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BLOODY SUNDAY: WHAT DID GORBACHEV KNOW ABOUT THE JANUARY 1991 EVENTS IN VILNIUS AND RIGA?

Ainius Lasas

In January 1991 Soviet troops conducted several military operations in Vilnius and Riga aimed at subduing the renegade Baltic republics. In the aftermath of these events, nearly 20 civilians died and dozens were injured. To this day, Mikhail Gorbachev, president of the Soviet Union at that time, denies knowing or approving of these operations. This article reexamines his claims of innocence and finds convincing evidence to the contrary: most likely, he did not order the deaths of innocent people, but he embraced the solution that led to this outcome.

Keywords: Mikhail Gorbachev; Soviet Union; Vilnius; Riga; Bloody Sunday

The events which some journalists refer to as ‘Bloody Sunday’ took place in January 1991. At the time, the Soviet Union was going through fundamental political and economic dislocations. Among the most urgent and problematic questions facing President Mikhail Gorbachev was the solution of the so-called ‘national question’, i.e. how to deal with the Soviet separatist republics, especially the Baltic republics, which insisted on leaving the Union. In fact, Lithuania had already declared its independence in March of 1990, defying repeated threats from the Kremlin to comply with the Soviet constitutional procedures for self-determination. In the midst of escalating tensions between the Baltic and Soviet leadership, Soviet troops attacked the television center in Vilnius, killing 14 people. A week later,

a similar but less violent scenario was repeated in Riga. At that time, Gorbachev denied any knowledge of these operations, and he continued to assert his innocence in this affair (1995, pp. 507–8; 2000, pp. 103–4). He claimed that the decisions to use military force were made without his prior approval. In this article I attempt to determine whether and what the president knew in advance about the January events. It is important to answer these questions because they point to one of the critical historical moments that led to the eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union. Neither the August coup of 1991 nor the dynamics of the subsequent Novo-Ogarevo process can be fully appreciated without taking into account the January events in the Baltic Soviet republics. This analysis also contributes to a better understanding of Gorbachev's thinking at the time of the events and beyond. Finally, the article exposes the vulnerability of historical accounts based on the memoirs of participants. The struggle between pride and memory, once noted by Nietzsche, seems to be relevant in the context of the January events as well.

Literature Review

Current historians and political scientists hold widely differing views about the Soviet involvement in the Vilnius and Riga events of 1991. For the purposes of this article, I have identified three distinct 'schools of thought'. The first group of scholars defends Gorbachev's innocence by pointing the finger at the Soviet military establishment (Brown 1996, p. 282) or the deterioration of Soviet military discipline (Miller 1993, pp. 173–4). They argue that Gorbachev was simply misinformed about the real situation in the Baltic republics. He did not realize that behind his back conservatives were making plans for a military solution of the 'national question'. Other researchers, however, put all the blame on Gorbachev, since he supposedly authorized the use of brute force against civilians (Kipp 1992, p. 77; Watson 1998, p. 44; Froyanov 1999, pp. 292–3; Clemens 2001, p. 50). The third group of scholars falls somewhere in between: they assign various degrees of responsibility to Gorbachev, but they also acknowledge that he might not have known the details of the plan (Pryce-Jones 1995, p. 107; Galeotti 1997, pp. 107–9; Sternthal 1997, pp. 207–8; D'Agostino 1998, p. 291; Taylor 2003, pp. 40–1). Since for most scholars the Vilnius and Riga events are only small pieces of larger narratives, evidence is often limited to a few memoirs or a personal interpretation. Few of them openly question information sources or attempt to critically evaluate alternative interpretations.¹ In this article, I address these shortcomings and move this debate beyond the current boundaries of scholarship by examining *what* Gorbachev knew about these tragic events.

I offer a more detailed analysis of the January events using news agency accounts, memoirs, and works by other scholars in the field. None of these sources can be taken as unproblematic, because many writers have their own agendas in recalling these events. Memoirs present a special challenge because most of them reflect an exclusively subjective (or even predisposed) perspective, often constructed several months or even years after the events took place. For example, in his writings, Gorbachev might try to save his image as a pro-democratic leader. With obvious and

open dislike of his former boss, KGB director Vladimir Kryuchkov might promote only his narrow interpretation of the events and unduly accuse Gorbachev of convenient crimes. During the Baltic crisis, most of the president's liberal advisors were at the fringes of the political process because of Gorbachev's recent move towards the right. Following Gorbachev's announcement of his 'conservative' agenda on 18 November 1990, the president's cabinet gradually underwent fundamental changes: old Soviet conservatives came back to power and brought with them old solutions to the 'national question'. This marginalization of liberals not only limited their access to the crucial decision-making discussions preceding the Baltic events but also might have resulted in bitterness over the new political course. While sorting through such complex and sometimes conflicting stimuli engraved in personal recollections of historical events is a nearly impossible task, supplementing them with new information sources may help alleviate that problem.

Hidden agendas and favoritism are not the exclusive domain of memoirs; news agency reporters, however, are less prone to such biases because they do not have the luxury of historical perspective. Since their reporting occurs as events unfold, one can expect that their day-to-day accounts are more reliable. Therefore, in conveying the factual information of the events of January 1991, I draw heavily on the reports of news agencies. Although I make an effort to diversify information sources, Soviet official news agencies are sometimes openly prejudiced, offensive, and poles apart from the storylines of the majority of reporters, and this obviously undermines their reliability. For example, TASS coverage of the January events in Vilnius was questioned not only by independent Soviet sources² but even by the pro-government Central Television First Program Network.³

Gorbachev's Account

In order to ascertain what Gorbachev knew and did not know, I first turn to his side of the story. In his memoirs and several books based on interviews, Gorbachev repeatedly denies any direct knowledge or approval of January events in Vilnius (Gorbachev 1995, pp. 507–8; Slavin 2001, pp. 95–6; Gorbachev & Mlynar 2002, p. 131). He writes that:

At the end of 1990 the authorities in Vilnius continued to function according to the letter and spirit of their declaration of independence, and this led to a significant internal struggle within that republic. Those opposed to secession from the Soviet Union created their own organizations. The Communist Party of Lithuania broke apart at that time, and its fragments scattered in different directions. [...] Even so, I felt, as before, that I did not have the right to take extreme measures. On January 10, 1991, I appealed to the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian republic and called for full and immediate restoration of the Soviet Constitution since the situation was becoming explosive. The Lithuanian authorities did not respond. [...]

Yazov, Kryuchkov, and Pugo [ministers of defense, state security, and the interior, respectively] reported to me that they had taken measures in case the

situation grew out of control and direct clashes began between supporters of Sajudis and the Communists, necessitating rule by presidential decree. [...]

Under these conditions, one more attempt was made at a political solution. On January 12 the Council of the Federation discussed the situation in Lithuania. I stated that we were one step away from bloodshed and proposed that representatives of the Council of the Federation be sent to Vilnius immediately to investigate on the spot and suggest possible action. But before the delegation even arrived in Vilnius, the tragedy occurred. I demanded explanations from Kryuchkov, Pugo, and Yazov: How could this have happened, and who gave the order for the use of troops? All three denied any involvement in these events. (Gorbachev 2000, pp. 103–4)

Gorbachev's introduction to this topic is strikingly similar to that of KGB director Vladimir Kryuchkov. Kryuchkov also blames the worsening situation in the region on the growing confrontation within the Baltic states which supposedly were split between pro-independence nationalists and pro-Soviet communists (Kryuchkov 1996, pp. 27–8). This initial storyline is central to both narratives because first of all it predefines the main players in the drama, which is essentially comprised of two opposing groups: pro-independence nationalists and pro-Soviet communists. In this scenario, the military takes a secondary role in the Baltic crisis. Ten years after the events took place Gorbachev does not question this assessment of the situation, although his argument, as I demonstrate below, has little historical or even factual basis.

If internal frictions in Latvia and Estonia had ethnic overtones because of large Russian-speaking minorities, Lithuania never faced this dilemma. As its native population exceeded 80% and Poles were the largest minority group, the Lithuanian pro-independence political elite had strong popular backing. This difference among the Baltic states was clearly demonstrated by the newly elected Supreme Council of the three republics in early 1990. Lithuanian parliamentarians issued a declaration of independence; their Latvian and Estonian colleagues, however, followed with more moderate declarations of transitional periods to independence. Most scholars agree that the presence of considerable Russian-speaking minorities in both Latvia and Estonia 'dictated a more gradual approach' (Lieven 1993, p. 241). Thus, what Gorbachev designates as a 'significant internal struggle' between pro-Moscow and pro-independence segments of Lithuanian society can at best be applied only to Latvia and Estonia. He also misdates the split of the Communist Party of Lithuania, which happened in December 1989 (Aladinsky & Sizov 1989).⁴ A year later the independent Lithuanian Communist Party, which in March 1990 had voted for the declaration of independence, simply changed its name to the Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party (Uscila 1990). This was a cosmetic modification that had no impact on the political climate in the country. Finally, Gorbachev refers to the creation of civic organizations to counteract the secessionist policies of the Lithuanian government. Except for the National Salvation Committee (NSC) created on 11 January 1991 and a few short-lived strike committees, no other civic start-ups had been documented by foreign or Soviet news agencies around that time. While the NSC claimed to unite 22 local entities, *Izvestiya* correspondent Nikolai Lashkevich could not find one entity

endorsing it (Lashkevich 1991). This was hardly surprising given the fact that nobody seemed to know the members of the Committee itself. Even Gorbachev's envoy to Lithuania, Georgii Tarazevich, acknowledged in February 1991 that he did not know the make-up of this secretive organization (Lashkevich 1991). While the political and economic situation in the republic was far from ideal, price hikes announced on 7 January and then revoked the next day were the only potential reason for increased tensions. However, these controversial fiscal policies had no direct bearing on the societal support for the political goals of independence.

Even some of Gorbachev's most faithful advisors never bought into this myth of internal struggle. Foreign policy assistant Anatolii Chernyaev dismissed these 'justifications' as pathetic and shameful (Chernyaev 1997, p. 77). The president's adviser and press secretary, Andrei Grachev, revealed that because of the time differences between Moscow and Vilnius, the Soviet military force appeared to have come to deal with pre-planned 'street riots' an hour before the riots started (Grachev 2001, p. 347). Nevertheless, in Kryuchkov's version the Soviet army becomes an even-handed pacifier that supposedly moved in to help control the situation and avoid any provocation (pp. 31–2). Along with the KGB director, Gorbachev avoids the difficulties of explaining the role of the Soviet military by simply ignoring the fact that weeks before the tragic events in Vilnius and later in Riga, the military took an active role in escalating the tensions. Ignoring the prehistory of these incidents, he presents the situation as a single, locally sparked event, which, to his complete surprise, took a violent turn.

Baltic Drama

Using the reports of news agencies and newspapers, I reconstruct several weeks of the Baltic–Soviet relations prior to the incidents and demonstrate that the writing was already on the wall several days before the tragic events. While many prior developments can be taken into account, I start this chronology with the establishment of the Latvian NSC in November 1990, which, according to its co-chairman Albert Kauls, aimed at cooperating with the republic's 'progressive forces in order to rally them and prevent possible bloodletting and hunger' (Kuchina 1990).⁵ Initially, the Latvian NSC seemed to focus on the specific problems and needs of the non-titular population, but its rhetoric grew more controversial and confrontational by the week. Barely a month after its establishment, the Committee joined forces with Latvia's Interfront, a conservative communist political faction, in launching 'a campaign of disobedience to the authorities of the Latvian Republic' and calling on Gorbachev to introduce 'direct presidential rule'.⁶ These demands coincided not only with new legislation that empowered the government to cut off food and electricity to Soviet military facilities but also with a series of mysterious bombings in Riga. According to various information sources, 12–14 low-yield bombs exploded in the capital during December. Most of them targeted either Soviet military or Communist Party buildings causing minor structural damage but incurring no casualties. For Latvian premier Ivars Godmanis this was a sign that the USSR President 'might soon eliminate the government and legislatures of the Baltic republics with the help of

the Army' (Stoessinger 1990). Some Latvian political leaders left and went overseas, worried that this scenario might come to pass. In contrast, Soviet official news reports blamed extreme nationalists seeking either to provoke military action (Dobbs 1990) or to do away with the Latvian Communist Party (Zaytsev 1990). While the explosions remained unsolved, their low-yield nature suggests that the purpose was not damage, but rather attention.⁷ However, with Gorbachev, Kryuchkov and Yazov threatening to clamp down on separatists and Schevardnadze warning about an approaching dictatorship in his resignation speech, the Latvian government hardly needed more attention. On 2 January, the events in Latvia took another unexpected turn – the Black Berets, an elite unit of the Interior Ministry police, took over the entrance of Latvia's largest printing house. While Soviet Interior Minister Boris Pugo denied that such actions ever took place, Latvian Communist Party leader Alfred Rubiks explained it was done in order to secure the property of the Party. In addition to injuring three people, troops arrested the director of the printing house and demanded that all financial records be handed over.⁸ Although over the next two days the confrontations subsided, the troops remained in charge of the building.

Responding to Baltic politicians' concerns over the increased activity of troops in their republics, Soviet Army Chief of Staff Mikhail Moiseyev assured Latvian President Anatolijs Gorbunovs that 'not a single additional soldier will be dispatched to the Baltic republics in the future. We may even consider reducing the military contingent there' (Moskovsky 1991). The next day, in a direct contradiction to this statement, Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov ordered additional units to be brought into seven Soviet republics, including the Baltic states. According to Vitalii Ignatenko, the head of the Soviet President's Press Service, these deployments were based on an earlier decree of the Soviet president.⁹ For Baltic political leaders, these moves again signaled a possible preparation for military actions against the renegade republics.

On the day of the takeover of the printing house in Riga, the Soviet Interior troops began controlling access to two main Communist Party buildings in Vilnius (Bykhun 1991). This move hardly seemed newsworthy since similar 'check-points' had been established in the past. At the time the internal political tensions between the Lithuanian parliament and the government had also reached their peak. On 7 January, following a months-long debate over appropriate economic reforms, Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene decided to raise food prices substantially. The parliament suspended this proposition, which in turn led to Prunskiene's resignation on 8 January (Fein 1991). In her statement to the parliament, she acknowledged the differences over economic approaches: 'We have different opinions concerning economic policy. That is why the whole government is resigning' (Womack & Langan 1991). The prime minister remained in office for two more days until the new government was formed.¹⁰ In addition to the economic dimension, these tensions also reflected different political approaches in relations with the Kremlin. While Prunskiene was advocating a moderate appeasement strategy, the head of the parliament, Vytautas Landsbergis, supported more radical and abrupt measures of disengagement.

Given the overall state of affairs between the Baltic republics and the center, most analysts and local politicians feared that Moscow might use this instability to achieve its goals. As noted by Anatol Lieven, the Soviet campaign of intimidation was initially

aimed at Latvia since it had the largest Russian-speaking population and a mostly pro-Soviet police establishment, but the sudden turn of political events in Lithuania provided an opportunity to jumpstart the military operation in Vilnius (Lieven 1993, p. 245). Whether or not one accepts this interpretation, over the next few days the Kremlin's attention clearly shifted to Lithuania.

On 10 January Gorbachev issued a statement that essentially amounted to an ultimatum: 'to immediately restore the full authority of the Soviet Constitution and the Constitution of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, and abrogate earlier adopted anti-constitutional acts' (Rosen 1991). In his memoirs, Gorbachev interpreted this statement as a message of compromise and opportunity meant to prevent further escalation of tensions (1995, p. 505). Few Lithuanian politicians shared his perspective. According to Vytautas Landsbergis, the head of the parliament, 'this is an ultimatum. The only difference with the ultimatum of 1940 is that it has no date limit' (Womack 1991). The next morning that time limit was set by the Lithuanian Communist Party Central Committee Secretary Algimantas Naudziunas. The Lithuanian parliament and government had to comply with the president's decree by 3 p.m., or else 'a committee for the national salvation of Lithuania w[ould] be formed to take over the concern about the future of the Lithuanian SSR'.¹¹ Later that evening, the committee was established in order 'to take all power' in Lithuania (Zenkovich & Petrov 1991). The same day Soviet troops stormed the National Guard headquarters and the Press House building in Vilnius. Other strategic facilities that had nothing to do with the enforcement of the military draft or the return of Communist Party property were also captured. The subunits of the USSR Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) internal troops took control of the intercity telephone exchange¹² and the Vilnius railway station.¹³ When asked about the reasons for taking control of the railway station, the military commander of Vilnius, Grigorii Belous, stated: 'In order to safeguard the lives of transit passengers at the station, the strike committee of the Vilnius section of the Baltic Railway appealed for help to the local garrison leadership of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. This assistance was given'.¹⁴ Seven people were injured in the aftermath of these military actions. Landsbergis attempted to contact Gorbachev over the incidents, but the president was supposedly having lunch and could not take the call (Seward 1991). In addition to earlier statements of concern from the US State Department, the British Foreign Office issued its second official protest to the Soviet *chargé d'affaires* in London over the recent developments in the Baltic republics (Bromley 1991). Jacques Poos, Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, which held the European Union's rotating presidency, appealed 'to the Soviet leaders to stop intimidation by force, and [...] to start a dialogue without delay' (Collins 1991).

Around this time the president of the USSR received a letter from Lithuanian Communist Party First Secretary Mykolas Burokevičius asking him to declare presidential rule and detailing a preferred mechanism of governance once the decree was in force. Specifically, Burokevičius suggested that the Lithuanian NSC should play the central role until the situation was stabilized and new elections took place (Urushadze 1995, p. 276). Also, Gorbachev received a report from the Commander-in-Chief of Land Forces and Deputy Minister of Defense Valentin Varennikov, who had been in Vilnius since 10 January (Gorbachev 1995, p. 506).

As mentioned in Gorbachev's memoirs, on 12 January the Council of the Federation discussed the situation in Lithuania and decided to send a commission in order to investigate these incidents (Gorbachev 1995).¹⁵ However, in his account the Soviet president forgot to mention that this decision was made because of vigorous perseverance by the Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin (Brumley 1991; Chernyaev 1997, p. 72). Nevertheless, it is clear that up to the very night of the Vilnius tragedy, Gorbachev was not only aware of the general situation in the Baltic states but he also knew about specific military actions there. Furthermore, he received information from official Soviet, foreign, and Baltic sources. In fact, on 12 January Latvian Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis and the head of the Latvian Supreme Council Anatolijs Gorbunovs briefed him about the confrontational OMON (Special Purpose Detachment of Militsiya) actions in the Baltic states (Pryce-Jones 1995, p. 170). Several days earlier he had also met with Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene.¹⁶ When she raised the issue of the deployment of paratroopers in Lithuania, Gorbachev declined to discuss it, instead advising her to contact the Soviet Army Chief of Staff Mikhail Moiseyev.¹⁷

On 13 January the confrontation reached its culmination when the Soviet special military unit 'Alpha' along with the MVD internal troops and Pskov Airborne Division attacked the Vilnius TV tower and the Radio and TV Committee building. Fourteen people died and over 100 were injured as a result of this military operation. After 24 hours of silence, Gorbachev stood in front of the Supreme Soviet along with Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov and Interior Minister Boris Pugo and denied authorizing the crackdown, and at the same time blamed Lithuanian nationalists for what had happened. Recalling his recent conversation with several Latvian politicians, the Soviet president provided his interpretation of the Vilnius events: 'I told them that, you know, that events had suddenly taken such a sharp turn and within brief, literally several hours, well, within 48 hours had entered such an acute phase in Lithuania – I simply did not expect that, generally speaking, to such a degree'.¹⁸ During his long and opaque speech, Gorbachev made numerous accusations and allusions to the actual causes of the conflict. He blamed Baltic politicians for their extreme nationalism, land restitution laws, and hostility towards Soviet military personnel and Russian-speaking minorities. He also gave credence to what seems to have been KGB Director Kryuchkov's version of the events involving various local rival factions and militia:

There are thousands, tens of thousands of weapons, and you could commit such a carnage that these gangsters would remain alive, while they as a rule shoot from hospitals, from the stories of residential blocks, and you try returning fire there. But I think one thing is clear, I understand the position of the Supreme Soviet, that we should not yield, proceed step-by-step to this, for as long as there are weapons scattered all around the republics and regions there will be no peace.¹⁹

Kryuchkov's memoirs contain a similar story (1996, p. 32). In later recollections of the events, including his memoirs, Gorbachev toned down this Soviet army versus local militia interpretation, although he always maintained the internal conflict argument.

While events following the 13 January tragedy usually get little scholarly attention, their historical relevance is obvious. They provide additional evidence

against Gorbachev's thesis of a '48 hour' conflict. Despite the enormous international and domestic pressure to end violence, on 14 January, the Soviet troops took over a radio relay station in Vilnius (Dejevsky & Fletcher 1991). The same day Black Berets set a barricade of trucks and tractors on fire in Riga. The tensions seemed to escalate rapidly in the Latvian capital following the ultimatum issued by the plenum of the Latvian Communist Party Central Committee on 14 January. They called for the resignation of the government and the disbandment of the legislature. Otherwise they threatened to call on the Latvian NSC to assume all state power in Latvia (Zaytsev 1991). During the next few days, the NSC issued numerous provocative statements about the takeover of power. The headquarters of the Baltic Military District located in Latvia wholeheartedly supported all these actions. At the meeting with Anatolijs Gorbunovs, the head of the Latvian Supreme Soviet, on 14 January, the Commander-in-Chief of the Baltic Military District, Fyodor Kuzmin, demanded compliance with the Soviet Constitution and threatened to disarm the Latvian government and the population at large: 'I propose confiscating all combat arms . . . listing all owners of hunting rifles, and taking control of the arms of the ministry of the interior and customs service'.²⁰ Two days later Kuzmin's threats came to pass: the paratroopers stormed the police academy building in Riga confiscating all weapons and injuring three people (Karacs & Langan 1991). During this time, the Black Berets also managed to shoot dead a driver from Latvia's Ministry of Transportation. Concerned over the Soviet military actions, Anatolijs Gorbunovs got in touch with Gorbachev on 16 January to express his concerns over the recurring violence.²¹ The next day Gorbunovs also sent a telegram to the Soviet president calling on him to stop the actions of this 'group of bandits'.²² By 20 January, it appeared that the tensions in Riga had eased somewhat. At least that was the impression of Latvian Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis, who was making such comments on a local TV station. At the time of his address, the infamous Black Berets attacked the Latvian Ministry of Interior building, killing five people and injuring nine. As in the Lithuanian case, the Soviet president was clearly informed about the military actions in Latvia before the fatal day. Most likely, he was already aware of the injuries and the casualty on 16 January, but took no action. Again, he regularly received information from both Soviet and Latvian sources.

The official reaction from Gorbachev to the Vilnius and Riga events did not come until 22 January. As Gorbachev writes in his memoirs:

In a speech on January 22, 1990, I said the following: 'The events that occurred in Vilnius are in no way an expression of the policy line of the president; it was not for this that presidential power was established. I therefore emphatically reject all speculation, all suspicions, and all insinuations in this regard'. The declaration stated firmly that any social organizations, committees, and fronts can aspire to come to power only by constitutional means and without the use of force. All attempts to resort to armed force in political struggle are unacceptable. Arbitrary actions on the part of the armed forces are equally unacceptable. (Gorbachev 2000, p. 104)

Interestingly, Gorbachev did not see any problem with the timing of his 'firm' statement against military solutions. He spoke nine days after the Vilnius and two days

after the Riga tragedies. Such a belated response seriously undermined the sincerity of his words and suggested that he might have known and endorsed the muscle-flexing of the Soviet military forces. Whether intentionally or not, in quoting his speech Gorbachev omitted the reference to Riga events, which is included in all other available versions of his statement to the press: ‘The events that occurred in Vilnius and Riga are in no way . . .’.²³ If that deletion was intentional, it could have helped him to maintain the ‘one-time occurrence’ thesis in this particular storyline.²⁴

Since the quote provided in his memoirs is brief and uninformative, I present a more extensive segment of his speech addressing the alleged causes of the Baltic events:

The developments in the Baltic republics evolved in an atmosphere of the severest crisis. Unlawful acts, trampling on the constitution itself, disregard for presidential decrees, the flagrant violation of civil rights, discrimination against people of a different nationality, irresponsible behavior with regard to the army, servicemen and their families have created an environment and an atmosphere in which this kind of clashes can flare up very easily over most unexpected things [causes]. This is precisely the source of the tragedy, not some mythical orders from higher authorities. This is how it happened in both the first and second instances.²⁵

While Gorbachev openly denies any orders from higher authorities, this statement seems to be disingenuous. First, his implication that developments unfolded spontaneously has little factual basis. Take, for example, the simultaneous military attacks on the Vilnius TV tower and the Radio and TV Committee building at 1.00 a.m. Those who are familiar with the layout of Vilnius know that the tower is quite a distance not only from key governmental buildings but also from the Radio and TV Committee building, where the broadcasting studios were located. If one takes Gorbachev’s explanation of a protest rally turned into acute confrontation²⁶ or Kryuchkov’s version of protesters trying to deliver a petition to the Committee building (Kryuchkov 1996, pp. 31–2) at face value, then the question still remains why the ‘pacifying’ mission was aimed at the TV tower, where the alleged protesters never even went. Timing is yet another problem: the claim that a group of protesters attempted to deliver a petition at 1.00 a.m. seems to be absurd. Also, according to the secret Alpha group report on the Vilnius events, deputy commander Mikhail Golovatov disclosed these designated targets to his colleagues 12 hours before the incidents, i.e. on 12 January at 1.00 p.m. (Urushadze 1995, p. 277).²⁷ The spontaneity claims are further undermined by the abrupt transfer of troops to the Baltic region. While some of these relocations could be blamed on the enforcement of the military draft, the arrival of the elite Alpha group on 11 January 1991 in Vilnius and its participation in the takeovers leaves little doubt that these actions were preceded by what *Komsomolskaya Pravda* called ‘excessively thorough preparations’.²⁸ Pavel Grachev, commander of the USSR Airborne troops, later agreed that the military draft was only an excuse (Lashkevich 1991). Secondly, as was demonstrated by the tracing of the events, Gorbachev had detailed and well-balanced information about the situation in the Baltic states. An argument that the Soviet president was fooled by Kryuchkov’s biased briefings simply does not work. Gorbachev was clearly

aware of the establishment of the National Committees and their attempts to challenge legitimately elected legislative and executive bodies. He also knew about the initial military takeovers of buildings in Latvia and Lithuania. Most likely, both Latvian and Lithuanian politicians informed the president about the injured and the casualty in Riga resulting from these military actions. The gradual development of these events further undermines any justification of ignorance or incompetence. Finally, as pointed out by some scholars, Gorbachev did not punish anybody supposedly responsible for these tragedies (Knight 2003, p. 80; Taylor 2003, p. 36). Even the first secretaries of the Lithuanian and Latvian Communist Party, Burokevičius and Rubiks, who according to Gorbachev established *unconstitutional* salvation committees (1995, p. 505), retained full backing of the Soviet army at the local level and kept their positions in the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee. In fact, the Soviet Interior troops left some of the occupied facilities in Lithuania and Latvia only after the August putsch.

Undoubtedly, Gorbachev preferred a Soviet military takeover of the Baltic republics without any casualties, but under the circumstances that was highly unlikely. After all, Gorbachev had a week to prevent the Riga events, but he took absolutely no action. In fact, Anatolii Chernyaev's diaries reveal that immediately after the Vilnius incident, Gorbachev was still clinging to the power solution. Although initially intrigued by the advice that his 'democratic wing' go to Vilnius and attend the funeral of the victims, he pretended the next day that the conversation had never happened (Chernyaev 1997, p. 74). Vitalii Ignatenko, the head of the Soviet President's Press Service, concluded that the president was not simply 'misinformed' but in fact was actively implementing his strategy of intimidating the Balts (Chernyaev 1997). Chernyaev also reminds us that on 16 January, the last day of the Supreme Soviet session, after the discussion of the Vilnius events, Gorbachev suggested suspending media law and introducing censorship. While his suggestion did not find any support, according to Chernyaev, it demonstrated that Gorbachev had something important to hide by taking up the conservative side (Chernyaev 1997, p. 79). These accounts also fit well with Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene's recollections of her conversation with the Soviet president before the tragic events. In her interview with *The Washington Post*, Prunskiene quoted the following words of the Soviet president: 'Go back home and restore order. Otherwise I will be obliged to do the job myself' (Dobbs 1991). One final piece of evidence comes from the former Soviet Interior Minister, Vladimir Bakatin. In his memoirs, Bakatin recalls a phone conversation with the Soviet president immediately after the Vilnius tragedy. Gorbachev already knew about the events and tried to calm Bakatin down. He assured him that they were not as dramatic as Bakatin's Lithuanian sources insisted – only one or two casualties (Bakatin 1999, pp. 234–5). While Gorbachev turned out to be wrong, it suggested that at the time he was willing to tolerate nominal casualties.

How reliable are Bakatin's and Chernyaev's accounts? Since both of them represent the pro-Gorbachev camp, one would expect them to provide an overly positive image of their former boss. After all, Chernyaev has worked at the Gorbachev Foundation since its inception in early 1992. Although invited to work for Yeltsin, Bakatin refused to jump overnight 'from one orbit into another orbit' (Nuzov 1997). Instead, he joined Stanislav Shatalin's foundation *Reforma*. Unlike Kryuchkov's account,

these memoirs do not display any disdain or bitterness towards Gorbachev, but rather provide well-balanced recollections of that historical period. Finally, these memoirs fit well with the news agency accounts that I regard as the most reliable sources of information. Thus, I feel comfortable integrating all these personal storylines into a larger historical account of the Baltic events.

Conclusion

All of this information leads me to believe that Gorbachev knew about and supported at least a limited military solution. Most likely, he did not expect numerous casualties and did not order the deaths of innocent people, but he embraced the solution that led to this outcome. According to political scientist Edward Walker, the choice ends up being between Gorbachev as a liar or an incompetent leader (Walker 2003, p. 112). In my opinion, the answer seems to be both incompetence and a cover up. While this assertion by no means challenges Gorbachev's personal charisma or his political ingenuity, it reveals his struggles and missteps in striving for democratic ideals.

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Notes

- 1 For notable exceptions see the Winter 2003 issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*; see in particular Taylor (pp. 40–3).
- 2 “‘Vzglyad” Reporter Relates Vilnius Experience’, Radio Rosii Network, 15 January 1991 (trans. in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports (FBIS-SOV)-91-011, 16 January 1991, p. 76).
- 3 ‘Moscow TV on “Conundrums” in TASS Reportage’, Central Television First Program Network, 14 January 1991 (trans. in FBIS-SOV-91-011, 16 January 1991, p. 74.)
- 4 In his earlier book of memoirs, *Zhizn' i reformy* (1995), Gorbachev provides a more detailed and adequate chronology of the events in Lithuania.
- 5 At the time, Kauls also served as USSR People's Deputy and a member of the Presidential Council. Alfred Rubiks, the chairman of the Committee, was also USSR People's Deputy and the First Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party.
- 6 ‘Correspondent Reports Latvia's Interfront Calls for Introduction of Presidential Rule in the Republic’, Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, Moscow, 18 December 1990, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 14 July 2006.
- 7 ‘Riga Another Explosion’, *Pravda*, 12 December, 90, p. 2, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 10 July 2006.
- 8 ‘International Press Institute Protests Treatment of Latvian Journalist’, Associated Press, London, 4 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 10 December 2005.

- 9 'Briefing by Vitaly Ignatenko', Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, Moscow, 8 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 5 December 2005.
- 10 On the day of Prunskiene's resignation, around 5,000–10,000 pro-Soviet demonstrators gathered outside the parliament building to protest against the price hike and to demand the dismissal of the government. Several demonstrators attempted to storm the building, but the attempt failed.
- 11 'Urgent – Situation in Lithuania Worsens', ITAR-TASS, 11 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 19 July 2006.
- 12 'Pravda Reports "Agravation"', *Pravda*, 12 January 1991, p. 2 (trans. in FBIS-SOV-91-009, 14 January 1991, p. 50).
- 13 'Vilnius Commander: Situation "Normal"', TASS International Service, 12 January 1991 (trans. in FBIS-SOV-91-009, 14 January 1991, pp. 56–7).
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Gorbachev mentions that the meeting was attended by head of the Latvian Supreme Council Anatolijs Gorbunovs, Estonian Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar, and Egidijus Bickauskas, the Lithuanian diplomatic representative in Moscow.
- 16 'Gorbachev Meets Prunskiene to Discuss Army in Baltic Region', The Russian Information Agency ITAR-TASS, Moscow, 8 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 10 December 2005.
- 17 'Deployment Not Discussed', Agence France-Presse (AFP), 8 January 1991 (in FBIS-SOV-91-006, 9 January 1991, p. 47).
- 18 'Gorbachev Attack on Yeltsin Situation in Baltic Viewed', BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 17 January 1991 (SU/0972/C1/1, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 10 December 2005).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 'Riga Told to Toe Kremlin Line', *The Times*, 15 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 19 July 2006.
- 21 'Gorbunovs Talks by Telephone to Gorbachev', BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 19 January 1991 (SU/0974/i, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 15 December 2005).
- 22 'Pugo Agrees to Talks after Latvian Ultimatum', AFP, 18 January 1991 (in FBIS-SOV-91-013, 18 January 1991, p. 76).
- 23 'Gorbachev Attack on Yeltsin Situation in Baltic Viewed', BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 17 January 1991 (SU/0972/C1/1, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 10 December 2005); Dobrochotov (1992, p. 302).
- 24 In *Zhizn' i reformy* (1995) Gorbachev discusses Latvian events in greater detail.
- 25 'Gorbachev Baltic Address', ITAR-TASS, 22 January 1991, available at: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed 15 December 2005.
- 26 'Gorbachev Explains Recent Policy Toward Lithuania', ITAR-TASS, 14 January 1991 (trans. in FBIS-SOV91-010, 15 January 1991, p. 23).
- 27 Gorbachev himself uses this secret document in his memoirs in order to justify his version of the Baltic events. See Gorbachev (1995, pp. 507–8).
- 28 'Military Coup Would Herald "End of Perestroyka"', *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 January 1991, p. 1 (trans. in FBIS-SOV-91-011, 16 January 1991, pp. 79–80).

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