

# Is this Gorby's Waterloo?

**M**ikhail Gorbachev is due to arrive today in Lithuania where he probably will receive a less than friendly welcome. To the rest of the world, the Soviet leader may be a saintly reformer; but to fired-up Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians, Gorby is the man who won't set them free.

Lithuania, the largest of the Soviet Baltic republics, has thrown down the gauntlet in front of the Kremlin and demanded independence. What this means depends on whom you ask.

Some Lithuanians and other Baltic peoples want total autonomy within a loose Soviet federation. Others demand a return to the complete independence the Baltic states briefly enjoyed from 1919-39, when they were annexed by the USSR.

The powerful Lithuanian popular front is calling for total independence. The Lithuanian Communist party has had to echo this call for fear that otherwise it will be crushed in upcoming February elections. Moscow has reacted to demands for an independent Lithuania and independent communist parties with anger and dismay. The only surprising point is that Moscow hasn't sent in the tanks.

Gorbachev is clearly stuck with a nasty dilemma. His policies of glasnost and perestroika call for self-determination and free expression. Which, in turn, has unleashed potent nationalist forces across the USSR. At some point, Gorby will face the painful choice between G&P and keeping the USSR in one piece.

Lithuania is the first crisis. Latvia and Estonia are next. Followed by demands for secession from Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and perhaps by the Moslem republics of Soviet Central Asia. This means that almost 48% of the USSR's population might potentially decide to decamp from the federation.

While I sympathize with the Baltic peoples and understand their lust for independence from Soviet

## Punch



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rule, I also think they have chosen a terrible time to press their demands. Worse, their increasingly extremist position is threatening Gorbachev's survival — and he is the man who made their uprising possible.

The Russian Communist party, KGB and armed forces are deeply divided over how to deal with the Baltic and other secessionist problems. Gorby's faction, which is still dominant, wants to use debate and conciliation to convince the restive, non-Russian republics to stay in the USSR. The conservative faction, now growing increasingly powerful, wants to crack down swiftly and ruthlessly. Look at East Europe, hard-liners warn. Mother Russia is next. They could be right.

To many Russian nationalists, Gorby is coming to look like another dreamy Jimmy Carter. Unfortunately, the Baltic peoples are so wrapped up in emotion they don't see they are about to kill the goose who laid their golden egg. If they press Gorby any harder, he will either have to send in the KGB and Red Army or face being overthrown by the Politburo. What's needed now is caution, restraint and small steps.

There are other major problems. All three Baltic states have sizable ethnic Russian minorities — in some cases, up to 40% of the population. Baltic nationalists are talking about expelling them. The Baltic rail network is Russian-run and tied into the USSR's system. Baltic industry has been configured by central planners in Moscow to serve the needs of Soviet manufacturing.

The Soviets have always favored the Baltic at the expense of the Russian Republic with more consumer goods, industrial investment and subsidies on raw materials. These will disappear if the Baltic secedes, leaving the region in very bad economic shape.

It's a fantasy to think that a free Baltic will suddenly turn into another Finland or Sweden overnight. More sensible is for the Baltic to stay autonomously within the USSR and serve it the way Hong Kong serves China.

And let's recall our history. The Baltic region was ruled for centuries by the German Teutonic knights, the Swedes, Poles and Russians. The Baltic states were independent for only 20 short years. I think they should be again, but the Soviets certainly do not. For Russia, the Baltic coast is as strategically vital as the Gulf Coast is to the U.S. and a key focus of Russian grand strategy for the past 400 years. I just can't believe Moscow is going to reverse the course of Russian history because a lot of nice Baltic people sing songs and hold candles.

Rumors are again pouring out of Moscow that Gorbachev is in danger of being ousted, in large part because of the Baltic situation. If Gorby goes, the Baltic will then have to deal with hard-liner Yegor Ligachev and his tank generals.