CHAPTER FIVE


§ 1. Environmental Protests and Popular Fronts

The appointment of Michail Gorbachev as the new Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (April 1985) marked the beginning of a new era. Confronted with obvious economic problems, Gorbachev launched a policy of perestroika or economic restructuring. In order to overcome bureaucratic resistance to perestroika, a policy of glasnost (‘openness’ or ‘publicity’) was articulated. Finally, Gorbachev understood that economic recovery could only take place in a favourable external environment. Domestic and foreign policies were more closely connected than at any previous stage in Soviet history, a connection that was even explicitly acknowledged by Gorbachev himself. His ‘New Political Thinking’ and ideas concerning the construction of a ‘Common European Home’ signalled a departure from classical Soviet foreign policy and paved the way for more benevolent relations with the United States and Western Europe. This détente in the Cold War tensions and significant internal transformations of the Soviet society formed the background for the third national awakening of the Baltic peoples.

When the first signs of change became obvious, Baltic intellectuals seized the opportunities of glasnost to determine the agenda for reform in the republics. In the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of October

---

193 After the rise of national consciousness in the nineteenth century and the proclamation of independent republics after the First World War, this third awakening refers to the massive popular movements that succeeded in restoring national independence in the period between 1987 and 1991. Pabriks, Purs, op. cit., footnote 128, p. 45.
1986, the first expressions of dissatisfaction focused on environmental issues. In Latvia, the envisaged construction of a hydroelectric station on the Daugava River and plans to construct a subway in Riga faced tough opposition. The issue that activated the Estonian masses was the further development of phosphate mining, which could contaminate about 40 per cent of Estonia’s water supply. In Lithuania, the ecological debate focused on the planned expansion of the Ignalina nuclear power station, a Chernobyl type installation located only 130 km from Vilnius.

The ecological protests have been portrayed as “relatively neutral in political terms” dealing with problems of economic efficiency and technical planning rather than challenging the legitimacy of the regime. Yet, the preoccupation with environmental problems had an important political and nationalistic connotation. On the one hand, the proposed projects required another major influx of immigrant labour and thus presented a demographic threat to the native population. On the other hand, the environmental protests reflected the fundamental question of division of powers between the Union and the republics. The initial demonstrations can, therefore, be described as “environmental in form but nationalist in content”.

The new climate of glasnost and the success of the environmental protests soon paved the way for more radical expressions of nationalism. The first openly nationalist organization, Helsinki 86, appeared in Latvia. It called for the restoration of Latvia’s independence, the end of Russification and the observance of international human rights norms. On 14 June 1987, the Helsinki 86-group organized a demonstration at the Freedom Monument in Riga to commemorate the Soviet deportations of Latvian citizens in 1941. This event was followed by demonstrations on 23 August, the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and 18 November, the anniversary of Latvia’s first declaration of independence. These so-called ‘calendar demonstrations’, which

---

195 Misiunas, Taagepara, op. cit., footnote 184, p. 304.