

sticking point in Lithuanian-Soviet relations. During a visit to Canada, President Gorbachev later denounced the Lithuanians for having acted in a "thief-like fashion", stealing out of the Union.³

Soviet reaction was swift and harsh by the standards of the previous two years' experience. The Congress of People's Deputies declared the declaration of independence illegal on 15 March 1989. Four days later, President Gorbachev reemphasised Soviet ownership of Lithuanian state facilities and industries.

There followed a period of much public diplomacy in the media, with Lithuania sticking to the forms of its independence and Gorbachev insisting on negotiations for a new relationship based on the acceptance of Lithuania's current position in the USSR. Ominously, there were Soviet troop movements on the borders of Lithuania, as well as in its capital, in early March. The rounding up of Lithuanians who refused to report for Soviet military conscription added to the tensions. Despite assurances by the Soviets that military force was not an option, the coercive nature of such activities was apparent. It remains unclear whether these manoeuvres were ordered by the Soviet leadership or were mounted independently by some level of the military.

On 3 April 1990, the Soviet government replied with a new law on secession. The law called for a referendum in the republic to be passed by a two-thirds majority, five years of transition to settle matters arising, and a second referendum to confirm the desire to separate. Demographically, Lithuania would appear to have no problem given that eighty percent of its population is Lithuanian, but Estonia (sixty-four percent Estonian) and Latvia (fifty-three percent Latvian) would experience difficulties, given their high proportion of Russians. This law was considered unacceptable in Lithuania, since it does not consider itself ever having been legally incorporated into the USSR.

On 13 April 1990, President Gorbachev issued an ultimatum to Lithuania to rescind its declaration of independence. This was refused and an economic blockade of the Republic was enacted on 18 April. The embargo on energy resources -- natural gas, coal and oil -- and other raw materials in particular put a severe strain on Lithuania's economy.

On 12 May 1990, Lithuania modified its stance, suspending all laws passed since the 11 March declaration, and thereby suggesting a transition period in which to negotiate independence. This offer was rejected as insufficient by President Gorbachev. A few days later he threatened further sanctions. However, in meetings on 24 May, the Soviet president told Lithuanian officials that if they declared a "freeze" on their declaration of independence, sanctions would be lifted immediately and Lithuania could achieve independence within two years.

Support for Lithuania came from an unexpected source at the beginning of June. Newly elected president of the Russian republic Boris Yeltsin met with President Landsbergis and pledged his cooperation. Russia offered to supply raw materials, oil and natural gas of its own

³ Ross Howard, *Globe and Mail*, 31 May 1990, p. A1.