

Lithuanians campaign for national independence, 1988-1991

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• Soviet Bloc Independence Campaigns (1989-1991)

Timing

June

1988

to:

September

1991

Location and Goals

Country:

Lithuania

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Sovereignty and independence for the Lithuanian Republic

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 016. Picketing
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing ›National Anthem
- 038. Marches
- 046. Homage at burial places

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott of Communist Party newspaper
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government › Sajudis "Seimas" as a parallel government

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 017. Mock elections
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 037. Singing › National Anthem
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 090. Revenue refusal
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government › Sajudis "Seimas" as a parallel government

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 037. Singing › National Anthem
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › 2 million people joined the capitals of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia with a human chain
- 048. Protest meetings
- 053. Renouncing honours
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government › Sajudis "Seimas" as a parallel government

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Declaration of Independence
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 037. Singing › National Anthem
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance

- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 184. Defiance of blockades
- 190. Alternative markets
- 197. Work-on without collaboration
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government›Lithuanian Supreme Council

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 037. Singing ›National Anthem
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government›Lithuanian Supreme Council

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 037. Singing ›National Anthem
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 124. Boycott of elections
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government›Lithuanian Supreme Council

Segment Length:

Approximately 6.5 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Lithuanian Citizens

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The group "Sajudis", which was later led by Vitautas Landsbergis; Popular Lithuanian Communist Party politician Algirdas Brazauskas; The Sajudis alternative parliament "Seimas"

Partners:

Lithuanian Freedom League; The Green movement; Pro-independence groups in Latvia and Estonia

External allies:

Catholic Church, USA, Sweden, Soviet Union supporters, France, West Germany, CNN, BBC

Involvement of social elites:

Communist leaders and intellectuals played a huge role in the campaign. During the August 1991 invasion, the Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet, Boris Yeltsin, acknowledged the independence of the Baltic states and condemned the military action.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Algirdas Brazauskas
- Estonian and Lithuanian independence movements
- Green movement
- Seimas

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Lithuanian veterans
- Lithuanian youths

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Lithuanian Supreme Council

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Boris Yeltsin; International supporters

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 6.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Soviet Union Leadership; initially the Lithuanian Supreme Council was an opponent, but this changed when Sajudis gained a majority there.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The USSR implemented an embargo on sending goods to Lithuania

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Lithuanian police early in the campaign attacked protesters. Throughout 1990 Soviet troops attacked youth that refused conscription. In January 1991, Soviet troops led an invasion of Lithuania, which continued to a lesser degree until August 1991. During the first part of the invasion, the troops killed at least 13 and wounded hundreds more Lithuanians.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Lithuania gained complete independence in 1991

The main organizing group, Sajudis, survived through the campaign

The campaign grew to include almost the entire Lithuanian population and Sajudis took over the government of Lithuania. During the economic blockade they were able to raise huge amounts of funds to sustain their resistance.

Russia first occupied Lithuania and introduced a program of “Russification,” an attempt to eliminate Lithuanian language and culture in favor of Russian culture, in the mid-19th century. After 22 years of independence from Russia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 reintroduced the Soviet Union’s dominance over Lithuania—as well as the other Baltic states: Estonia and Latvia. The Soviet Union publicly stated that Lithuania had joined the USSR willingly, although secret protocols of the pact disputed this. Following World War II, the Soviet Union reoccupied Lithuania. In the period from WWII until 1987, Lithuanians continued resistance, both violent and nonviolent, to the Soviet rule and “Sovietization” of Lithuania.

This resistance came from several different areas of Lithuanian Society, one important leader being the Catholic Church, which had always been important in Lithuanian history and Lithuania’s independence movement. The Catholic Church circulated mass petitions and letters against Soviet repression deportations.

With the implementation of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) in the USSR in 1985, Lithuanian resistance took on new levels. Although Lithuanian Communist Party leaders did not favor these new policies, Lithuanian intellectuals took advantage of the new openness by publishing new literary magazines that critiqued Soviet rule. Resistance also took place through environmental protection groups that opposed the ecological destruction implemented by Soviet industrial projects.

By spring 1988 the movement for Lithuanian independence gained new momentum and a group of scholars had begun to write a new constitution for the nation. On June 3, 1988, five hundred intellectuals and young Communist Party officials gathered at the Academy of Sciences and formed the group called “Sajudis,” which would go on to lead the campaign for Lithuanian independence. Soon after its formation, Sajudis organized several small gatherings.

On June 14, 1988, a radical pro-independence group called the Lithuanian Freedom League, which had been operating since the 1970s, organized a 6,000-person rally in Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius. At this rally the independent Lithuanian flag was flown for the first time since World War II.

Competing for attention, the more moderate Sajudis organized two rallies on June 21 and 24 in order to provide mandates for the Lithuanian representatives to the Nineteenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow. 20,000 people attended the second demonstration where they heard speeches by Vitautas Landsbergis (who would later become the leader of Sajudis) and Algirdas Brazauskas (a Communist Party leader).

When the Lithuanian representatives returned from the Nineteenth Party Congress on July 9, Sajudis held another rally in Vilnius to demonstrate popular support for reform and to hold the Lithuanian representatives accountable to such reform. At this demonstration, which 100,000 Lithuanians attended, people flew more Lithuanian flags and sang the national anthem for the first time since WWII. After July 9, many Lithuanians also joined a Sajudis-planned boycott of the Communist Party newspaper.

On July 20—the 48th anniversary of Lithuania’s becoming a Soviet Socialist Republic—the entire country engaged in protest activities. A photography exhibit documented all of Sajudis’ activities; 100 cyclists participated in a “Ride for ecology”, with 24 rallies in support of Sajudis along the way; there was an ecological march to the coast of the Baltic Sea; and a Sajudis member organized a “rock-n-roll” march to pay homage to the new demands for national independence.

In response to these demonstrations, after August 2 the Lithuanian Supreme Council (which still supported the Soviet rule) required 10-days notice before any assemblies, demonstrations, or marches could be held. In protest, 5,000 people demonstrated illegally in front of the Supreme Council building.

On August 21, Sajudis openly published the secret protocols of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which proved that Lithuania had been forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union. Two days later, on the anniversary of the Pact, 250,000 people carrying Lithuanian flags attended a rally in Vilnius to protest Soviet rule. Smaller groups held rallies in several other Lithuanian cities.

Through the rest of 1988, Lithuanian support for Sajudis and national independence continued to grow. The environmentally focused Green movement joined the campaign. Later, the campaigners experienced their first physical repression when police used batons to disperse a demonstration of more than 20,000 people. In response to the repression, Lithuanians sent a massive amount of letters and picketed the Communist Central Committee, forcing the Central Committee to legalize the Lithuanian flag and forcing the Communist Party secretary to resign the next month. He was replaced by Sajudis supporter and reformer, Algirdas Brazauskas.

In October, Sajudis held its first congress, during which the group expressed continued support for “restructuring” (perestroika), but also called continued Soviet rule illegal. During the congress, Sajudis elected a 220-person Seimas (“Diet”) as an alternative governmental body to the Supreme Council. In its first meeting the new Seimas condemned a new law for the Soviet Union that would further diminish the sovereignty of Lithuania and other Soviet Socialist Republics. Despite over 1.8 million Lithuanians signing a petition to stop

the new law, the USSR's Supreme Soviet passed it.

Following Estonia's declaration of sovereignty (which Moscow did not recognize) in November, the Seimas passed its own declaration stating that Lithuanians would only follow laws that did not restrict Lithuanian independence. In further support of such a declaration, on Christmas Eve thousands of Lithuanians turned off their lights for half an hour and lit candles in their windows as a symbolic referendum for national independence.

After this symbolic gesture, Lithuanian protesters carried through more acts of noncooperation, like a boycott of dairy products (controlled by the state monopoly) and the refusal to pay increased taxes. On August 23, 1989, 2 million people in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia joined hands forming a 650-kilometer chain linking capitals of the three republics in a protest against Soviet occupation and to demonstrate Baltic solidarity.

Throughout 1989 Lithuania furthered its protest. The republic officially recognized the illegality of the Soviet rule in August. Lithuanian youths boycotted conscription and burned their conscription cards. Over one hundred Lithuanian veterans of the Soviet army returned their medals and awards. Some public organizations, unions, and societies, including the Lithuanian Communist Party, ended their relationships with Moscow.

In February 1990, Sajudis won a huge majority of the seats in the Supreme Council. With Sajudis control of this official power structure, the Supreme Council officially declared the independence of the Republic of Lithuania on March 12. The following day, the declaration of independence and other documents were sent directly to the leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev.

After the declaration, the Soviet Union responded with 3 attack phases. The first dealt with Lithuania's refusal of Soviet conscription. The Soviet troops were ordered to take youths and deserters forcibly. The second phase dealt with state borders. The USSR troops strengthened their position on the borders and began confiscating all firearms from Lithuanians. The third dealt with the control of buildings and institutions. Soviet paratroopers began to occupy several buildings that had once belonged to the Communist Party. The USSR began to replace personnel that were openly sympathetic to the independence cause. However, these replacements proved ineffectual because the Lithuanian staff refused to recognize them.

In response to the declaration of independence and other attempts to diminish Soviet rule of Lithuania, the USSR implemented a blockade of goods on April 25. This blocked nearly all oil and gas supplies to Lithuania for 10 weeks, but Lithuanians quickly organized to redistribute scarce resources and withstand the blockade. The Supreme Council organized a Blockade Committee and raised funds to support groups in the most need.

On June 29, 1990, the Supreme Council called a 100-day moratorium of the declaration of independence in order to begin negotiations with Moscow. These negotiations began two months later. Nonetheless, for the remainder of 1990, the USSR stepped up its intimidation strategy. The USSR threatened further economic sanctions and annexation of Lithuanian lands and also increased their attacks against young people that refused conscription.

At the beginning of December, the USSR began ordering troops to enforce a conscription law in all the republics of the Soviet Union. It also withdrew from the negotiations it had begun with Lithuania after the 100-day moratorium on independence. In late December the USSR sent troops to patrol the streets of Lithuanian cities. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Supreme Council called on its citizens not to provoke any physical altercations with the Soviet troops.

Following a declaration from Moscow on January 10 that ordered Lithuania to repeal its declaration of independence, the National Salvation Committee (NSC) announced its existence. The NSC's ranks were made

up of members of the pro-Moscow CPL/CPSU and the Soviet military. Under the auspice of the NSC, Soviet troops invaded the Lithuanian Department of National Defense and occupied the press center in Vilnius. The Lithuanians had already begun a plan for nonviolent defense, setting up unarmed civilian patrols to protect the Supreme Council and TV and radio buildings.

At midnight of January 12-13, the NSC announced that Lithuania was under the direct control of the president of the Soviet Union. Two hours later (2 a.m.), soviet troops began to move towards the radio and TV centers in Vilnius. Meanwhile thousands of singing Lithuanians surrounded the buildings, creating a human barricade to prevent a Soviet takeover. The Soviet troops attacked this group, killing 13 and wounding hundreds more. One Soviet KGB officer was also killed (not known how).

While citizens stood between the Soviet troops and the buildings and TV transmission tower, more stayed in position to protect the Supreme Council from invasion. The entire attack on the TV buildings was broadcast internationally through television and radio. When the Soviet troops seized the transmission tower, the Lithuanians continued to broadcast updates from an alternative transmitter in the Supreme Council building, which was never invaded.

Later on January 13, Boris Yeltsin (the Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet), who was opposed to the attacks, recognized the sovereignty of all Baltic States. On the same day, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania all recognized one another's independence. In response to the Soviet attack of Lithuania on January 12-13, international supporters sent letters and organized rallies in solidarity with the Lithuanian independence campaign.

Following the January 12-13 events, the Soviet Union continued its aggression towards Lithuania with frequent attacks on Lithuanian police, army deserters, customs offices, and other groups. However, the Lithuanians continued to defend their declaration of independence nonviolently. In March they boycotted a USSR referendum to uphold the Union. Lithuanians refused to acknowledge the troops that occupied the TV and press centers, instead setting up alternative newspapers. Press workers held a hunger strike for several months in front of the Soviet-occupied press buildings. Lithuanians remained prepared for another invasion with plans for further disobedience and human blockades to protect buildings.

On August 19, 1991, when Communist Party and military leaders in Moscow attempted a coup in order to maintain the Soviet Union and its control of the Baltic states, the Lithuanians were still prepared. They launched their plan for human blockades and disobedience. However, in response to nonviolent resistance in Moscow itself, the coup failed.

After this failed coup, Lithuania was officially recognized as an independent nation. In September 1991, Lithuania became a member of the United Nations.

Research Notes

Influences:

Gandhi's independence movement—with respect to the nonviolence and non-cooperation. (1)

The other Baltic States were both influences (Estonia's declaration "On the Sovereignty of the Estonian SSR," Nov. 16, 1988) to the Lithuanian independence movement. (1,2)

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Additional Notes:

This case was originally written by Aurora Muñoz (03/12/2009) with one source. It was researched again and significantly added to by Max Rennebohm (24/05/2011).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Aurora Muñoz, 03/12/2009, and Max Rennebohm, 24/05/2011

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