

Finally, victory for the Baltic states

by Hartmut Cramer

The Baltic people, whose history has been full of terrible ebbs and beautiful flows, with many, many painful periods, in August scored their first decisive victory in the last 52 years: The sovereignty and independence of the states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were recognized first by the Russian Republic, and then by a plethora of western states, among them the entire European Community, which, because of its economic and political weight, is of utmost importance.

But before this victory was achieved, the people in the Soviet Union, and especially in the Baltic states, were forced to look straight into hell: Upon hearing of the military coup in Moscow on Monday Aug. 19, which was accompanied by aggressive military action by the hated OMON troops against the Baltic states, the governments of these republics and the leaders of their independence movements made the last preparations for organizing governments-in-exile abroad and going underground. Already, the three foreign ministers had been dispatched to Scandinavia with the mission to form governments-in-exile.

In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, the storming of the parliament was to be expected any minute after the last remaining key buildings, like the telephone center in Vilnius and the television station in Kaunas, had been captured by the coup-plotters already early on Aug. 19. Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis had called on the people to come to the parliament and defend this symbol of freedom and democracy with their bodies, a call which, as in January, was effectively answered by the population: Tens of thousands of Lithuanians immediately streamed to the parliament and stayed there all night and day, in case the parliament were captured. Nevertheless, Landsbergis had already called for

a general strike and, in order to stress that the Lithuanians would never give up in their peaceful resistance no matter what happened, Sajudis, Lithuania's independence movement, organized a one-hour warning strike at noon on Aug. 19, which was 100% successful.

Equally strong was the resistance inside the parliament. Monday night, a special session was held during which all parliamentarians ratified the treaty with Russia, which had been signed just a few weeks earlier and in which both sides mutually acknowledge their sovereignty and independence. The next day, a delegation of parliamentarians left for Moscow to present the documents to the Russian government and parliament, asking for help in this serious situation. But the situation was desperate and the chances for survival were minimal. Relatives abroad were ordered to stay away at all costs, and the assault of the tanks, which already were positioned in key areas of the Baltic capitals, was imminent.

Saved by a miracle?

But then, happily, the situation changed. The people in the Baltic capitals and in Leningrad and Moscow stood firm, went against tanks bare handed, and defeated a coup which surely would have meant the total destruction of the Baltic states. Some term it a miracle that the Russian people, long attacked for their apathy, had the guts to stand up, but it wasn't a miracle at all: They were simply fed up with the communist system, they literally had nothing to lose, and, above all, the Baltic people, and especially the Lithuanians, in January had shown them how to win such a fight against all odds. In this way, the horrible sacrifices of "Bloody Sunday" in Vilnius during January had not been in vain; the Russian people had learned the lesson and acted upon it.

But after this victory the trouble didn't end, at least not in Vilnius. Immediately after the coup was defeated on Aug. 21, Lithuanian Prime Minister Vagnorius arranged with then-Soviet Defense Minister Gen. Mikhail Moiseyev that all buildings occupied by the OMON and KGB troops in Lithuania would be vacated, including those occupied since "Bloody Sunday." It all went well until Gorbachov returned to Moscow that night; "after that, the action stopped, and the well-known game was played: Moiseyev in Moscow insisted he had given the order to withdraw, the local OMON commander in Vilnius stated he never received such an order," said a deputy of the Lithuanian Parliament. At 11 p.m. Wednesday night, a very serious "incident" occurred near the parliament, when one of the guards in front of it was shot and two of his comrades wounded by passengers of a car which had tried to break through the barricades and enter the immediate area around the parliament building.

Sajudis called a demonstration for the next day in front of the television tower, against its occupiers, and hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians were on their way to Vilnius to stage a mass rally in front of the parliament commemorating (i.e., protesting) the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact 52 years ago. Together with the mass demonstrations in Leningrad and Moscow, these demonstrations of the will for freedom of the Baltic people forced the central government in Moscow to give in.

One action fueled another. Estonia, and then Latvia, followed the example of Lithuania, which had declared independence on March 11, 1990. The Russian government of Boris Yeltsin had notified the Baltic governments Monday night that it had officially called on the western states to immediately recognize the Baltic states diplomatically. To put more teeth behind this demand, Yeltsin sent his foreign minister to the West.

During a speech given to the parliament on Thursday morning by Lithuanian President Landsbergis detailing the planned withdrawal of the Soviet special forces from Lithuania, it was suddenly reported that the Soviet military commander in Vilnius had called, announcing that "the OMON forces will leave the TV tower within the next 15 minutes." The session was interrupted as all parliamentarians and government members rushed to the tower to watch this historic moment with their own eyes.

But though the central government in Moscow had now officially withdrawn its forces from all the occupied buildings, the orthodox communists in Lithuania were still occupying other buildings, such as the pedagogical high school, the archive of the Academy of Sciences, and others. To force the communists completely out of power, the government and parliament on Aug. 22 issued decrees calling for the complete withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Lithuania, the seizure of the (considerable) wealth the Lithuanian Communist Party had assembled and stolen over the last 50-plus years, and for the ousting of local CP bosses, who until now

had survived as local administrative leaders in certain cities and regions of Lithuania, and who had supported the recent coup. Since the central CP apparatus in Moscow was considerably weakened and almost smashed by Yeltsin, such an action, long overdue, had become possible, and it was implemented immediately in Lithuania and the other two Baltic states.

Rush to diplomatic recognition

After Gorbachov had been publicly humiliated by Yeltsin, and the latter had officially also recognized the independence of Estonia and Latvia by the end of this historic week, the Baltic countries stood right in front of their biggest victory to date: They, who had been the pariahs of the international political community, who were given the boot by frightened western heads of state merely upon a hostile twinkling of the eye by an arrogant Gorbachov, as had happened at the CSCE meeting in Paris last year, were now suddenly at the center of world attention.

From Aug. 26 on, the list of countries that officially recognized the Baltic states as independent and opened up diplomatic relations, grew longer. The little nation of Iceland, which had been the only one in the West to have the guts to take such a courageous step, was the first western country to send a diplomat to the Baltic states, and was immediately followed by Denmark. Then other countries joined in, such as Poland, Argentina, Hungary, Italy, and the Vatican.

The big question was what the "big players" in the West, like the United States and the European Community, would do. There was a lot of foot-dragging in Europe for some days; U.S. President Bush had certainly pressured his European "friends" to hold back, as well as Gorbachov, who said the establishment of relations was done too "hastily and too early." Strangely, Gorbachov still had some credibility with the Europeans, who seemed not to realize that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes.

But reality reasserted itself very quickly. German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who has a nose for evaluating which way the strongest wind is blowing, suddenly "discovered" a letter which Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had written to Moscow in 1955, stating that opening up diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union "does not mean recognizing the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union." Displaying the letter, Genscher didn't have to bother to join the western governments now racing to recognize the independence of the Baltic states. Germany, which never had ceased to recognize the independence of the Baltic states, simply had only to "reopen" diplomatic relations, an act performed in a ceremony on Aug. 28-29 in Bonn in the presence of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In his speech, Kohl announced that his government, which had pressured the EC-member states the day before to also recognize the Baltic states diplomatically, would push for an "associate member-

ship" status for the Baltic countries in the EC in order "to facilitate their economic development."

'We can live without the U.S.!'

The government of France took great pains to disguise the fact that it had treated the Baltic states very badly until the last moment. A special envoy of French President François Mitterrand was sent to the Baltics to sound out the situation and announce that France would establish diplomatic relations very soon. The worst picture in the West was given by U.S. President George Bush. The last sympathies which he might have had among the Baltic people in their countries and abroad, after his recent cynical remarks in Moscow on the executions of seven Lithuanian border guards by Soviet special forces, are now gone.

"America betrayed us," was the slogan of the Baltic partisans and freedom fighters already in the 1950s, after they had to learn the bitter lesson that the U.S. government had broken its promise "to come and help." The same mood was prevailing before and during the recent war against Iraq, which everybody in the Baltics knew would mean a "green light" for the Soviets to move militarily against the Baltics, which they did, in Lithuania and Latvia. Now, Bush may have gone overboard, destroying relations completely, no matter when he finally makes up his mind and establishes diplomatic relations. His "diplomacy" failed, the damage has been done. It's a fact: The Bush administration is among the last governments in the world to officially recognize the Baltic states; even communist Albania had the guts (or slyness) to face reality in this respect.

What this means was made clear by the unofficial Lithuanian representative in Washington, Lozoraitis, who also served as his country's representative to the Vatican in the past. When every government was rushing to recognize his country, and he learned from the White House that Bush was still wavering, he told the American people and the world in a television interview, smiling, "We are now being recognized by many countries, including the European ones. If the U.S. doesn't want to do this, well, we can certainly live without that."

Washington should take heed, that this might be the policy of not only the Baltic nations, but all the other old and new republics in middle and eastern Europe, including Russia. If such a mood spreads to western Europe too, then Bush is finished for good. Concerning the behavior of the Baltic politicians, however, one might wish that they continue to speak with such clear language as they have in the past; if they further refrain from realpoliticking, as Lithuanian President Landsbergis has often mocked the cowardly behavior of the western politicians, and stick to their policy of telling the truth no matter what—a policy which has just been proven to be the correct one in the long run—then the participation of these small countries in the international political arena is a gigantic gain for the entire world.

The old Soviet Union is dead

by Konstantin George

The signing of a historic agreement between the Russian and Ukrainian republics to form a new league of independent states on Aug. 29, marked the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. As Leningrad Mayor Anatoly Sobchak said, the friends of Mikhail Gorbachov may oppose the agreement, but they cannot change this reality.

To underscore the dramatic shift, on the very same day Gorbachov was stripped of all emergency powers, and the Supreme Soviet agreed to vote itself out of power; and the Communist Party was suspended and its funds sequestered. Furthermore, the Russian republic has assumed control of the central financial institutions formerly controlled by the Soviet Union.

A new federal political and economic structure is coming into being, which will no doubt extend beyond the two republics now in alliance; nonetheless, Russia and Ukraine, already between them, represent about 80% of the entire economic weight of the U.S.S.R.

Overnight, along with an independent Russia, the independence of the three Baltic republics has become reality, as has the independence of Moldavia and Georgia. Russia's sister Slavic republics of Ukraine and Belorussia have emerged as nations, linked to Russia in a new league of independent states, in an economic and customs union, roughly modeled on the 19th-century Zollverein of the German states, where each member state is an internationally recognized sovereign nation.

Sweeping decrees, issued by Boris Yeltsin in the week of Aug. 19-25, have destroyed the power of the *nomenklatura's* institutions, by abolishing the Communist Party and seizing all its property and assets; by eliminating Soviet TV and mass media, placing them under Russian control and conducting a wholesale purge of the KGB-connected leadership, newscasters, and commentators; by eliminating all "Soviet" property on Russian territory, making it Russian State property; by accelerating the process of national independence in recognizing the independence of the three Baltic republics, and allowing Ukraine and Belorussia to move toward independence. As the Aug. 23 Russian Parliament proceedings documented, Yeltsin is allowing Gorbachov to formally remain