

figure that people cited time and again was that some 90–95 percent of the enterprises in the Soviet Union were run from the center, to the detriment of the republics. Vitold Fokin, Chairman of the Ukraine State Planning Commission, explained to us somewhat ruefully that when the Ukraine Supreme Soviet met he would have a difficult time defending his economic record, but people “should understand that many of the problems arose from exaggerated centralism.” As our meetings progressed, the impression grew stronger that all or nearly all of the hopes for reform, from economic to environmental, were being poured into the vessel of decentralization.

It was in these circumstances that Lithuania declared its independence on March 11 and the Soviet Union responded with anger and an economic blockade. The Committee’s first meeting in Moscow was with a delegation of deputies from the Lithuanian parliament who made a plea for international economic and political assistance. They argued that a tougher stand by the West against the Soviet blockade might actually help Gorbachev against the conservatives in the Kremlin. “The imperialist impulse of Moscow will be encouraged by a weak response of the West. The fate of perestroika is tied up with the fate of Lithuania. If violence is used, it will be the end of reform in the Soviet Union, just as the repression of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was the end of Khrushchev’s reforms.”

We encountered considerable sympathy among Soviets for the Baltic cause. A newly-elected, non-communist member of the Leningrad Soviet reported that many of its members had signed a telegram to President Gorbachev declaring their absolute opposition to the use of military force and their belief that “Lithuania is an independent part of the Soviet Union and has the right to secede.” At the same time, he acknowledged that there were differing views on the subject and considerable support for Mr. Gorbachev’s position and handling of the issue.

Georgy Arbatov was one of those critical of the precipitousness of the Lithuanian action when he quoted an old saying about “people who are willing to start a world fire in order to fry their eggs.” The Soviet Government’s unbending position was put to us forcefully by Aleksei Obukov, a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He pointed out that all republics have the right of secession, “but within the framework of the constitution and taking into account the interests of all citizens and the other republics.” He stressed repeatedly that this was an internal problem and that it would be discussed only on the basis of the Soviet constitution. What appeared to be a less rigid message was delivered to us by Volodymyr Ivashko, a member of the Politburo. “My proposal is that the boys from Lithuania should sit down, scratch their heads and say ‘maybe we need to think again’. Nobody denies them the right of self-determination, but let us divorce nicely.”