

The myth of Good Czar Gorbachev. (Repression in the Baltics)

By Vladimir Kvint

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U.S. and Western Europe tried to help the cause of Soviet reform by pandering to Gorbachev's government. As the repression in the Baltics shows, the cause would have been better served had we been tougher with the Kremlin.

In failing to press Gorbachev on behalf of Lithuanian freedom, the Western government.... unwillingly brought to a halt the further progress of perestroika. President Bush and his allies... have strengthened the bands of those in the Soviet Union who are trying to stop the movement of progress. “

So wrote Vladimir Kvint in an almost prophetic FORBES article, *The best way to help Gorbachev is to take life difficult for him*” (June 11, 1990). Gorbachev point was simple and blunt.. By insisting Gorbachev move toward reform and freedom we would strengthen his band in the difficult job of curbing communist extremists and centralists, by easing up we reduce his need to crack down on the hard-liners This dire prophecy was redeemed in a shower of lead and a clanking of tank treads last month in Lithuania.

What does Kvint see now? In 1991 the name “U.S.S.R.” will disappear from the political map of the world. It would be interesting to know what the Norwegian Nobel Committee now thinks of last year's winner, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Until January this revolution could have been peaceful. But unwavering Western support for Gorbachev and centralized Soviet power have strengthened the hard-liners and increased the chance of a bloody civil war.

Last spring Gorbachev imposed an economic blockade on Lithuania. In this way he tested the reaction that might come from the West were he to back down on reform. Then, at the summit in May, President Bush accepted several promises from Gorbachev. Gorbachev never fulfilled them. The law on freedom of travel and immigration, for example, was not passed even though Gorbachev promised to adopt it in June, right after the summit. Thus the green light for today's tanks appeared then, in May.

Gorbachev is a master manipulator of Western opinion. He will fire the generals who, he claims, gave the order to put down Lithuania behind Gorbachev's back.

In doing this, Gorbachev will be repeating an ancient Russian drama. For centuries, Russian serfs believed in the image of the kind” czar. They believed that everything wicked was done by his evil ministers, acting behind his back. “If only the czar knew” was an emotion that helped countless Russians rationalize the state's irrational brutality against them. Many of those who knew about Stalin's atrocities believed that he was unaware of them. He was a “good czar. “ So is Gorbachev; only his generals and ministers are wicked.

Only this time the Western leaders behave like the Russian serfs. By making Gorbachev the beloved child, they allowed him to become a despot.

Yes, a despot. The latest news, ignored or not comprehended by the Western press, is that Gorbachev abolished the President's Council early in January. Now Aleksandr Yakovlev, the main promoter of democracy in Gorbachev's team, is out of a job. And in December Gorbachev fired Vadim Bakatin, the minister of the interior, who apparently disagreed with Gorbachev's plan of suppression for Lithuania and other rebellious republics. After Bakatin's sacking, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze broadcast to the world his fears about the coming dictatorship. The Western World regretted the resignation but pretended it didn't hear his warning. There are now democratically elected parliaments in 7 out of 15 republics. In these parliaments lies big potential for democracy. But this potential cannot be realized in a despotic country and that is why civil war is now almost inevitable. While it may fool naive Westerners, the image of the kind czar - Gorbachev in his latest incarnation - cannot deceive people in the U.S.S.R. any longer. The real disintegration of the U.S.S.R. will start sometime between March and October of this year, when hunger and economic crisis will reach their peaks. Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Moldavia will be the fuses of the explosion. By my estimate, approximately 12% of the country's territory could be enveloped in civil war. There is little hope that it won't be bloody.

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At any rate, perestroika is dead. But perestroika was a naive notion, anyway. It means reconstruction," but reconstruction could not help socialism to survive. In any case, Gorbachev and his allies never forswore socialism or even communism.

Gorbachev's timing has been sophisticated. He made good use of the approaching war in the Persian Gulf. It is clear that President Bush is worried about retaining Gorbachev's support, but at this point there is no reason for Bush to worry. Gorbachev cannot back Saddam Hussein: He needs Western capital and technology; and by changing his position on the Persian Gulf, Gorbachev could incur the real wrath of the West. This is something he is truly afraid of.

For Western businessmen interested in doing business in the Soviet Union, now is a time for caution but not paralysis. Some of the new independent republics will voluntarily enter a new confederation. They will delegate to it some political responsibilities. The confederation will also deal with nuclear arms and military strategy. But Gorbachev and his crowd will probably end up as figureheads. Boris Yeltsin and the leaders of the other

republics are the people to deal with in the U.S.S.R. now-both for foreign governments and for business people hoping to get a foothold. Yeltsin now is popular in all the republics, and not in Russia only. His main task is to revive Russia and to rebuild ties with the other republics, without the center. Yeltsin understands that revival is impossible without integration with the West. Under him the Russian parliament has already adopted the best legislation as to the protection of Western capital.

What should the U.S. do? Stop all economic aid and loans to the centralized U.S.S.R. government; this aid is senseless. This would involve suspending the trade agreement signed at the spring summit until all Gorbachev's promises are fulfilled. Nor should there be any new meetings with Gorbachev until he provides a new union treaty-signed by the republics voluntarily, and not with a tank muzzle at their heads. The U.S. and the other Western countries should loudly and firmly condemn the invasion of Lithuania and establish direct contacts with the democratic republics and their parliamentary governments. In continuing to back Comrade Gorbachev, the U.S. is-not for the first time in recent history-backing the wrong horse.