

# Slavic Republics Declare Soviet Union Liquidated

Michael Dobbs Washington Post Foreign Service

*The Washington Post* (1974-Current file); Dec 9, 1991;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1995)

pg. A1

# Slavic Republics Declare Soviet Union Liquidated

By Michael Dobbs

Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Dec. 8—The leaders of Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia formally announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union today and said they had agreed to establish a "Commonwealth of Independent States" in its place.

The decision to liquidate the 69-year-old Communist-forged union and halt activity of all Soviet government organs came during a closed-door meeting at a Byelorussian

hunting lodge near the Polish border in the absence of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

There was no immediate comment from Gorbachev, whose constitutional position as president and commander in chief of the 4-million-member Soviet armed forces has now been challenged throughout the Slavic heartland of the former Soviet superpower.

In Washington, Secretary of State James A. Baker III said in a television interview that "the Soviet

Union as we've known it no longer exists," but he warned that there is still a risk of civil war amid the ruins of the Soviet empire. [Details on Page A16.]

In a joint communique at the end of a two-day Slavic summit, the three leaders declared: "As founding states of the U.S.S.R. . . . we declare that the U.S.S.R. is ceasing its existence as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality." The three also agreed to establish unified control over the So-

viet Union's 27,000 nuclear warheads and coordinate foreign relations and economic activity, but they offered no details about how this was to be accomplished.

The dramatic move by the three republics, which account for 70 percent of the Soviet Union's 290 million population and 80 percent of its industrial output, has far-reaching constitutional implications that are likely to take some time to unfold.

It is also likely to increase the political pressure on Western gov-

ernments to deal with individual republics rather than the central government, and a White House spokesman said Russian President Boris Yeltsin discussed the new commonwealth with President Bush today in a 30-minute telephone conversation.

The three republics claimed the right to dissolve the Soviet Union as co-signatories of the 1922 treaty that established it, but this could still be disputed by Gorbachev or by the other republics. The commu-

nique invites all other former Soviet republics to join the commonwealth, which will have its headquarters in Minsk, the capital of Byelorussia, rather than Moscow, the historic Russian capital.

The declaration was signed by Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and Byelorussian parliamentary chairman Stanislav Shuskevitch after two days of talks in Viskouoi, near the Byelorussian city of Brest. All three men are due

See SOVIET, A16, Col. 1

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

# 3 Republics Create Slavic Partnership

SOVIET, From A1

in Moscow Monday to present Gorbachev and Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev—the most influential of the non-Slavic Soviet leaders—with what amounts to a fait accompli.

The statement by the three Slavic leaders said that lengthy negotiations chaired by Gorbachev on a modified union of former Soviet republics had reached an impasse and that the establishment of independent states on former Soviet territory had become a "reality." It accused the Soviet authorities of pursuing "a short-sighted policy" that had led the country into a deep economic and political crisis.

Born out of the turmoil of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and a brutal civil war involving Communists, monarchists and various nationalist forces, the Soviet Union came into existence formally on Dec. 30, 1922. It eventually expanded to occupy one-sixth of the Earth's surface, gobbling up the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia during World War II, as well as sizable chunks of prewar Poland and Romania.

Over the past few days, Gorbachev has stepped up his warnings of "catastrophe" and "anarchy" if the former Soviet republics did not agree to some form of political union, and in an interview on French television broadcast earlier today, he said that the disintegration of the Soviet Union would make the civil war in Yugoslavia look like "a joke."

"I am the center. This is the current situation and the situation that will remain," Gorbachev told the interviewer in response to a question about control of nuclear weapons, which currently are located in the three Slavic republics and Kazakhstan.

Tonight, Ukrainian television broadcast a recorded interview with Gorbachev in which the Soviet leader pounded his fist on a table and

pledged to do everything in his power to keep the Ukraine, with its 53 million inhabitants, in the union. The Ukrainian interviewer accused him of wanting to turn back the "wheel of history" and failing to understand Ukrainian aspirations for independent statehood after being under Russian domination for more than 300 years.

Although the agreement to create the Commonwealth of Independent States liquidates the present central government, as personified by Gorbachev, it meets at least some of the longstanding goals of the 61-year-old Soviet president. It speaks of "a unified command of a common military-strategic space,"

coordination of foreign policy among member states, common transportation and communication systems, and a common economic and customs union.

The principal difference between the new Commonwealth of Independent States and the "Confederation of Sovereign States" advocated by Gorbachev lies in the relationship between a central political structure and the republics. The Russian term *sodruzhestvo*, which can be translated as either commonwealth or community, clearly envisages a looser form of association than confederation or federation, with ultimate power vested in the individual member states.

The determination of Yeltsin and the other republic leaders to put an end to centuries of highly centralized rule was symbolized by the choice of the provincial city of Minsk as the headquarters for the commonwealth. The nearest equivalent is the role of Brussels as the focus of the European Community, which in many ways is a model for the kind of political association the Slavic leaders are seeking to achieve.

In an apparent attempt to defuse the politically sensitive issue of minority populations, the signatories of today's agreement promised to respect each other's territorial integrity and the "inviolability of existing borders." After the abortive Kremlin coup by hard-line Communists last August, Yeltsin provoked a major row with the Ukraine by suggesting that he might lay claim to Ukrainian lands in which ethnic Russians are in the majority.

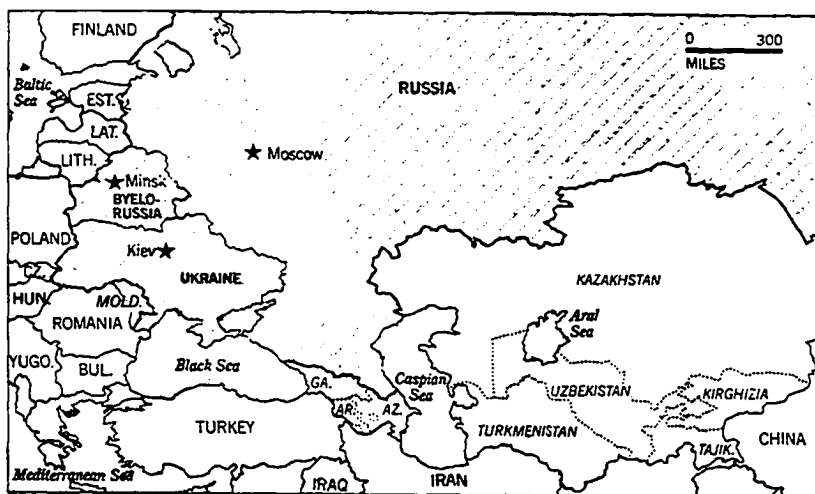
While the coup fatally undermined Gorbachev's attempts to preserve a strong central authority, the death blow to the Soviet Union was dealt by an overwhelming vote in favor of Ukrainian independence from Moscow in a referendum two weeks ago. The 90 percent "yes" vote appears to have persuaded Yeltsin that Gorbachev's attempts to negotiate a new union treaty were doomed.

In a separate economic agreement, the three Slavic republics agreed to coordinate radical economic reforms aimed at creating a free-market system and free enterprise in place of Communist central planning. The Russian government announced late last week that it will lift price controls from most goods beginning Dec. 16, forcing other republics to follow suit if they wish to prevent a mass shift of available food and consumer goods to Russian territory.

The republic leaders agreed to use the Russian ruble to settle accounts among commonwealth members and to sign an inter-bank agreement aimed at regaining control over the chaotic money supply. They fixed a 10-day deadline for coordinating common defense expenditures for next year and for funding continuing cleanup efforts stemming from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, whose deadliest impact was in the Ukraine and Byelorussia.

While the agreement speaks of joint control over nuclear weapons, it does not exclude the establishment of individual national armies. The Ukraine has already announced plans for a 450,000-member army, while Russia is forming a national guard.

## THE NEW SLAVIC COMMONWEALTH



### RUSSIA

The dominant Soviet republic has a population of 147.4 million and controls most of the Soviet Union's natural resources. It stretches across the entire Eurasian land mass, from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan.

President Boris Yeltsin's administration steadily has taken power from the central government since the August coup. But Russia faces many internal problems, including high inflation, food shortages and secessionist movements in ethnic regions such as Tatarstan and Chechen-Ingush.

### UKRAINE

The second-most populous Slavic state, with 52 million people and about a quarter of the country's industrial and agricultural might, the Ukraine voted for independence on Dec. 1. Since then, Ukrainian statehood has been recognized by Poland, Canada, Hungary and several other countries.

Newly elected President Leonid Kravchuk said last week he would consider forming an economic and military union with the other Slavic republics, as long as it had only a "coordinating" body, not a central government.

### BYELORUSSIA

Once a staunch ally of the Kremlin, Byelorussia has been increasingly defiant since April, when 200,000 workers went on strike to protest nationwide price increases. The heavily industrialized republic of 10.2 million people borders Poland, with the newly independent Baltic states to the north and the Ukraine to the south. It absorbed much of the radiation from the 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine, and many Byelorussians blamed the central government for the accident.

THE WASHINGTON POST