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The Soviet Exploding Periphery

G. Simon,
*Perestroika and
the Nationalities*

After the March 1989 election, the process of political transformation triggered in the USSR by Gorbachev's perestroika seems to have reached a stage beyond which, barring an immediate stop, return to "normalcy" will be extremely difficult. The same can be said of the beginning of a disintegration of the system of satellite countries, and of the Soviet periphery itself, in the gorges of the Caucasus as well as on the shores of the Baltic.

A. Shtromas,
*How the Baltic
was won*

The two situations are, however, quite different, as witnessed by the historical processes through which these territories became part of the USSR. The Caucasus has been a quasi-undisturbed inheritance from the Russian Empire, after an ephemeral independence in the early years of the revolution. In contrast, the Baltic countries, together with a good half of Poland, were Stalin's prize in his alliance with Hitler during the first phase of World War II, this after a twenty-year period of Baltic independence, and an era of unity and real independence for Poland as well.

The different historical heritages provide the explanation for the differences to be found between the clearly separatist undertones in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and the confused, tragic features of the nationalist movements in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Armenian nationalism has taken, namely with the Karabakh issue, an irredentist path bound to pit one Caucasian nationality against the other, while the ensuing brutalities by the Azerbaijanis have reopened the old wound of the 1915 genocide. The ancient

U. Halbach,
*Anatomy of
an Escalation*

ghosts thus resuscitated inevitably pushed Armenian opinion to look once again at Russian power as "the enemy of our enemy", hence from the outset condemning to failure all possible separatist ambitions.

S. Kartveli,
*Georgia's
Narrow Path*

Pitting the Caucasus' peoples one against the other, irredentism inevitably plays into the hands of Russian imperialism. This simple logic can well explain the very limited support to be found in Georgia for Armenian irredentism, as well as the brutal Soviet repression against Georgian nationalism, similar in its separatist tendencies to the Estonian one.

P. Iberi,
*Moscow, Tbilisi
and the
Abkhazian Card*

The destiny of the exploding Soviet periphery seems therefore to be marked by an historical "correlation of forces" that goes far beyond the borders of the Empire. For the Baltic countries, as well as for Poland, this means that independence is possible only when the two great nations of central-eastern Europe - Germany and Russia - fall into a condition of weakness, as the situation was between the two World Wars, and as it might be tomorrow if the present condition of Germany's politically diminished status is complemented by a confession of historical failure on the part of the regime that, for half a century, has made Russia a military power of ever growing rank.

J. Kachia,
*Russia and the
USSR in the
Caucasus*

A similar geo-political pattern applies to the Caucasus, whose destiny is marked by its being in the middle of the historic clash between the Islamic and Russo-Christian Empires. North of their borders, the small nations in this region see today the crisis of the Soviet regime as the occasion to reassert their national aspirations, but on their southern flank, they have to face the fact that the ghost of the Islamic revival offers Moscow new opportunities to divide and rule.