

## Moscow imposes blockade to strangle free Lithuania

by Konstantin George

The Anglo-American "Munich II" policy of appeasing Moscow, both to support Mikhail Gorbachov and to prop up President George Bush at all costs, a policy exemplified by the sellout of independent Lithuania, has produced as an inevitable consequence a Soviet drive to "go in for the kill" against that brave republic. The Soviet move to strangle Lithuania into submission by a blockade began on the late evening of April 18, when the flow of crude oil from the U.S.S.R. to Lithuania's Mazeikiiai oil refinery was abruptly and totally cut off. The cutoff was declared in a terse telephone message from the U.S.S.R. Oil Industry Ministry, received by the director of the refinery. It said: "In accordance with the resolution of the [U.S.S.R.] Council of Ministers, we are halting the pumping of crude oil to your refinery."

The move was followed the next morning with the shutting down of Lithuania's Ignalinas nuclear power station, the only one in the republic, and later in the day, with 80% of Lithuania's natural gas supplies being cut off, thus creating a full-scale energy crisis.

Lithuania, under normal consumption requirements, has only three weeks of oil supply on hand. These three weeks are the last chance for the major Western countries to reverse their appeasement policy and come to Lithuania's assistance, not with words, but with concrete aid, beginning with supplying oil.

### **Moscow confident West will not act**

The Kremlin leadership only shut off the oil to Lithuania *after* it became confident that the action would meet with continued appeasement from the political heirs of Neville

Chamberlain in the West. The chronology of Soviet pre-blockade moves, gridded at each step with the Bush administration's response, demonstrates this.

First, the blockade was pre-announced in an ultimatum to Lithuania issued on April 13. It was signed by Gorbachov and Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, and ordered Lithuania to revoke all post-independence laws it had passed, or else face a cutoff within 48 hours of commodities from the U.S.S.R. that could instead be "sold for hard currency" on international markets. The two commodities which account for some 80% of all Soviet hard currency export earnings are oil and natural gas. Thus, it was clear as of April 13 that Moscow was about to attempt to strangle Lithuania with a cutoff of oil and natural gas.

Not only did Washington and London do nothing in the face of this ultimatum but, at the April 14 Bermuda summit between Bush and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, both reiterated their policy of supporting Gorbachov, and called for "both sides" to "settle the conflict" through "dialogue." This line has been widely parroted in the Western media and promotes a false picture of two "intransigent" parties.

### **Lithuania makes generous offers**

Lithuania's new government has been extremely statesmanlike in its posture towards Moscow, bending over backwards to meet every legitimate Soviet security and economic interest, under the sole condition that Moscow repudiate the Hitler-Stalin Pact and recognize Lithuanian independence. While Gorbachov was issuing his ultimatum, the Lithuanian government was making the following generous offers to

Moscow as the basis for negotiations:

1) Lithuania offered to stop drafting new laws until May 1, in return for state-to-state negotiations with Moscow.

2) Lithuania offered to grant full language and cultural rights to its minority populations of Russians and Poles, and to settle amicably the status of members of these minorities who do not want to become Lithuanian citizens, by giving them rights similar to those normally granted in Western countries to resident aliens.

3) The Lithuanian Parliament drafted over the Easter weekend a statement offering negotiations on the basis of restoring Lithuania's condition of existence prior to its 1940 annexation by the U.S.S.R., leaving intact the agreements concluded by Lithuania with Russia in the year between the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the country's annexation. The draft specified that Moscow could thus retain its military bases in Lithuania, under the terms of the Lithuanian-U.S.S.R. agreement of Oct. 10, 1939, which established Soviet military bases on Lithuanian soil.

4) Lithuania will guarantee Moscow transit rights over its territory for supply and travel to and from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic coast, and Soviet use of Lithuania's ports as before.

5) Lithuania's government will continue to honor all its goods-delivery commitments to the U.S.S.R. Any stoppages would only occur as the unavoidable result of Soviet curtailment of supplies to Lithuania's industry.

The intransigent party that has rejected all talk and dialogue, has been Moscow, solely.

As Moscow's stranglehold tightens, Margaret Thatcher was rivaling Neville Chamberlain's "Peace in Our Time" declaration: She characterized Gorbachov's declaration of war on Lithuania as a "moderate ultimatum."

Russians, however, are cautious before crossing the point of no return, and thus Moscow still did not plunge ahead. It prepared another test for the West, before commencing the blockade. On April 16, a telegram was dispatched to Lithuania signed by the Soviet natural gas pipeline concern, Zapadtransgas. It read, dispensing with all diplomatic niceties: "Executing Order No. 81D on April 16, 1990 by the Government of the U.S.S.R. and the natural gas concern, the supply of natural gas to the Lithuanian S.S.R. will be severely restricted as of April 17 of this year."

President Bush, wishing to do nothing to upset Gorbachov, or to "ruin" the May-June Washington summit, declared that he would not act to "inflamm" the situation and stressed that any U.S. moves would be "measured responses." Even those would fall strictly into secondary and tertiary economic realms, such as denying Moscow observer status at the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) talks.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said on April 19 that "President Bush has begun a series of consultations with our allies on appropriate responses." Bush spoke by telephone with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on

April 18, and will discuss it with Mitterrand during their day of talks on the 19th. "We will be in touch with all of the allies either directly or through diplomatic channels in the next few days," Fitzwater said.

Asked if joint NATO or Western action was being considered, Fitzwater said, "I wouldn't put it in that category. I think it's more a consultation about what individual countries might do, what their approach might be."

Just to be doubly certain that acting against Lithuania would not incur any trouble from Washington and London, Moscow did *not* cut off natural gas or oil on April 17, or during the day on April 18. The first response by the White House to the cutoff tragically confirmed that Moscow's pre-aggression confidence was justified. Radio Moscow of April 19 dutifully quoted White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater that "the Lithuanian crisis makes all the more important holding the Soviet-American summit."

### Lithuania fights for its life

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis responded instantly and defiantly to the oil blockade. Calling it "an act of economic warfare," he declared that Moscow's move "reflects a great crisis in the U.S.S.R. The Soviet Union, being unable to find a human solution, is resorting to economic coercion and economic warfare against a neighboring country. No one would do this to himself. Truly, this is a recognition of the independence of Lithuania." Landsbergis emphasized that now, "the West must take a clear stand."

From the Bush administration, Landsbergis and Lithuania can expect nothing. On April 14, directly after Gorbachov's ultimatum, Landsbergis had sent an urgent letter to President Bush, appealing for immediate "concrete help" (see *Documentation*). No reply ever came from the White House.

Help could come from Scandinavian quarters. Lithuanian Prime Minister Mrs. Kazimiera Prunskiene arrived in Norway, Europe's second largest oil producer after Britain, the evening of April 18, just before the blockade began, to begin talks with Norwegian oil and shipping companies for the supply of oil to Lithuania. Norway's state oil firm Statoil, according to spokesmen, would be prepared to discuss possible oil sales if contacted by Lithuania. "We would have no problems delivering oil to Lithuania as long as it pays a market price and it fits into our delivery schedule," he said. Other Norwegian oil companies have said sales would be on a purely commercial basis and that such sales would have to be paid for in hard currency. Whether that oil can physically reach Lithuania depends on the Western powers. Lithuania has the ports and the huge Mazeikiiai refinery, but Russia has the Baltic Fleet, which could blockade Lithuania's ports.

Such a blockade, which could only be prevented by resolute Western response, is likely. Moscow's choice of an oil and energy blockade against Lithuania as the form of strangulation was not accidental. Oil supplies are Lithuania's

weakest flank. Russia's move, designed to gain a quick victory, is also a gamble and a reflection of desperation. This is what makes the crisis so dangerous. If Lithuania survives the next several weeks, Moscow's blockade will backfire, and cause much greater devastation in the economy of the U.S.S.R. than it will in Lithuania.

This will certainly be true if Lithuania is allowed to receive oil from abroad. Western media commentaries that Lithuania allegedly cannot do this because it has no foreign exchange, are hogwash. Lithuania has something far more valuable than foreign exchange: the Mazeikiai oil refinery. This refinery has an annual production of 11 million tons, which meets Lithuania's annual consumption requirements of 2.7 million tons, and exports over 8 million tons per year, most of that to the West for foreign exchange. Therefore, Lithuania, through the proceeds from refined oil products alone, can easily pay for its crude oil imports and acquire a hefty hard currency surplus to finance imports of Western technology and machinery to modernize its industry.

Moscow is in no position to engage in any lengthy economic warfare against Lithuania. The consequences for the Soviet economy will be devastating. Lithuania's factories are the sole suppliers of critical components for all Soviet household appliances, and of critical components for Soviet agricultural machinery and trucks. Some 20% of all Soviet refrigerators are manufactured in Lithuania, 30% of all TV sets, 55% of all TV tubes, and the list goes on. The energy blockade of Lithuania, once it forces these plants to close, will cause shutdowns of hundreds of large industrial enterprises throughout the Soviet Union, creating labor unrest and explosions in the empire's already disgruntled heartland.

The disruption of component and product supply will only be one of the shock waves to hit the Soviet Union. Given the physical layout of Soviet oil and gas pipelines, the pipelines that have been closed are the same pipelines which run through Lithuania to the Russian Republic's Kaliningrad exclave, which now faces much worse economic devastation than Lithuania does. The disruption of oil and the nuclear plant closure, will likewise produce devastation beyond the borders of Lithuania. Lithuania is part of an electricity grid that includes Kaliningrad region, the southern half of its Baltic republic neighbor, Latvia, and the northwest part of Belorussia.

Moscow has thus embarked on a course which is not only brutal and aggressive in the mode of Hitler, but like Hitler, irrational, even from the standpoint of Russia's own vital economic and security interests. In short, Russia has taken a path which will aggravate its systemic crisis, and that will, in turn, feed a very dangerous increase in the level of irrationality prevailing in the Kremlin. This, while Bush and Thatcher remain intent on repeating the tragic appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain. There is still time to act and save Lithuania, and by doing so, to contain the Kremlin before it's too late.

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## Documentation

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*Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis appealed to President Bush for help, in a letter written April 14, one day after Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov delivered an ultimatum to the Lithuanian government insisting that it repeal certain laws or face an economic blockade. The letter was delivered to the White House April 18 by a visiting Lithuanian parliamentarian. The Washington office of the Lithuanian Information Center released the letter:*

We are very grateful for, and have been very much encouraged by, the repeated statements on the part of the United States over the last few weeks in support of Lithuania's expression of its right to self-determination. What we very much need today, however, is your strong political support—your recognition of the new Lithuanian government.

At this point, we need your concrete help; use of Soviet military force and political pressure on other countries to not recognize Lithuania continue, and now there is the threat of an economic blockade as a new Iron Curtain is drawn around Lithuania on the Baltic Sea and the Polish border. This aggression must be recognized for what it is, and labeled as such by the West.

*A Sajudis news bulletin reported that at the April 18 session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania, the parliament adopted the draft of a letter to the President Gorbachov and Prime Minister Ryzhkov, which was sent by telegram along with a resolution which was adopted the same day. The text is as follows:*

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania has carefully read and discussed your appeal containing the notice of possible economic sanctions and has prepared an answer including proposals which have been developed at an earlier date. Unfortunately, having received concrete announcements about future sanctions as well, we have little to add to the statement by the Council of Ministers of April 16, 1990, except to possibly express regrets on the position and methods chosen by the U.S.S.R. On our part, as earlier, we are prepared to discuss any issues, taking into consideration all justified interests of the U.S.S.R., foremost those of its citizens and those of a strategic nature. We are ready not to adopt new legislative political acts during the period of preliminary parliamentary consultations, if they were to begin, until May 1, 1990. We are composing a delegation of deputies for such consultations, which will arrive in Moscow at the nearest possible date in hopes of a meeting with persons authorized by you.