

THE BALTIC STATES AND THE END OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

Kristian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund

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OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE



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KRISTIAN GERNER AND STEFAN HEDLUND

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Under new management	24
3 A Baltic background	49
4 Transforming the Soviet Union	69
5 Dissolving the Soviet Union	106
6 Destroying the Soviet Union	145
<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>References</i>	198
<i>Index</i>	205



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Preface

The sudden disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, that shocked the world in the autumn of 1991, was an event of unique historical significance. Philosophers of history and comparative imperiologists are left with the task of trying to explain how an empire could break down so fast and so completely, without any major display of physical violence. Experts on international relations have to explain how one pole in a bipolar system could suddenly break down, without any military or political threats, not to speak of acts of violence, emanating from the other side. Socialists finally have to repent.

If history is made by men, as some have argued, this indeed is the case on which to test that hypothesis. In the present work, we approach the self-destruction of the Soviet Union from the vantage points of methodological individualism and game theory.¹ Relying on a variety of sources, we have tried to create a comprehensive picture not only of what happened but also of how it came about and why events took the turns they actually did.

We have chosen to focus on relations between the three Baltic states, on the one hand, and the imperial government in Moscow, on the other. The basic reason is that this was where the observable part of the process of Soviet disunion began. Living in Sweden, moreover, we found it rather natural, not to say irresistible, to focus on processes in that part of the dissolving union which for cultural and security reasons were of direct concern to Swedish society.

Although constituting a tiny minority of the 'Soviet' population, and an almost negligible share of its territory, the Baltic states played a role in the Soviet breakdown which can hardly be overestimated. Economically as well as socially, these were the most developed parts of the USSR. It was here that the key to a better future was seen to lie, long before Gorbachev. It was they who were the first to abandon the sinking ship. To an actor- and conflict-oriented analysis such as ours, moreover, it is of crucial importance

that the tiny Baltic states displayed a rich variety of ideologies, actors and political strategies.

Ours, however, is not only a study of the Baltic–Muscovite struggle as such. For the general scope of the analysis, it is of great importance to note that the same diversity which could be found in the Baltics, also marked Transcaucasia and Central Asia, the other large regional peripheries of the Soviet empire. The problem for the central government was that it had as adversaries actors who sometimes could join forces but who also had different kinds of grievances towards Moscow.

For the empirical parts of our study we have relied not only on printed Soviet materials but also on compilations of facts and analyses made by Swedish and other Western journalists and social scientists. We have also made good use of Swedish-language sources. The latter reflects not only the fact that the authors are Swedes themselves but also the circumstance that in the late 1980s Swedish society took a particular interest in developments in the Baltics. Thus a host of studies on Baltic themes have been published, ranging from book-length studies to short notices in the Swedish press.

We would like to mention especially, as valuable sources of information for this study, the works by Ignats and Sandström which are listed in the References section. We would also like to express our appreciation of the work that is being carried out at Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe in Munich, Germany. As may be seen from the reference list, their weekly reports have been of great value to our work.

In conclusion, Kristian Gerner would like to acknowledge support from the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

1 Introduction

The most immediate purpose of this book is to tell a story. Its heroes are the three small Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Its plot is based on their eventually successful struggle to gain independence from a Soviet Union they never wished to be part of in the first place, and its moral concerns how, in that process, they actually helped to destroy both the Soviet state itself and the Communist Party that had been its leader and architect.

Rather like a folk tale, our story begins with Lenin granting the three Baltic peoples independence 'for ever', from a Russia torn asunder by revolution and civil war. Then the big bad wolf Stalin quashes this freedom, by way of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, and finally, in the triumph of right over might, the three Baltic presidents of the transition period, Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania, Anatolijs Gorbunovs of Latvia and Arnold Rüütel of Estonia, stand up to the infamous Black Beret special forces of the Soviet Interior Ministry.

At first glance, the story of Baltic secession has all the trimmings of a world in simple black and white. The bad guys wear black and are armed to the teeth. The good guys are little and armed with nothing but courage and the righteousness of a just cause. The bad guys are Communists. The good guys are democrats. In Hollywood it would all go down very well, but in real life, as we shall see, the picture is less clear-cut.

A complication of particular importance arises with respect to the reversal of roles that took place in the early post-independence period, when the previous Soviet majority nationality – the Russians – suddenly became a national minority in the three Baltic successor states. This rather dramatic turning of the tables not only brought unaccustomed insecurity to the Baltic Russians. It also placed the democratically elected governments of the three newly-independent Baltic states in a position of equally unaccustomed responsibility for the future course of events.

Most importantly, however, the change of scene in the Baltics brought

2 *The Baltic States and the end of the Soviet Empire*

home to outside observers that the world as a whole had changed, that old patterns of analysis would no longer suffice. In order to understand what may now become of the various parts that until very recently combined to make up the Soviet Union, it is imperative also to understand the processes that led to its disintegration. In this sense, our story has an immediate bearing on the empirical study of post-Soviet development. At the same time, however, it also seeks to establish some analytical points of great relevance.

In presenting the story of Baltic secession, we create a framework which will be used to study the mode of conflict resolution within a disintegrating Soviet Union. The topic as such has a considerably greater analytic appeal than might be apparent at first. Neither conflict resolution nor imperial decline represent problems which are new in their own right, but in their present application both pose vital new questions.

In world history, the death of empires is something akin to the order of nature. The Chinese, the Roman, even the British – all the great empires have gone the same way, albeit in a different fashion, and it was hardly realistic to expect the Soviet version to last for ever. The intriguing point lies in all previous experience telling us that empires go through a long period of decline, before being finished off by some external shock, normally a war.

Neither is applicable to the present case. In a few short years, the Soviet Union went from being a superpower with great influence in world affairs, to becoming an economic basket case intensively engaged in begging for aid. It did so, moreover, pretty much on its own. Even if civil war should break out amongst the ruins of the former Soviet Union, the Soviet collapse will still be remembered more as an implosion than an explosion. The way in which the Soviet empire collapsed, in a few years and without being attacked by outside enemies, must be unique in world history. All previous great empires have either needed centuries to dissolve, been violently overrun, or vanished by way of an orderly political process (the British).

The very speed of these internal events leads us on to the question of post-imperial adjustment, and to the challenges being faced by the new political leaders. Can they be expected to have the skills necessary in order to guarantee a peaceful post-transition period? Or, phrased somewhat differently, can the old Soviet leaders be relied upon to handle in a constructive manner open political challenges, from actors that would normally have been taken care of by the KGB?

We are rather ill-equipped to answer these questions. From a theoretical point of view, Soviet bargaining behaviour represents a well-known and well-researched topic. Bargaining processes within the planning apparatus have been extensively studied, and the same holds for patterns of

international negotiations. The present case, however, is one where different nationalities haggle over the way in which the Soviet Union should be first reformed and then dismantled. The very structure of the process is thus of a kind that makes it fall well outside all previous applications.

The struggle between Moscow and the Baltic republics offers an excellent background for a first attempt at sorting these questions out. We have threats, intimidation and violence. We have the underdog reaction of stubborn peaceful resistance, coupled with hints of civil disobedience. We have superpower implications, and we have new challenges to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process of a new order for European security. Most of all, however, we quite simply have a good story.

Since it was the breakdown of Soviet power that made room not only for the 'refolutions'¹ of Eastern Europe in 1989, but also for the policy of secession that eventually led to the establishment of fifteen post-Soviet successor states, it might be a good idea to start by looking briefly at the *process* of disintegration.

END OF EMPIRE

By the end of 1990, all of the fifteen fully-fledged Soviet republics had issued various forms of sovereignty declarations, and the same went for a host of minor autonomous formations within these republics. The constitutional chaos that resulted from the accompanying practice of issuing conflicting sets of legislation became known in Soviet parlance as the 'war of laws'. The picture as a whole was rather baffling, and one was hard put to predict where it all would end, with a bang or with a whimper.

During 1990, Soviet politics had come to resemble the game of 'musical chairs'. In the first round there were sixteen Soviet presidents, but only fifteen Soviet republics. Judging from moods amongst the Soviet population at the time, moreover, there was hardly any doubt as to who would be left out when the music stopped. Even more importantly, the chances were that in a second round the same procedure would be repeated within at least some of the successor republics.

The most compelling example was, and at the time of writing still is, that of the former Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which is presently engaged in searching for a new name and a new identity. In April 1992, the Russian Congress of People's Deputies decided on a compromise, calling their state 'Russian Federation. Russia'. (The full stop left room for individual choice of what name to use.) As the Soviet Union crumbled, it became increasingly obvious that the RSFSR was about to run

4 *The Baltic States and the end of the Soviet Empire*

into much the same kind of trouble. Within its borders could be found around a hundred different nationalities, some of whom were settled in no less than sixteen autonomous republics, ten autonomous *okrugs* and eight autonomous *krais*. In 1990 they all began to seek various forms of sovereignty.

In terms of population, the autonomous provinces of the Russian Federation are not overly important, holding merely 20 million out of a total of close to 150 million inhabitants in the federation as a whole, but economically their importance is far greater than implied by mere population figures. Geographically, they account for about half of the republic's total area, and it is on their territories that the bulk of Russia's once vast supplies of natural resources is to be found.

Given the heavy dependence of the Russian economy on above all its energy exports, the issue of regional autonomy took on some considerable importance. When the Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, declared that Russia should have the right to her own resources, it was only natural for the autonomous regions of the RSFSR to claim that such rights should be passed on to those who actually resided in these areas.

To mention but one example of the gravity of this problem, a new giant gas field has recently been discovered in the Yamal peninsula, which is located in the the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous *okrug*, which is part of the former RSFSR, which was part of the Soviet Union. One would certainly expect President Yeltsin to claim that the Russian Federation should be the master of this plentiful source of hard currency earnings, but if the indigenous populations of the area were to claim that such rights should be passed on to them, where would it all end?

Supposing that the 17,400 Nentsy, the 6,500 Khanty and the 5,600 Komi who live in this area were to acquire full rights to the gas deposits, they would soon not only become rich as the Kuwaitis, but would also be able to oppress the almost 100,000 Russians living in 'their' autonomous *okrug*.² This will certainly not come about, but what will? How will these conflicts be resolved?

Similar stories can be told for many other strategically important resources. Much of the oil, for example, can be found in Tatarstan, in Bashkiria and in Chechen-Ingushetia, the latter being an autonomous Caucasian republic where the struggle for independence took a violent turn in late 1991. Much of the 'Russian' gold, moreover, is to be found in Yakutia, a vast area with very few indigenous people. Somehow, these conflicting interests will have to be aligned, as will a host of other problems of a similar kind.

Seeing these processes unfold, some Russian intellectuals began to speculate that the future Russia would be something akin to South Africa,

with independent states landlocked within its borders. The Kingdom of Lesotho would in this analysis correspond to the free Republic of Tatarstan, which flatly refused to participate in the Russian presidential election that was won by Boris Yeltsin in 1991. In the spring of 1992, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published a rather striking map of a future *Respublika Rus*, a country that meandered its way – from the Baltic to the Pacific – amongst all the non-Russian territories.³

To the outside world, the process of Soviet breakdown seems to have come as a total surprise. Attitudes marked by a high degree of confusion produced policies which in equal measure rested on wishful thinking. Up until the very last moment, hopes remained high that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mikhail Gorbachev would somehow manage to square the circle, to preserve the union intact without resorting to force.

The fallacies of such a policy should have been obvious already at the time of the parade of republican sovereignty declarations, which shook the Soviet Union during 1990, but in a somewhat broader perspective we must conclude that it was far from being an isolated aberration. A rather ominous parallel could be seen in the initially naïve Western approach to the Yugoslav crisis.

By the time of the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, on 25–6 June 1991, it was obvious to all serious observers that the level of ethnic tension within Yugoslavia had risen beyond the point of no return for the federal state. Serbs and Croats in particular could no longer be expected to live together in the same state. These facts notwithstanding, both the United States and the European Community underscored the imperative need to preserve the unity of the Yugoslav state. Nobody wanted to deal with a break-up. No ideas for a peaceful dismantling of the federation were put forth.

This is not to say that a more resolute policy would have succeeded in averting the tragic events that were to unfold during the fall and winter of 1991. Maybe things had already gone too far. The important point to note, however, is that no attempt was made. Shielded behind the principles of inviolable borders and of the integrity of states, the outside world stood passively by, watching as tensions rose to the point where a savage civil war was unleashed. It would be hard to find a more powerful indication of the absence amongst Western nations of a preconceived international policy, taking into account realities rather than wishful thinking.

Returning to the case of the Soviet collapse, we find a similar pattern of attitudes and policies. Although both political and ethnic processes were pointed firmly in the direction of a dissolution of the Soviet state, it was Mikhail Gorbachev's central power that was the focus of outside policy-making. During his visit to Kiev, only days before the August coup, President George Bush could still issue warnings about separatism and

6 *The Baltic States and the end of the Soviet Empire*

come out strongly in favour of a central power.⁴ Compared to Yugoslavia, however, the composition of the Soviet crisis derived from an even more complicated reality. The case of the United Nations will serve to illustrate.

In the United Nations, the Soviet Union had one seat, the Ukraine one and Byelorussia one. This rather strange composition of the Soviet representation was the outcome of negotiations where Stalin had initially argued that each of the then sixteen Soviet republics should have its own seat. The compromise said that the Soviet side should be granted a representation equal to that of the three Western allies, that is the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

The fact that Russia did not get a seat of its own reflects the very deep-seated Russian habit of viewing Russia and the Soviet Union as one and the same. Republican institutions inside the Soviet Union were never intended as anything more than window dressing, and the same went for the Ukrainian and Byelorussian delegations at the United Nations.

During 1991, however, all this changed profoundly. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, Russia had to put up a hard fight in order to carve out its own post-Soviet existence. With respect to internal affairs, that process had begun already in 1990, when the RSFSR had successfully established its own Communist Party, its own Supreme Soviet, its own president, even its own KGB, but when it came to international relations, progress was made at a much slower pace. The struggle for recognition cannot really be said to have got off the ground until well after the misguided August 1991 coup.

Already on the following Monday, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Thomas Pickering, said that Russia ought now to take the place of the Soviet Union and that all other former Soviet republics were welcome to apply for membership.⁵ Treading gently, Boris Yeltsin did hint that he too would like representation in the United Nations, but up until the very last minute Western policy remained in favour of the integrity of the Soviet state. The first real breakthrough towards international recognition came with President Yeltsin's visit to Germany, in late November 1991, and the signing of a Russo-German friendship agreement.

In sharp contrast to the Russian caution, the Ukraine had been actively engaged in exploiting what it considered to be its rights to an independent foreign policy. Agreements on the exchange of diplomats had been signed with Poland and Hungary already in the late spring of 1991, and at about the same time the Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk, had visited Germany, where he met with both President Richard von Weizsäcker and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Most remarkably, after the Soviet crackdown in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, in January 1991, the Ukrainian delegate to the UN Commission on Human Rights caused quite a stir by strongly condemning that action.⁶

A decisive step towards international derecognition of the Soviet Union appears to have been taken with testimony given by CIA director Robert Gates to the US Senate in November 1991, indicating that President Gorbachev would be out before the end of the year. Prompted, most likely, by a need to pre-empt a possible Yugoslavian scenario, President Bush finally decided to play a more active role.

Only days before the crucial Ukrainian referendum on sovereignty, held on 1 December, President Bush announced his willingness to consider recognition of an independent Ukraine. In so doing, the US administration not only crushed all prospects for a preserved Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, it also effectively placed itself in charge of both the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the safe-keeping of its nuclear arsenal. In a parallel move, moreover, President Yeltsin announced that if the Ukraine decided to turn its back on the union, Russia would do the same and that would obviously be the end of that.

By now the situation was in total flux. The outside world still maintained that some form of central power must remain, at the very least with respect to issues like control over nuclear weaponry and the servicing of the foreign debt. In relations between the republics, however, even these were debatable issues.

In the end, a solution was indeed generated from within. Meeting near the Byelorussian capital Minsk, on 8 December the presidents of the three Slav republics agreed on the formation of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), to succeed the defunct Soviet Union. After some initial rumblings, eight of the other formerly Soviet republics decided to join in, and on 21 December the full-size CIS was created. Furious at not even having been informed, let alone consulted, Mikhail Gorbachev took a few extra days to adjust, but on 25 December he finally announced his resignation, from the presidency of a country that no longer existed.

Thus the game was over. Western powers finally had to realize that both the Soviet period and Gorbachev's reign had come to an end. Russia was recognized as the heir to the USSR, and was invited to 'inherit' its seat in the Security Council of the United Nations. Paradoxically, what had started with a Bolshevik coup, in November 1917, ended with a democratic counter coup, in December 1991. Regrettably, substantial damage had been done in the intervening years.

A STRATEGY OF CONFLICT

What makes the story of the Baltic republics particularly relevant to a deeper understanding of the drama of Soviet disunion, is the fact that this was where it all started. It was in Estonia that national flags and symbols

8 *The Baltic States and the end of the Soviet Empire*

were first displayed, in defiance of the Soviet ones. It was in Estonia that the notion of economic autonomy was first presented, as a first step away from central planning, and it was in Lithuania that full national independence was first proclaimed, as a first challenge to the integrity of the Soviet state.

The resulting tug-of-war between Moscow and the three Baltic capitals was a subtle and many-layered one. Most importantly, it was one where rules and objectives were in a constant process of change. Nothing could be further from the truth, for example, than the picture often presented in Western media of a soft-spoken Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis stubbornly sticking to his principles, in the face of an equally immovable Soviet/Russian counterpart.

While there was certainly an air of stale constancy about some of the rhetorical window-dressing that accompanied the Baltic drama, behind the scene dramatic changes repeatedly took place. This does not mean that feasible solutions were ever presented, before the events of 19–21 August. It merely says that various positions and objectives were shifted around and that new alliances were built.

In the following chapters we shall separate this process into three distinct phases, each being characterized by its own strategies and alliances. The first will capture the emergence of Baltic ambitions for a greater autonomy within the Soviet Union, and the reasons for the central government to support such ambitions. In the second phase, the initial strategy of cooperation is transformed into one of pure conflict, where the Baltic player wants to leave the union and the Soviet counterpart tries to prevent such an outcome. In the third and final phase, the cohesion of both sides is destroyed and consistent strategies become hard to identify. It is significant that this phase ends, in August 1991, with the collapse of the central Soviet power.

Since our focus will be on conflict, it is natural that tools and terminology will come from the world of game theory. This, however, will also bring into the picture some problems of connotation. The notion of ‘game’, for example, is in this context something very different from the games people normally play. Before the story can begin, some basic concepts will thus have to be defined and explained.

First of all, our understanding of the concept of ‘strategy’ shall be that used by Thomas Schelling, in his classic 1960 study *The Strategy of Conflict*.⁷ Schelling’s own definitions are well-suited for the present purposes:

The term ‘strategy’ is taken, here, from the *theory of games*, which distinguishes games of skill, games of chance, and games of strategy, the

latter being those in which the best course of action for each player depends on what the other players do. The term is intended to focus on the interdependence of the adversaries' decisions and on their expectations about each other's behavior. This is not the military usage.⁸

A key point with respect to our presentation is that of the interdependence of the strategic choices of different players. It is in this dimension that we shall see how the 'game' being played between Moscow and the Baltic republics has been repeatedly transformed. As one side reacts to actions taken by the other, not only strategy but also objectives undergo change. Even more importantly, as the objectives undergo change, we shall also see how the composition of the players is transformed.

While it may be trivial to state that there was a world of difference between Moscow in 1991, when the Baltic race for freedom ended, and the Moscow of 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev entered the stage, it is of some considerable importance to recognize that the Baltic side underwent great changes as well, from initially being one single actor in opposition, to becoming three different players who were all internally divided. In order to better understand the basic characteristics of the various phases of this process, we shall proceed to say something about the nature and structure of the 'games' that are referred to here.

Already in his 1960 book, Schelling complained that game theory had become excessively focused on the special case which is known as the 'zero-sum game', and in the preface to the 1980 edition he sees no reason to alter his previous critique. The main problem concerns the limited range of applications that this specific game has to real world bargaining situations.

The defining feature of the zero-sum game is that it is a game of pure conflict, where the gain of one is the loss of the other. Consequently, there is no room for either threats, promises or speculation about the other player's expectations. In each game there is an optimal strategy to follow, irrespective of what the other does. The most well-known illustration of this game is the Prisoner's Dilemma.⁹

In contrast to the zero-sum game of pure conflict stands the much richer class of what Schelling refers to as 'pure-collaboration' games, where players either win or lose together. In traditional terminology, these respective cases are known as fixed- and variable-sum games. If chess is used to denote the former, charades may be taken to represent the latter.¹⁰ In the following we shall refer to the zero-sum game only during one very special phase of the process of Baltic secession.

In a 'bargaining game', which is Schelling's more convenient suggestion for the variable-sum version, a crucial role is played by

10 *The Baltic States and the end of the Soviet Empire*

expectations. Where the zero-sum game has an optimal strategy, irrespective of what the opposition does, here each player will have to consider carefully what the opposition may have in mind. In the end, those considerations will determine the outcome: 'What is most directly perceived as inevitable is not the final result but the expectation of it, which, in turn, makes the result inevitable. Everyone expects everyone else to expect everyone else to expect the result; and everyone is powerless to deny it'.¹¹

What Schelling presents here is a rather neat summary of the logic of human political history, indicating that it should be defined as the outcome of the interplay of the actors' perceptions of what is inevitable. This means that history is made by men, and not according to mechanistic 'laws'.

The key to understanding games of this kind lies in realizing the importance of the coordination of expectations. Schelling illustrates this by referring to the practice of maintaining the name, number and military history of army units, even beyond the point where they ought rightly to have ceased existing. The rationale is that expectations connected with the old identity will make a build-up easier to achieve than if recruits were drafted into an entirely new formation.

Similar illustrations may be taken from completely different spheres of society:

It may be the same phenomenon that makes it possible to collect income tax in some countries and not in others; if appropriate mutual expectations exist, people will expect evasion to be on a scale small enough not to overwhelm the authorities and may consequently pay up either out of a sense of reciprocated honesty or out of fear of apprehension, thus together justifying their own expectations.¹²

From a policy point of view, the main issue here concerns to what extent the formation of such expectations can have any effect. In a pluralistic society, that question would be hard to answer. Campaigns for a clean environment qualify as an eminent illustration of how systematic indoctrination has succeeded in establishing social norms against littering, but when it comes to the success of other policy ambitions the outcome is not as clear. There are quite simply too many conflicting messages around.

In the totalitarian type of society with which we are faced in this presentation, the situation is entirely different. There is an official ideology, which claims to have a 'scientifically correct' answer to all possible questions. There is an official Party priesthood, which is placed in charge of constantly interpreting and developing the corpus of relevant thought, and there is a repressive apparatus ready to deal with any potential heretics.

Where we have a state which continuously, vigorously and explicitly