. 299; Arbusow 1908, p. 254; Cruse 1837, p. 186; Berkis 1969, pp. 291-294).

The Prussian delegate was also tasked with informing the Prussian King of the number and disposition of Russian troops in Courland and report on the position of Duke Biron. In his dispatches there are frequent mentions of the Duke's helplessness and the

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<sup>8</sup> The Russo-Swedish War lasted from 1788 to 1790. The Russo-Turkish War lasted from 1787 to 1791 and it was terminated by the Treaty of Jassy. The borders of the Russian Empire were transferred to the Dniester. Turkey recognized Russia's annexation of the Crimean Khanate.

<sup>9</sup> Peter's brother Charles had male offspring.



weakness of his supporters. The Prussian delegate assessed the majority of Courland noblemen as being persons with no patriotic or national sentiment. He was very well aware that the nobility hated the Duke because of his wealth, and therefore he advised Peter to lease out the greater part of the ducal domain (Strods 1993, pp. 163, 165).

In 1792, the second partition of Poland took place. This time only Russia and Prussia were involved. The agreement signed by the two countries on 7 August, 1792, contained a secret clause in which both sides agreed to maintain the status quo in Courland. Despite the agreement, Prussia became more deeply involved in Courland affairs. In December 1792, the Russian Chancellor therefore asked for the Prussian delegate to be removed from Courland. On 28 January, 1793, Hüttel received an order from the Prussian Foreign Minister regarding the closing of the legation. After the second partition of Poland, it became evident that Prussia would not help Courland. The annexation of Courland by Prussia was not possible, probably for strategic reasons. Courland was too far from the centre of Prussia and in the event of a war with Russia its defence would be very difficult (Berkis 1969, pp. 294-295).

The second partition of Poland triggered a revolution in Poland. At the beginning of 1794, Lithuanian troops crossed the Courland borders to deal with Russia. The Russian delegate in Mitau urged Peter to strengthen the ducal units for the event that the insurgents attacked. The Duke said that it was impossible for his 400-500 men to defend the entire Lithuanian border, especially when Courland people sympathised with the insurgents. On 23 May, 1794, the Lithuanian insurgents, under the command of Prussian Lieutenant Mirbach, occupied the city of Liepāja, raided the local military warehouse and proclaimed the freedom of the vassals. The Duke was invited to pledge allegiance to the Polish constitution from 1791. The Courland underlings joined the insurgents and rebelled against their masters. On 30 May, 1794, Duke Peter issued a statement in which he urged Courland underlings not to pay any attention to the new doctrines declaring freedom and equality. Although the Duke's statement was read in churches for six weeks, it did not make the peasants refrain from supporting the insurgents. The insurgents gradually took over several other Courland cities. After the two-day battle of Gaviezes, which took place on 24-25 July, 1794, they forced the regular Russian army to retreat. The Russians retreated to Mitau. Some Courland noblemen were aware of the impending danger and therefore promised their peasants to revoke servitude if they maintained peace and good order. However, the majority of them did not truly mean what they had said because they definitely did not intend to voluntarily give up their privileges (Seraphim 1896, pp. 669-670; Richter 1858, p. 231).

Peter Biron eventually decided to write a letter to Empress Catherine II in which he asked her to have Russia take over the protection of Courland. The Duke still hoped that Courland could maintain its independence, the only difference being that Poland, as its feudal master, would be replaced by Russia. On the Duke's order, an extraordinary provincial council was convened and held from 30 June to 12 July 1794.<sup>10</sup> The delegates approved the Duke's request for Russian protection and military help against the insurgents. The insurgents left Courland on 11 August, 1794 upon learning that General Suvorov had started moving towards Warsaw with his powerful army (Heyking 1897, p. 443; Berkis 1969, p. 296).

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<sup>10</sup> Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, *Crown Archive*, Part Russia, folder 117, signature 55a/36, May 30, 1794, pp. 1-7.

The Courland nobility decided to request the annexation of Courland to Russia. Otto von der Howen was once again actively involved in this matter. He arranged for the extraordinary provincial council to send a delegation headed by him to Russia. Duke Peter von Biron was invited by the Russian Vice-Chancellor Ostermann to come to the Russian court together with the delegation. On 7 February, 1795, the Duke arrived in Saint Petersburg with the delegation. Empress Catherine II secretly met with von der Howen and agreed how Courland would be connected to Russia. After the meeting, the governor of Livonia, General Pahlen, received special instructions in which the Empress ordered him to support the activities of von der Howen. However, Catherine informed the Courland delegation that the annexation may occur only if approved by the Courland provincial council. At the same time, she assured the nobility that their privileges would be maintained. The council, not surprisingly, approved the annexation to Russia without any problems.<sup>11</sup> Duke Peter finally had no other choice but to agree with the decision of the council because Catherine had informed him that after the fall of Poland there was no longer a reason for the separate existence of his vassal state. On 17 March, 1795, Peter von Biron signed a document of abdication (Oberländer, Keller 2008, pp. 315-316). For his voluntary resignation, Catherine II left him a life-title of the Duke of Courland and gave him an annual allowance of 25,000 ducats. She also bought his private Courland estates for two million roubles (Heyking 1897, pp. 454-455; Sobková 2007, p. 61; Wittram 1973, p. 124).

## **Conclusion**

The reign of Peter von Biron was marked by constant disputes between the Duke and the nobility who sought to limit his power and keep their privileges. Courland noblemen prioritised their wealth, privileges and personal interests and did not hesitate to sacrifice the independence of the Duchy in the pursuit thereof. The Duke had no means to regulate the nobility.

During the reign of Peter von Biron, as was true during previous times, Courland was a territory where Russian and Polish interests clashed. While the Polish influence steadily declined, the Russian influence strengthened. There was a short weakening of the Russian influence after the second partition of Poland. This was because Russia had to turn its attention to other problems for some time. Prussia took advantage of this opportunity and tried to prevent the annexation of Courland to Russia and take the Duchy for itself. This effort failed because of the considerable distance between both territories.

The Duke of Courland, Peter von Biron, managed to economically stabilise the Duchy and accumulate considerable wealth. However, he could not have prevented the annexation of Courland to Russia. It was impossible due to the limited options he had as the ruler of a small state, in particular the absence of a sufficiently strong army. He therefore eventually made an agreement with the Russian Empress and voluntarily abdicated, for which he received substantial compensation. At that point Courland definitively became part of the Russian empire and the Courland issue came to an end.

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<sup>11</sup> National Archives of Latvia in Riga, *Courland Ducal Archive*, folder 1574, March 18, 1795, pp. 10-12od.

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