

**Voices of Change:**  
**The Power of Music in the Baltic Singing Revolution**

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Amidst a sea of voices, massive waves of unity sang out instead of discord, and hopeful harmonies prevailed over anger. The singing revolutions in the Baltic region during the late 1980s represented more than just independence movements; they were powerful expressions of cultural identity and resilience against Soviet occupation. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania each had their own iterations of the singing revolution, but all shared a common thread of peaceful protest through music and cultural preservation. During an occupation built on cultural assimilation and extermination to promote a ‘oneness’ through censorship, genocide, and brainwashing, the Baltic countries managed to hold on to their heritage and find their uniting characteristics and histories with each other as a form of defiance. This paper will focus on the Estonian example with a brief look at the similarities and differences between the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian uses of music, as they all have unique expressions under similar circumstances.

With a rich historical and cultural legacy, the Baltic region has experienced profound periods of occupation, fostering a deep and spiritual bond with the land among its people. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were all Pagan regions until their Christianization in the 13th century, contributing to their *nature culture* (Bunkše 1992, Brokaw and Brokaw 2001). In reference to Estonia, but generally representative of all the Baltic states, “Jõeste (1993) said that ‘in folk stories, the most common themes are place legends, and almost every larger boulder, tree, body of water or hill has a legend associated with it’” (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001, 20). Other than a brief 20 year period of independence between the 1920s and 1940s, Baltic occupation dates back to before the common era under the Roman Empire, later taken over by the Danes, Swedes, Germans, Poles, Czarist Russia, the Soviet Union, the Nazis, and finally the Soviet Union again (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 2:22).

Even amidst the enduring grips of occupation, the Baltic people safeguarded their five-thousand-year-old cultural heritage from eradication (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 5:00). While governmental authorities imposed strict restrictions on the documentation of Estonian history, an allowance for the preservation of folklore and mythology persisted (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001). Until the early nineteenth century, the people were fragmented by serfdom, deeply dividing the populace, most notably along dialectic lines. In 1838, an instrumental step toward unification emerged with the establishment of the Learned Estonian Society. The heterophily of scattered indigenous Estonians gave way to homophily, forged in the unification process by the Learned Estonian Society. Differences were bridged in the expression of shared mythology and history, unified by poems and songs. (Nicoara 2018).

Central to this cultural unification is the epic poem 'Kalevipoeg,' often heralded as the cornerstone that unified Estonian culture. This saga chronicles the life of the son of a revered mythological figure, embodying core Estonian values and beliefs through his actions, while weaving together the separate networks of Estonians, narrating their common history, ancient freedom, and occupation by foreign forces (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001, Nicoara 2018, 71). See Nicoara (2018, 71) table 1 for a comprehensive list of values and beliefs presented in 'Kalevipoeg'.

The adaptation of poetry to song likely contributed to the widespread transmission of ideas, history, and homophily experienced by the Estonian people. Cultural values of resistance and nationalism implied by the lyrics and evoked by the emotive melodies of these traditional songs were stoked by the Soviet efforts to quash any non-Soviet patriotism and culture, cementing the collective solidarity among indigenous Estonians. As Soviet occupation went on, and the process of Russification continued, Russian settlement and immigration rapidly increased

*Table 1. Cultural messages of self-governance, responsibility, cooperation, and entrepreneurialism in Kalevipoeg*

| <b>Ancient Estonian beliefs, attitudes, and governance preferences</b>                 | <b>Ancient Estonian Text</b>         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| An optimistic and constructive attitude toward failure                                 | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 212; Song XVI) |
| Humility and knowledge accumulation                                                    | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 212; Song XVI) |
| Entrepreneurship as risk-taking                                                        | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 43; Song III)  |
| The role of social feedback in good governance                                         | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 200; Song XVI) |
| Conflict resolution and cooperation through communication: language and singing skills | (Kruks, 2003)                        |
| Responsibility for one's own actions                                                   | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 115; Song IX)  |
| Freedom of choice; hope for the future                                                 | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 250; Song XIX) |
| Responsible collective action                                                          | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 251; Song XIX) |
| A society of equal, capable, and responsible beings                                    | (Kreutzwald, 1982, p. 251; Song XIX) |

*Source: Table with categories created by Nicoara's (2018) interpretation based on Kalevipoeg lyrics found in Kruks, 2003.*

with hundreds of thousands of Russians settling in Estonia growing from 8% of the Estonian population in the 1940s to over 40% by the late 1980s (Tusty and Tusty 2006, 50:39). As a nation with a population of only around one million, resource exploitation plans by the Soviets threatened to bring in more Russian settlers, sparking Estonian fear of becoming a minority in their own home (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001, 25).

In the long dark shadow of oppression and occupation, Gorbachev's Glasnost cracked open the door, revealing the opportunities and potentials of a more open and free society. Whether in a disingenuous feigning of democratic values or a legitimate attempt to slowly take these steps together, the Estonians and other Baltic peoples were drawn to the opportunity and, through their song, came together to fully open the door and rush to freedom. These conditions manufactured a resistance movement out of necessity and heightened nationalistic pride that culminated in the late 1980s with the Singing Revolution. The policy of 'increased freedoms' was called Glasnost, and was a major part of the overall Perestroika movement of 'reconstruction' of political and economic systems by the Soviets. While Estonia's Singing Revolution is the most well-known and thoroughly researched example, Latvia and Lithuania both had "Singing Revolutions" of their own through different forms.

The most iconic location of the Singing Revolution occurred in Estonia. Commencing with the iconic Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn, the nation's capital, massive gatherings during the Laulupidu festivals became potent symbols of national unity, where thousands congregated to sing traditional songs affirming Estonian heritage. After many years of Soviet propaganda and control corrupted the once patriotic festivals with songs singing praise of Stalin, Lenin, and Communism, the celebrations evolved into a platform for political expression, with attendees advocating for independence through traditional melodies and patriotic hymns. Months of rapidly growing grassroots protests spread only by word-of-mouth boosted the confidence of Estonians (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 37:39).

One of the first examples of music festival patriotism occurred at the Tartu music festival in May of 1988, with the singing of outlawed nationalistic songs and the appearance of many national Estonian flags (Ryynanen and Talviste 2023, 644). This came after a series of protests

against Soviet decisions took place in the year prior against environmental impacts of new Soviet mines and immigration (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 36:50) as well as a second protest against the Soviet's occupation in general (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 37:40). The growing success of these protests in light of Perestroika and Glasnost gave the fed up Estonian people motivation and courage to continue their traditions of song and music festivals to voice their opinions.

The watershed moment arrived in 1988 with unprecedented mass demonstrations at the Song Festival Grounds, where the fervour for independence surged. In June, following a music festival, the crowd of over 15,000 moved across the city of Tallinn to the Song Festival Grounds (Rakfeldt 2015, 533, Tusty and Tusty 2007, 43:10). This demonstration was full of music and protesters would continue to stay there for an entire week, amassing an enormous crowd with estimates well over 100,000, purely through word of mouth (Ryynanen and Talviste 2023, 644-645, Tusty and Tusty 2007, 44:10). As crowds grew, people started to feel more comfortable to let loose, the breaking point of which was an iconic scene of one man riding his motorcycle by the festival grounds waving the Soviet banned Estonian flag. That one flag let off a chain reaction of hundreds more Estonian flags being brought out by all kinds of people who had been hiding them from the Soviets for decades (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001; Rakfeldt 2015, 533, Tusty and Tusty 2007 45:04).

By September (1988), word had spread about the June demonstrations and the people were raring for their national Laulupidu festival in Tallinn and nearly one in every three Estonians were there with an audience of over 300,000 ready to sing their patriotic songs and unite in a show of protest against their Soviet oppressors (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001, 25; Nicoara 2018, 78; Tusty and Tusty 2007, 51:59). After the normally scheduled songs and sets, the audience erupted into song, singing songs banned by the Soviets for the patriotism to Estonia,

including "Eestlane Olen ja Eestlaseks Jään" ("Estonian I Am and Estonian I Will Remain"). A Soviet brass band tried to drown out the singing but were no match for the determined and outnumbering crowd (Tedla 2011). This demonstration was a catalyst for the actual change to follow, Estonian adults almost entirely all registered as Estonian citizens, and following an election, elected Estonian officials from the rogue, anti-Soviet alternate governing body were emboldened to push for actual independence over the following years (Tusty and Tusty 2007, 1:04:13).

In Latvia, the implementation of Glasnost and Perestroika emboldened Latvians to write more music praising their country of Latvia, appearing in both mass choir song festivals and on air with radio station song competitions. The choral protest of singing banned songs started in the 1970s at Latvian national song festivals (Šmidchens 2014, 173-179), though additional mobilization was more uniquely led through formerly government-sanctioned radio song competition, *Mikrofona aptauja*. The *Mikrofona* was a Latvian radio programme created in 1965 by the Soviets to serve as counterpropaganda and take up airtime during the times when foreign Latvian translated radio programmes would air (Gronow and Daugavietis 2020, 274).

By 1968, the producers of *Mikrofons* figured that hosting a song competition would increase their audience. This competition would end up being a great stage for subtle anti-Soviet/pro-Latvian messaging through songs that could slip through Soviet censorship and be broadcast across the whole Soviet Union (Gronow and Daugavietis 2020). Pērcons, a Latvian rock band and winners of the 1989 *Mikrofona aptauja* contest, describe their music, saying “We didn’t sing *against*, because that would be destructive action. We sang and were *for*. *For* love, *for* social issues, *for* good rock music” (Šmidchens 2014, 251). This sentiment and framing is shared among the Baltic states, emphasizing the love and care for one's country and people rather

than being expressly against or full of hate toward their Soviet occupiers, clear especially in the unplanned collective choice to use music for change.

The core of the Singing Revolution in Lithuania lay in the Sajūdis - an organization formed in 1988, comprising thirty-six artists and intellectuals. Sajūdis fervently championed the principles of perestroika and glasnost, serving as a beacon for societal and political transformation within the nation (Martinelli 2019, 298). One of the most notable artists was the band, Antis. Martinelli (2019) explains the name of the band itself is a double entendre, meaning both ‘duck’ (the animal) and ‘mass media scandal/sensation,’ “the subtext that everybody knew was that the band’s real name was a dig to freedom of speech, censorship and media manipulation” (Martinelli 2019, 300). With song themes and comments of sarcastic insincerity and provocative irony, Antis pushed the boundaries, playing on the fact that Russians would not understand their jokes while Lithuanians were all privy.

Meanwhile, Lithuanians were having song festivals of their own, some of which Antis would play at. One festival of note was the Rock March that would take place between 1987 and 1989. This Rock March was held to raise money for different charities every year, and to also serve as a coverup for the Sajūdis platform and Lithuanian independence (Martinelli 2019, 302). With guest performers from Latvia and Estonia also joining the stage, the solidarity among Baltic states was further proven (Martinelli 2019, 299). Reports also tell of how the Sajūdis would distribute tens of thousands of copies of the Lithuanian, Estonian, and Latvian national anthems at events for people to sing along (Šmidchens 2014, 192-193). Sajūdis connections were international, even artistic movement Fluxus - of which Yoko Ono and John Lennon helped make popular - were created by Lithuanians and had connections to members of the Sajūdis (Martinelli 2019, 299). By 1989, bands like Antis were also going on tours across the globe,

amassing a greater audience and influence to help their cause (Martinelli 2019, 303). These international connections likely helped in the eventual declaration of Lithuanian independence and international recognition of the country's sovereignty.

With so much of the Baltic Singing Revolution being a mass, collective effort, the barriers of participation were lowered and encouraged greater participation from everyday citizens. Whether standing amongst a crowd of over one hundred thousand voices, mailing in a vote to a radio song competition to support a rebellious rock band, or being one of the fans in the audience, the messages of hope, unity, and pride were central to the Singing Revolutions of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Through cultural preservation and regional support and solidarity, these movements enhanced each other and led to the Baltic Way (also known as the 'Baltic Chain'). On August 23, 1989, the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Hitler and Stalin that led to the occupation of the Baltics and the Second World War (Zunes 2009; Tedla 2011), somewhere between half a million and two million Balts came together and joined hands and arms to create an over 600 meter long human chain that wove through the entire countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in solidarity and the collective desire for autonomy (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001, 27; Gronow and Daugavietis 2020, 286; Rakfeldt 2015, 539; Tusty and Tusty 2007, 1:00:19). This peaceful yet powerful resistance eventually led to the consecutive 1991 declarations of independence from all three Baltic countries, marking a historic triumph of cultural resilience and determination against Soviet suppression.

By using ballads over bullets, songs over strong-arms, and solidarity over savagery, the Baltic people united in ways unseen by the world. While their methods were uncoordinated and differ in implementation, they share a core set of beliefs and motivations that carried them through their long history of occupation. When the people finally had enough, they raised their

voices, not in shouts of anger, but in songs of love and national pride. Preserving their unique and extensive cultures, the Baltic people were ultimately successful in their pushes for independence from the Soviet Union and international recognition. The stories of protests, hundreds of thousands of people singing in protest, and millions more holding hands in solidarity were spread across the world, bringing international responses of wonder and admiration highlighted in media coverage throughout the world (see Dobbs 1989; Fein 1989). The images and videos that came out of these events are truly something to behold and will forever be a monumental moment in history for each of the Baltic states and their proud citizens.

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