

A hint of revolution in the Baltic air

Karl Marx was right — almost. The workers of the world have risen and they are throwing off their chains. Only it's happening in the communist nations, not, as Marx predicted, in the capitalist West.

This week's most dramatic events occurred in deeply troubled Yugoslavia. Angry workers stormed party headquarters in Belgrade and Novi Sad, demanding the ouster of the Communist party leadership. Politicians have diverted surging unrest over the disastrous economy into a revival of aggressive Serbian nationalism. This, in turn, is pushing Yugoslavia toward civil war.

Workers in Poland are threatening to bring down the Warsaw government. Labor unrest is growing fast in Romania, Hungary and even far-off Vietnam.

In the USSR, workers and consumers are steaming over their nation's worsening economic problems but they have not yet reached the stage of open revolt. Except, perhaps, in Estonia where events of exceptionally curious nature are now taking place.

Estonia has only 1.5 million people; its capital, Tallinn, sits just across the narrow end of the Baltic from Helsinki. Along with its neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia was independent until July, 1940, when Hitler made a deal with Stalin that let the USSR annex what had been Imperial Russia's former Baltic provinces.

As a byproduct of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, Estonians have been allowed — even encouraged — to form a Popular Front that was totally independent of the Communist party. An ecologically oriented Green Party was also founded last May.

Last week the Popular Front met in Tallinn and called for a political and economic program that can only be termed dazzlingly revolutionary.



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The Front, which is now the prime political power in Estonia, is demanding almost total autonomy from Moscow. It wants to print its own convertible currency, end collective farming, sell state enterprises to workers or private businessmen and force many Russians who have settled in Estonia to pack up and leave. Large, polluting industries foisted on Estonia by Moscow's central planners will be shut down.

Moscow must also admit that the 1940 Hitler-Stalin Pact was against the will of Estonians, demands the Front. Some radicals are even urging a declaration of independence from the USSR, though wiser heads have vetoed the idea. There are also plans for free elections and a free press.

Can such events really be happening in the Soviet Union? My Soviet sources tell me that unknown to the outside world the Latvian port of Riga was actually shut down for three days last summer by the new Latvian Green Party which was demanding the same rights as the Estonian Popular Front. You can smell revolution on the salty Baltic air.

A few years ago, Estonian nationalists were being sent to the Gulag. Today, they have the official blessing of

Mikhail Gorbachev who has lent his personal support to the Popular Front. What's going on?

Gorbachev knows that the Soviet Union's economy is fast going down the drain. The Soviet leadership, I have been told on the best authority, deeply fears that the party is being totally discredited and may even lose power. Gorbachev's economic reforms have so far failed and food shortages are worsening.

Gorbachev's solution may be to let the Baltic states go capitalist, or at least to develop a free market and political system that will serve as a laboratory for reform in the Russian republic.

It's not hard to imagine the industrious Estonians quickly turning their little republic into the Hong Kong of the Baltic. In fact, the Baltic states could shortly come to duplicate the quite successful free economic zones set up by Chinese reformers along their coast. The Baltic free enterprise zones would be the USSR's open window onto the world that would attract western technology, investment and consumer goods.

Peter the Great had a similar plan back in the 18th century. It failed, but perhaps Gorbachev will have better luck. If the Baltic booms, he will be able to convince his deeply conservative citizens that there really is a better way than the run-down, rusting welfare state to which they cling. Better to experiment in a small, safe corner of the USSR than in the Russian heartland.

If the experiment goes sour, the KGB can also shut it down in a day. But if it goes well, and I think it will, then the busy Baltic peoples could just provide ailing Mother Russia with a desperately needed shot of economic tonic. Otherwise we may see angry Soviet workers and consumers marching on the Kremlin.