

Following the failed coup d'état in the USSR in August, a surge of nationalism swept through the dying empire. By November, all but two of the fifteen Soviet republics declared their independence. Some, like the three Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), Armenia, and Georgia had already asserted their intention to achieve independent statehood before the coup d'état, but from late August until late October, most others joined the independence bandwagon.

ONLY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND KAZAKHSTAN (where the Russian proportion of the population is nearly as large as the Kazakh) broke the spell, presumably because they would form the core of any new Russian-dominated union. With the old centre defunct, they would in effect only be declaring independence from themselves.

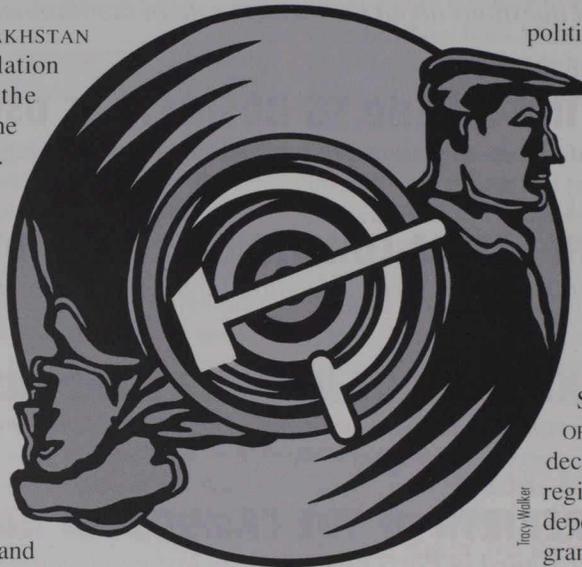
This new wave of independence mania evoked a sense of déjà vu among Soviet-watchers, for in 1989 and 1990, a similar "parade of sovereignties" had marched through the land. But now the republics were not only claiming control over their own affairs, but were, at least ostensibly, asserting their right to full recognition in the international community.

The coup d'état itself was both a response and a spur to this rising tide of nationalism. On the eve of the planned signing of a new union treaty, Gorbachev's disloyal aides took action to block the agreement that would have shifted numerous powers from the centre to the newly-assertive republics. Only five republics intended to sign the new accord on 20 August (the Russian federation, Kazakhstan, Belorussia, Tadzhikistan, and Uzbekistan), with four others (Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Kyrgystan, and Azerbaidzhan) possibly following in the next month.

THE ORGANIZERS OF THE COUP RIGHTFULLY DISCERNED that 20 August would signify a capitulation of the centre to vital demands from the republics, a process which could easily initiate the withering away of the Soviet state, though hardly in the sense Marx and Lenin had intended. Ironically, the putsch attempt accelerated the very process that the coup-plotters were trying to halt. As one Soviet commentator noted:

If in other countries a putsch usually is a venture of a dozen malefactors who are then put in prison and the old leaders go on living like they did before, the August putsch was unparalleled. Practically all of the union leadership – the coercive structures,... the executive power,... the legislative power,... and party power ... all could simultaneously be charged under various articles of the criminal code.

And when the whole apex of government, consisting either of criminals or of their accomplices, suffers a shattering defeat by the people, such a government cannot hold out. The whole leadership of the government collapses into political non-existence, and out of the



MADLY OFF IN ALL DIRECTIONS

*The dark side of the USSR's
independence bandwagon.*

BY JOAN DEBARDELEBEN

tions are under construction, and a genuine national and social revolution has occurred over the last two years. To be sure, problems remain, and nationalism's uglier face peaks out at times. For example, will individual rights be as well protected as the collective rights of the newly assertive Baltic peoples? How will national minorities be treated? And how will they respond to new stresses and demands for assimilation?

In mid-September, large numbers of Estonians rallied to protest

political vacuum arises some other government. It arose, but not as a single government.*

The coup-plotters' actions revealed the deep corruption, stupidity, and arrogance which governed actions of the central organs; this fuelled the centrifugal forces tearing the union apart. The draft union treaty was scuttled, and by 21 August when the coup flopped, its concessions were already too limited to satisfy even the most acquiescent of republics.

SURVEYING THE MAP, ONE WONDERS WHAT SOME OF the republics intended to achieve with their declarations. Could the smaller or less-developed regions really hope and want to stand alone as independent states? Who and what lies behind their grand language? Are these declarations really assertions of national self-determination and popular sovereignty, as we in the West might like to believe? Or are they Janus-faced, with a darker, seamier side as well?

Like everything in the former USSR today, generalizations come hard and are usually wrong. And despite *glasnost*, one must still look beyond the words to discern the true message. The independence declarations above all signify that each former republic must be understood in its own terms. But the meaning of the proclamations varies dramatically from place to place, even if some common tendencies exist.

For the Baltic peoples, the declarations without doubt reflected a genuine resolve to achieve independent statehood, a national yearning ever since the treachery of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 made these nations into pawns of larger forces. On 6 September 1991, the Soviet state itself recognized Baltic independence; the gradual realization of that status will involve a radical rejection of Soviet institutions and communist power. New democratic procedures and institu-

*Maksim Sokolov, "Slava Bogu, perestroika konchilas, (Thank God, perestroika is over), Kommersant (19-26 August 1991), p. 1.