NATIONS AND NATIONALISM
JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM

Nations and Nationalism **20** (2), 2014, 259–276.
DOI: 10.1111/nana.12059

'Singing oneself into a nation'? Estonian song festivals as rituals of political mobilisation

KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN* and ANDRES KASEKAMP**

**Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia*
***University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia*

ABSTRACT. This article argues that Estonian song festivals were a powerful ritual of political mobilisation. Throughout their history, however, they had to be accommodated to narratives of ruling regimes. Taking Patrick Hutton's concept of such events as a 'moment of memory' with which images of the past are being reconstructed in a selective way, song festivals are on each occasion made to suit present needs. During the history of Estonian nationhood, these needs have been guided first and foremost by forms of political authority: during years of independence, the festivals were to serve different purposes than under imperial or Soviet Russian rule. Thus, the concept of 'singing oneself into a nation', popular in Estonian history textbooks, is only partly true. Although the performance of the festival changes only slightly through the years, its political significance changes enormously.

KEYWORDS: Baltic states, choral singing, cultural nationalism, Estonia, national festivals, rituals

Songs have been our weapons, song festivals our victories.

Estonian President Lennart Meri, 3 July 1999

Introduction

According to traditional narratives of relating the story of the Estonian nation, the first song festival in 1869 created a firm basis for the sense of ethnic unity, a process that has been called 'singing oneself into a nation' (Adamson and Karjahärm 2004: 144). More than a century later, in the 1980s, a new 'awakening' symbolically took the first one as a model, this time as 'liberation through singing' from Soviet domination. The song festivals are part of the narrative template underlying Estonian cultural memory, which Marek Tamm (2008: 511) labels 'The Great Battle for Freedom'. Metaphorically speaking, the song festivals not only were instrumental for the 'birth of the nation' but also provided the means for the 'survival' of the nation in the second half of the

twentieth century. Thus, the ritual of common singing developed, over time, into a tradition of performing peacefully the national aspirations of the Estonian people.

According to Bernhard Giesen, '[R]ituals are the performative counterpart to myth' and they 'provide the ultimate anchor for connecting actions, they refer to the construction of meaning itself'. Therefore the song festivals not only followed and shaped Estonian political developments, ethnic consolidation, national consciousness and self-image but also became a 'real' counterpart to the 'myth' of the national narrative (Giesen 2006: 342). At the same time, the song festivals became gradually institutionalised in 'a process of formalisation and ritualisation, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition' (Hobsbawm 2000 [1980]: 4–5). However, as increasingly ritualised events, organised under various regimes, the tradition was invented as a highly symbolic process marking different stages of national cohesiveness. Especially during Tsarist times, the 'rapid transformation of society', as Hobsbawm wrote, weakened the social patterns 'for which "old" traditions had been designed'. In turn, these changes – urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation – created the demand for a new sort of visibility for a new group defining itself in terms of language and culture.

Since the time of the 'national awakening', in the second half of the nineteenth century, according to one recent source, song festivals became 'a part of Estonian culture' and played 'a decisive role in the creation and preservation of [Estonian] national consciousness'. Even under Soviet rule it was 'precisely through the song festivals that national solidarity was felt and, to the annoyance of the occupiers, patriotic self-awareness was generated' (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 3). Or as explained by the late Estonian President Lennart Meri: 'A song festival is a matter of the heart. Like the Estonian language and mentality, like love' (Meri 1999).

Nationalism undoubtedly has a strong emotional element, and national festivals were 'acts of devotion' (Mosse 1991: 9). Mass gatherings created a sense of interdependence with other members of the collective, and this interdependence was 'cemented by symbolic action'. Whereas song festivals created episodic action, the formation of singing associations and choirs enabled the people to be engaged more permanently (Mosse 1991: 13). Although we do not discuss this issue of singing together in more detail, we are aware of the importance of the factor Giesen calls the 'corporeality' of rituals. 'Rituals do not exist like texts or institutions as structures of signification or dispositions of power and control. Instead, they exist as embodied performances, as events produced and experienced bodily by actors in a shared situation and in a local site' (Connerton 1989; Giesen 2006: 342). Svetlana Boym (1994: 112) observes that mass songs 'function collectively as a magic force that programmatically arouses a certain predictable emotional [. . .] response'. To understand such a song, it is 'necessary first of all to sing it in a crowd'. Though Boym writes of Stalinist mass songs, a parallel can undoubtedly been drawn with patriotic songs that function in a similar manner.

Patrick Hutton (1993: xxi) directs attention to repetition and recollection as the ‘two moments of memory’:

> Repetition concerns the presence of the past. It is the moment of memory through which we bear forward images of the past that continue to shape our present understanding in unreflective ways. One might call them habits of mind; they are the stuff of the collective memories that we associate with living traditions.

If ‘recollection concerns our present efforts to evoke the past’ then the Estonian song festivals are a ‘moment of memory’ with which they ‘consciously reconstruct images of the past in the selective way that suits the needs of [their] present situation’ (Hutton 1993: xxi). In other words, the ritual of the song festival has a strong connection to its contemporary political and symbolic environment. If repetition provides the bond with the (imagined) past, then recollection is a performed way to articulate concerns of the present. It is this contemporary context of every single element in the chain of song festivals that linear national narratives tend to neglect.

Ritual activities are no doubt instrumental in creating cultural memory as a foundation for a national identity in a continuous work-in-progress process. However, as historians, we are interested as well in the interplay between ritualistic expressions of unity and identity on the one hand and its political instrumentalisation. Paradoxically, each national song festival had by necessity to be formulated as a manifestation of support for the existing regime, which was in sharp contradiction with the expressed undercurrent of the national identity and solidarity. Only during the independence era were these two contradictory narratives not in conflict, but with Estonian statehood, festivals had to comply with a completely new rationale. Thus political instrumentalisation was always different and the ritual became contemporised in each case, reflecting at the same time the changing patterns of performing the national agenda.

Below, we analyse the development of the Estonian song festivals through the Tsarist, independence and Soviet eras, contextualising their political ‘messages’. We argue that the song festivals and the performative act of mass singing have always been more than the national narrative of promoting Estonian culture ‘against all the odds’ suggests. Whereas the outer form of the festival changes only gradually in size, programme and technical equipment, its political significance has to be interpreted each time differently given the changing circumstances.

Tsarist era song festivals: creating a tradition

The first song festivals in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire were organised by the Baltic Germans, the local ruling elites, in the 1850s and 1860s, inspired by the choral singing societies that had blossomed in Germany during the era of national romanticism (Plaesterer 1929). Greatly impressed by these

events, Johann Voldemar Jannsen, the founder of the first Estonian language national newspaper and a central figure in the Estonian 'national awakening',[1] which had begun in the late 1850s, established the Vanemuise Society (named after the mythical god of music) to promote Estonian culture in Tartu (German: Dorpat) in 1865. The Vanemuise Society initiated the idea of an Estonian song festival and organised the first song festival in 1869.

Mosse has demonstrated how important for the German tradition of 'national festivals' established during the nineteenth century the genuine Protestant praxis of singing has been. Festivals 'forged one sacred national and Christian act of worship' where above all the singing of the hymn (in the Protestant case 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God') manifests the participation of the congregation. Singing patriotic poetry in the secular festivals replaces the collective reading of the Scripture in the service (Mosse 1991: 79–80). Thus, the worship of the people became the 'worship of the nation' expressed in a 'political style which became, in reality, a secularized religion', and in a liturgy that enabled the people to be drawn 'into active participation in the national mystique' (Mosse 1991: 2).

As historian Ea Jansen has shown, Estonian national activists imitated German models while at the same time striving to create a distinct Estonian public sphere independent of German tutelage (Jansen 2007: 453–5). In the mid-nineteenth century the only way for an ambitious upwardly mobile Estonian to get ahead in the Baltic provinces was to become Germanised, assimilating into the German cultural world and covering all traces of his own peasant roots.[2] Nevertheless, Estonians were still not able to act without the patronage of Baltic German enthusiasts. Estonians increasingly attempted to emancipate themselves culturally from the Baltic Germans. One means of demonstrating cultural presence and to liberate themselves from Baltic German tutelage was to organise their own song festival. For this they required support from the Russian imperial authorities. In order to overcome obstruction and the suspicions of the conservative local German ruling elite and the Russian imperial bureaucracy, the organisers announced that the song festival would be dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the emancipation of the peasants in gratitude to Emperor Alexander I (Talve 2005: 482).

The site chosen for the festival was the gardens of a German society in Tartu, Jannsen's hometown and centre of the national movement. Altogether 845 singers or musicians in 51 choirs or bands participated on 18–20 June 1869. The festival began with a parade of the choirs, many wearing local folk costumes, through the city (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 12), visually following the patterns of German national festivals characterised by Mosse (1991: 73–99) The first day was devoted to religious songs, the second to secular repertoire and the third day to competition and games. Though a couple of patriotic Estonian songs, including the future national anthem *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm* (My Fatherland, my joy and happiness) were featured, the overwhelming majority of the programme consisted of religious and secular songs by German

composers (sung in Estonian). The chairman of the festival was Tartu German Lutheran pastor Adalbert Hugo Willigerode, whose contacts in St Petersburg helped Jannsen to obtain official permission for the event (Põldmäe 1969: 36–7).

Despite the heavy Baltic German influence, ethnographer Ilmar Talve claims that 'the success of the song festival was mainly due to the enthusiasm of the participants, the energy of the choir leaders, and national spirit' (Talve 2005: 484). Apart from the emotional part of the festival, it was also a tremendous and unprecedented logistical and organisational accomplishment, being the first occasion when people from nearly all corners of Estonia came together for an event, despite the difficulties of transportation and communications (Talve 2005: 483).[3] It was the first physical demonstration of Estonian national unity staged as a cultural performance.

After the success of the first song festival and with the growing attractiveness of cultural nationalism, it was decided to organise another national festival, which after many delays, including the Russo–Turkish war, was finally held in 1879 in Tartu. The third song festival was held the following year for the first time in Tallinn (German: Reval), reflecting the competition between the two urban Estonian centres. At this point, the territory of present-day Estonia was still split into two provinces within the Russian Empire: Estland in the north, with the commercial capital Tallinn, and Livland in the south, an administrative unit, which also covered present-day northern Latvia. For the Estonian part of Livland, Tartu, the city with the only university in the Baltic Provinces, was the centre of cultural activity and the base of the first generation of national activists. The Estonian 'national awakening' of the mid-nineteenth century began to flourish earlier in Livland than in Estland.

The burgeoning national movement was torn in the 1870s by a debate over direction. Jannsen and Lutheran pastor Jakob Hurt (who was the main speaker at most of the early song festivals) favoured an evolutionary, cultural approach, which sought accommodation with progressive and liberal elements among the Baltic German local ruling elites. This strategy was challenged by the editor of the *Sakala* newspaper Carl Robert Jakobson, who promoted an explicitly political approach aligning the national movement with the imperial Russian authorities in order to undermine the hegemony of the Baltic Germans (Raun 2002: 63–5). However, this debate became irrelevant when the imperial government began to impose 'Russification' policies in the Baltic Provinces from the mid-1880s aimed at unifying administrative practice and language within the empire which largely failed (Thaden 1981).

Nevertheless, the song festivals of the Tsarist era grew in size and popularity, while also changing in content. During the remaining period of Tsarist rule four more festivals were held: 1891 and 1894 in Tartu and 1896 and 1910 in Tallinn (the latter was delayed because of the 1905 Revolution in the Russian Empire). As with the first song festival, the organisers in securing permission

often sought to connect the event with imperial commemorative practice. For instance, the 1880 festival was dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the coronation of Alexander II and the 1896 festival to the coronation of Nicholas II. By the end of the nineteenth century modernisation, urbanisation, and improved transport and communications created more favourable conditions and the burgeoning Estonian middle class provided a wider social base and self-assurance for organising the song festivals. The 1905 Revolution boosted the national movement, involved Estonians in mass politics for the first time, and weakened the authority of the Tsarist regime. At the 1910 festival, there were already 10,000 singers and musicians participating in 527 choirs or bands (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 65). Women first began to actively participate in the 1891 festival in the format of mixed choirs. The repertoire became increasingly national, that is more new original Estonian compositions and fewer religious hymns and borrowings from German, though the Russian anthem, 'God save the Tsar', remained the official conclusion. By the end of the Tsarist era, national song festivals had become a well-established tradition. This was especially so in a country where national monuments for obvious reasons at that time could not have been erected. Since there was a tendency 'for public festivals to claim a monopoly of the "sacred"', in the Estonian case the song festivals anchored 'the national myths and symbols in the consciousness of the people' (Mosse 1991: 8).

With each festival the cultural emancipation of the Estonians grew and the national movement gained self-confidence. A series of important symbolic victories can be noted: in 1891 the festival was chaired for the first time by an ethnic Estonian, Johann Köler; at the 1894 festival the German mayor of Tartu, Wilhelm von Bock, addressed the participants in the Estonian language, saying 'The Estonian people have demonstrated themselves through this festival to be an educated people' (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 45). The festival broke out of the narrow confines of the Baltic Provinces when a choir from Finland participated at the 1896 festival. Already then it was clear to outside observers that the festival was about more than just singing: The St Petersburg newspaper *Novoe Vremia* critically noted that 'singing in the Baltic Provinces is imbued with politics' (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 55). The final festival of the Tsarist era in 1910 was the culmination of this process of the assertion of an ethnic Estonian identity or national consciousness. For the first time, the entire repertoire consisted of works by Estonian composers (though the Russian governor ordered the words of some of the patriotic Estonian songs to be altered). Following the usual official conclusion with 'God Save the Tsar', the choirs and public spontaneously sang *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm*, the future Estonian national anthem, and shouted 'long live the fatherland' (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 64).[4] This manifestation of unscripted dissident behaviour presaged the ritualised nonconformism demonstrated at the emotional finales of the Soviet-era song festivals. However, in 1910 no one could yet even dream of the independent state that was founded eight years later.

Independence era song festivals: institutionalising a patriotic ritual

In the aftermath of the Russian revolutions of 1917, Estonian national leaders declared independence on 24 February 1918. However, independence was achieved only after nearly two years of armed conflict against Bolshevik and (Baltic) German forces (Brüggemann 2003). The republic, especially during the authoritarian rule of Konstantin Päts (1934–1940), promoted the Estonianisation of public life, supported indigenous culture and sought to reduce foreign influences, that is of German and Russian culture. Therefore the song festivals’ previously limited patriotic elements became the main agenda of the whole performance in order to accommodate the ritual with political changes.

The first song festival in the independent republic, held in 1923, was a celebration of the achievement of statehood. The tradition of the participants’ parade from the city centre to the song festival grounds, one of the ‘most coherent’ elements of national festivals (Mosse 1991: 85) continued. This time, however, the parade was greeted by high-ranking government officials and the opening speech was delivered by the Estonians’ own freely elected head of state, the *Riigivanem*. The character of the festival thus dramatically changed. Being guided now by the nation’s establishment, they could no longer ‘draw their dynamic from unfulfilled longings’ like Mosse has observed in the case of German national festivals after unification in 1871 that were in danger of becoming ‘artificial creations’ (Mosse 1991: 89). But in contrast to Wilhelmine Germany, the core of the Estonian festivals remained active participation of all present.

The event even received some international attention, with correspondents from seven countries reporting it and Admiral Horthy, the Regent of Hungary, in attendance (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 73). After this success, the song festivals became institutionalised, with the organising body, the Estonian Singers’ Association (*Eesti Lauljate Liit*, ELL), established in 1921, deciding on regular five-year intervals to set a fixed time frame for the ritual to be performed (Kuutma 1996). The next festival in 1928, dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the declaration of independence, was the first held at the current song festival grounds in Tallinn. Thus the ‘sacredness’ of the place where the festival takes place was precisely located and fixed in the capital.

During the independence era (1918–1940), the song festivals encompassed greater ambitions, widened in scope and took on new features. With the festival permanently anchored in the capital, other cultural production in Tallinn, such as theatres and the opera, were co-opted in support of the event. Another development was the attention paid to the musical quality of the choirs and ensembles, which were evaluated prior to being allowed to participate in the festivals. The ELL established a nationwide network of local choirs, with the performance at the festival grounds in Tallinn providing the culmination for five years of training, making the episodic patriotic action into a permanent one.

The 1933 festival was the first to be broadcast on radio, and also featured an address by a foreign head of state, Alberts Kviesis, the president of neighbouring Latvia. It also witnessed increasing ritualisation, invention of traditions and commercialisation in the form of souvenirs, commemorative postage stamps, pins, badges, and specially minted coins, as well as the production of a newsreel film. Thus the whole nation became part of the audience.[5] It is worth noting that all these elements of 'capitalist' commemoration of the event were copied later by the Soviet authorities. The song festival had become a genuine mass culture event guided by certain expectations from the authorities and the audience in terms of patriotic performance.

The final song festival during the independence era in 1938, dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of independence, featured greater state involvement than previously, as to be expected under Päts' nationalist authoritarian rule established in 1934 (Kasekamp 2010: 109–10). A mass folk dance and gymnastics show was added to the programme, which also featured a parade of the civil guard (*Kaitseliit*) (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 105). This was a characteristic feature of the militarisation of public events in Central Europe during the late 1930s, foreshadowing how the festivals could be used under Soviet rule.

Soviet-era song festivals: performance serving propaganda

Estonia's two decades of independence came to a traumatic end with the Second World War. The country was first annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, then occupied by Nazi Germany from 1941 until the Soviet regime returned in 1944. During these years Estonia suffered dramatic population losses, which were compensated in the postwar era by the massive influx of a mostly Russian-speaking working force from other republics of the Soviet Union. The ELL, along with other civil society organisations, had been dissolved by the Soviets already in 1940. Under the Nazi occupation, it had been re-established, but the plans for a song festival in 1944 were abandoned due to the Red Army's advance. By 1945, many people who had been active in the song festivals, either as participants or in their organisation, had not survived the war years, had been deported or had fled to the West (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 91; Ojaveski et al. 2002: 112).

In the postwar era, the first question was whether the song festival tradition would be allowed to continue at all in the context of the Sovietisation of Estonian life.[6] However, Soviet cultural doctrine was fond of mass events staged in accordance with the Stalinist formula 'national in form, socialist in content', a concession granted temporarily until the global triumph of the proletariat would lead to the establishment of a monolingual culture that would be socialist in both form and content. Until then, however, Stalin in 1948 could criticise an opera glorifying Georgian Bolsheviks for being musically not 'national' enough, whereas too many national elements could easily be condemned as 'bourgeois nationalism' (Frolova-Walker 1998: 334, 364).

In Estonia, the new communist leadership must have sensed the necessity to prove to Estonians that they could perform their traditions under the umbrella of Soviet cultural diversity. The Soviet regime in a highly ritualised way tried to make use of ethnic folklore in each republic to support the creation of a particular Soviet ethnic identity. The Communist Party started planning for the next song festival already in 1945, claiming that to continue this tradition is ‘the Estonians’ pride and sacred duty’ (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 91).

The new regime took the task of making the first Soviet song festival in 1947 a propaganda success very seriously. One criterion was that there should be more participants than at the previous 1938 ‘bourgeois’ era festival. More than 12,000 female and children singers were transported to Tallinn, a city whose central areas still lay in ruins from wartime Soviet bombing. Altogether there were over 25,000 participants. Though the traditional parade through the city carried Communist slogans and portraits of Party leaders, the programme was still ‘national – songs of praise to Stalin and the occupiers were not sung more than absolutely necessary’ (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 91). Songs written by composers who had fled to the West could still be performed. The speeches by Communist leaders praised the Estonian cultural tradition that had become genuinely popular thanks to the ‘Socialist revolution’ in 1940. The hymn that later under Soviet rule became the alternative national anthem, *Mu isamaa on minu arm* (My Fatherland is my love), was performed for the first time.[7] It was composed during the war in Soviet Russia by Gustav Ernesaks, one of the musical directors of the festival, and was set to the words of the national awakening era poetess Lydia Koidula (the daughter of Jannsen), whose poem had previously been set to music for the first festival in 1869. In reaction to this patriotic manifestation, the Soviet press demanded the inclusion of Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Georgian songs to ‘enrich’ the Estonian tradition and to enhance the ‘friendship of the Soviet peoples’ (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 114–5).

Late Stalinism tightened its grip on cultural matters during the campaign against ‘formalism’ launched in 1948. During the eighth plenary meeting of the Communist Party of Estonia (CPE) in March 1950, the 1947 song festival, which had officially still carried the national tradition into Soviet times as number XII, was criticised as a ‘bourgeois nationalist event’ (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 93). Therefore the Soviet authorities, ‘responding to the demands of the working people’, changed the numeration of the festivals, upsetting the continuity with the pre-Soviet festivals (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 134). They purposely assigned the festivals to a five-year cycle, which corresponded with important Soviet ideological anniversaries: 1940 – the (re-)creation of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR); and 1945 – the victory in the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) over Fascist Germany. Thus each Soviet-era song festival was ideologically framed by reference to the corresponding commemoration. It was unthinkable that the festival in 1950 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the ESSR might bear a higher number (XIII). The new

authorities had to accommodate the ritual of mass song festival to their own narrative of constructing socialism if they wanted to make use of it.

The festivals held in 1950 and 1955 were the most politicised. In 1950, the singers carried slogans criticising capitalist 'war mongers' reflecting the international tensions of the Cold War. The event took place after the mass deportations in March 1949 had brought the countryside under Soviet control and the eighth plenary meeting of the CPE, which purged the ESSR's leadership of those accused of insufficient vigilance towards 'bourgeois nationalism' (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993: 81–2). The programme was brought into accordance with official propaganda and at least one song in each section had to be performed in Russian. Soldiers' and miners' choirs took part (mostly Russians performing Russian songs). At the end of the festival Soviet composer Isaak Dunaevskii's famous 'Song of the Motherland' was performed, obviously in an artistic effort to highlight the Estonians' real socialist homeland, since Ernesaks' 'My Fatherland' was banned from the programme (although his 'Ode to Stalin' was performed) (Karjahärm and Luts 2005: 133–6; Ojaveski et al. 2002: 124–6).

The first festival after Stalin's death saw a few adjustments to the new political situation: instead of portraits only of Stalin the decoration was amended with the faces of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and the number of Russian songs was slightly reduced. Ernesaks was still listed as laureate of the Stalin Prize, but his 'My Fatherland' remained banned. The 1955 festival witnessed the first performance of 'ordinary' Russian choirs. Soon the more liberal regime under Nikita Khrushchev, who kept power in the Kremlin until 1964 and abandoned physical (mass) violence as political means typical for the Stalinist regime, led to a relaxation of cultural surveillance. A small song festival to mark ninety years since the first one was allowed to be held in Tartu in 1959 (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 147). Thus, after two decades when Soviet historical consciousness determined the sequence of the song festivals, the national tradition, at least on a local scale, was officially reintroduced. Or as Katherine Verdery (1995: 314) observed in the case of Romania, 'the national discourse subdued the Marxist one'. Subsequently, special song festivals were organised for university students and later for children, signifying that the tradition had been completely adopted into the cultural policy of the ESSR, ensuring the possibility for local activists to pass the tradition of permanent patriotic action onto following generations (Kuutma 1996).

The 1960 song festival was the first to be held at the new song festival stadium designed by Alar Kotli, a prominent Estonian architect who had been active already during the independence era.[8] In permitting the Estonians to build such a 'sacred place' for their national festival, even the Soviets subscribed to the demand of the nineteenth century that such manifestations of the nation needed a 'proper environment' (Mosse 1991, 15). This strikingly modernist ensemble, still in use today, included a tower with a flame on top, thus endowing the festival with an Olympic touch. Despite the general propagandistic elements, among others Eugen Kapp's cantata 'Baltic Sea – Sea of

Peace', the programme included folk songs from other socialist peoples such as the Latvians and Czechs, and the percentage of Estonian compositions rose. The emotional culmination, however, came when the crowd would not leave the song festival grounds after the final note of Dunaevskii's 'Song of the Motherland' until Ernesaks returned to the podium to conduct the masses in singing his still banned *Mu isamaa*. This unofficial national anthem was officially included into the programme from 1965 onwards, the year when the nominal head of the USSR, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet Anastas Mikoyan, honoured the festival with his presence (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 146–9, 160–1; Zetterberg 2009: 574). Many people today remember that they would come to the festivals just because they wanted to sing this one hymn (*The Singing Revolution*). A study by sociologists Helle Rakfeldt-Leetmaa and Jaak Rakfeldt (1996: 1574) confirms that the single most important factor in preserving national identity during the long years of Soviet rule was participation in the song festivals. Under Soviet rule, the hidden narrative of the pre-1918 festivals was repeated in order to articulate concerns of the present using cultural capital accumulated during the years of independence.

In Moscow, the Communist Party leadership was well aware of the nationalist environment in the Baltic republics. The most embarrassing issue for the Kremlin was the open alienation sections of the younger generation demonstrated towards Soviet ideology in all three Baltic Soviet republics (Zubkova 2004: 23–7). However, already after Stalin's death the leadership acknowledged that making the region loyal through terror had been a failure (Tannberg 2005). Especially the 1956 Hungarian uprising created an uncertain situation for the Soviet regime in the Baltic republics where many people displayed their solidarity with Hungary openly.[9] Like in other parts of the USSR, the problem was blamed on returnees from the Gulag (Dobson 2009). One point in case was the question of how the cultural traditions of the Baltic peoples were to be integrated into the Soviet performance of the socialist republics. In other words, how the idea of non-Soviet national independence could be erased from the cultural heritage of the three Baltic nations.

The Estonian song festival came under attack as well, but it was the local leadership that initiated the discussion. The Secretary for Ideology of the Central Committee of the CPE Leonid Lentsman complained to Moscow in August 1959 that too many songs were performed that had been written in the nineteenth century by Estonian composers. According to Lentsman, these songs had become old-fashioned, and thus 'completely unacceptable in terms of content nowadays'. He acknowledged that these songs had sounded 'progressive' during the struggle against 'feudalism', but already then they 'carried the stamp of national narrow-mindedness'. Therefore he regarded them to be 'reactionary' because they called for 'nationalist attitudes'. Lentsman criticised the 'system' of 'disguising' the song festivals programmes with a song praising the Communist Party performed in the beginning. Afterwards the

programmes would feature 'various ideologically uncommitted (*bezydeinye*) and apolitical, sometimes even nationalist works' (Lentsman 1959: 206). Party and state, as a rule, however, tried to cope with this 'system' in a quite stereotypical manner. Moscow would conclude that it is necessary to improve the political work among the population and especially the youth. It seems that the Kremlin consciously avoided confrontation in the field of cultural traditions and limited itself to symbolic action. Moscow obviously hoped that time would change the attitude of the Balts (Zubkova 2008). For the time being, however, to quote Giesen again, the ritual of the song festival managed to 'shield social reality from facing the unspeakable – [. . .] from the crisis of absurdity, disorientation, and uncertainty' (Giesen 2006: 342).

Prior to entering the 1970s under the new Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, a period later labelled 'stagnation', Estonian traditions once more remained decisive when the next festival was held in 1969. This time, the centennial of the first song festival was a stronger *lieu de mémoire* than the thirtieth anniversary of the ESSR. Many songs from the national awakening period were performed, although ideological correctness still had to be observed. Newly invented rituals like the lighting of the song festival flame, which in 1960 took place at an old barn where the Communist Party's printing press had been concealed during the 'bourgeois' era, were mostly of an overtly political symbolic nature. However, in 1969 the flame was lit in Tartu, the site of the first festival and from there, much like in the case of the Olympic Games, the flame was carried through the whole country during two weeks as if to let every region take part in this patriotic ceremony (Allandi 2009: 75). Since the 1970s, the flame usually would be brought from the eternal flame in front of the Bronze Soldier Soviet war memorial in central Tallinn, as for instance during the most overtly militaristic performance in 1975 when the flame was transported to the stadium by a Soviet military armoured personnel carrier (Allandi 2009: 75). To be sure, after 1969, this festival, with an ideologically correct share of roughly fifty per cent Estonian songs, many of them pro-Soviet, was reintegrated into traditional Soviet patterns of commemoration. During the days of the festival the nearby Maarjamäe memorial complex dedicated to the victory in the Great Patriotic War was officially opened (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 183).

If the USSR, according to the apt metaphor created by Yuri Slezkine (1994), was a 'communal apartment', where every room was free to use its own furnishings – national in 'form', not in content –, then the socialist transformation of the traditional form of Estonian song festivals carrying an explicitly national content was a very ambitious task for the new rulers since the 1940s. Eventually they failed, not least because the project of making Estonian traditions socialist in content ended up introducing ever more Russian elements. Making Estonia socialist via cultural 'Russification', however, was doomed to failure, at least in the shorter term of a couple of generations. Therefore the song festivals already in the 1960s were transformed by the public into spaces of latent protest when an audience of a

hundred thousand sang songs independently from the official programme. Thus, it could be said that a ‘Singing Revolution’ was taking place in Estonia since 1960. According to psychologist and national activist Enno Selirand, ‘the song festival became a meta-language, which the Moscow authorities were not able to understand and did not know that they should fear’ (Väljaste and Selirand 2011: 92).

Already at that point the Sovietisation project had essentially proved abortive. What was deemed necessary for the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, a re-nationalisation of rhetoric in order to create Soviet patriotism, was simply impossible to transmit to those parts of the postwar USSR that had well-established patterns of national forms of expression. Like many other things, the Soviet-era song festivals were a sort of compromise, a stalemate between Soviet patriotism and Estonian nationalism. The ‘national’ Estonian content performed was ideologically filtered to an extent that would be close to treason in the eyes of the exile Estonian communities in the West who preserved the traditions (including song festivals) of the Päts era abroad. An example was the performance at the 1975 festival of Veljo Tormis’ composition ‘Lenin’s Words’ with lyrics based on Lenin’s articles extolling the self-determination of nations, which was a case of reading between the lines or subversive double meaning (Kasekamp 2010: 159).

Ultimately, even leading Party members admitted the sacredness of the song festival for the ideal of the nation and not for constructing Communism. Indrek Toome, the last chairman of the council of ministers of the ESSR, later stated:

> For me, the song festival has never been a singing concert. It is a sacred gathering for all of us, it is uniting [. . .] It is like an inspection of our nation: no, no, we aren’t that few, we are strong! Singing together is like a message to ourselves: listen how powerful a sound we make! And a message for others: look, this is our song of vitality, this is our battlesong, we are strong, we are healthy and we are many! (Väljaste and Selirand 2011: 217).

The ‘Singing Revolution’

The 1985 song festival would be the last real Soviet-era festival. It started with the Soviet anthem that had to be sung in Russian, but ended with Ernesaks’ *Mu isamaa* (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 206–7). That same year, the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as the new Soviet leader and his policy of *perestroika* heralded new openings, which Estonians eagerly exploited. In the late 1980s, they seized the unintended opportunities provided by Gorbachev’s reforms to reassert their national identity and to push the boundaries of what the Soviet system could tolerate. By 1990, the hybrid nature of these mass Soviet Estonian patriotic events would be replaced by another type of politicised singing due to its adoption by the local movement for greater autonomy. This adoption for political struggle was linked to the ‘musical’ mobilisation of youth.

In June 1988, Estonians spontaneously replicated the ritual of song festivals. Since the musical performances during the Tallinn Old Town Days festival concluded early, people walked to the song festival stadium to continue singing and enjoy the long sunlit evenings. Unexpectedly, they convened every evening for nearly a week, each time attracting greater numbers. Waving the still banned Estonian tricolour and singing, among others, Alo Matiisen's five patriotic rock songs with lyrics from nineteenth century national romantic poems, up to an estimated 100,000 people on 14 June, marking by coincidence the anniversary of the mass deportations in 1941, gathered during these 'night song festivals' (Taagepera 1993: 133–6). In David Laitin's terms, this event triggered a 'cascade' (Laitin 1998: 21). People gathered courage and came back in droves to the song festival grounds to demand, and then celebrate, the replacement of the hard-line CPE leadership with reformists and the legalisation of independence-era national symbols (Graf 2008: 330–1).

Heinz Valk, a prominent activist in the newly created Estonian Popular Front, wrote an article for the cultural weekly *Sirp ja vasar* (Sickle and Hammer) under the headline *Laulev revolutsioon* (Singing Revolution). The movement now had its name, but Valk made it clear that its priority was to remain peaceful. After these nights of song and protest there was no turning back. Valk wrote that to be part of these festivals 'was worth suffering humiliation and self-denial for decades'. He saw the singing masses moving to the rhythms, scores of national flags, 'people were laughing and smiling, unanimous, no malice, no hatred, only one word in their hearts: Estonia!' (Valk 1988). The national myth of singing the people into a nation was amplified by the power of peaceful resistance, and the ritual thus reloaded with old weapons. The ritual became a source of power in the struggle for independence and thus part of social reality.

The culmination of the 'Singing Revolution' was an event called the 'Song of Estonia' (*Eestimaa laul*) on 11 September 1988. A reported nearly 300,000 people squeezed onto the song festivals grounds, which meant that one-quarter of the entire Estonian nation was present. The event featured patriotic speeches, choral singing and pop music and included the participation of the new Gorbachev-appointed CPE First Secretary Vaino Väljas. Here, Trivimi Velliste, leader of the Estonian Heritage Society, founded in 1987, openly demanded the re-establishment of Estonian independence, and Valk formulated his acclaimed sentence 'One day we will win regardless' that instantly became the motto of the 'Singing Revolution' (Valk 2010: 304–8). From this moment, it became clear that eventually autonomy within the USSR would not suffice. At the finale, the 80-year old Ernesaks conducted the majestic choir singing his 'My Fatherland'. This time, there was no reminiscence of a 'Soviet homeland'. The mental secession from the USSR was already under way. Anatol Lieven, a British journalist who reported on the 'Baltic revolution', vividly described the song festivals as follows: 'The sound of hundreds of thousands of voices symbolize national harmony in every sense, like Rousseau's '"General Will" set to music' (Lieven 1993: 113).

Epilogue: tradition continued and reinvented

According to Bernhard Giesen, ‘By participating in a ritual the actors cope [. . .] with the fundamental problem of change, uncertainty and boundaries. Rituals perform an order; in relating events to each other they construct, for the moment of performance, an insurmountable and immutable reality’ (Giesen 2006: 339). During the years of Soviet rule, the symbolic reality of the song festivals changed, but, in Giesen’s terms, the invisible core reference to social reality, the performed ‘nation’, remained untouched since ‘the ritual provides the basic performative construction of the social world. It constructs the elementary “communitas” that transcends social cleavages and unites the body social before social order and social structure can take over’ (Giesen 2006: 342). Because singing was so deeply ingrained into the Estonians’ historical consciousness it supported the creation of the unanimity necessary to challenge Soviet rule over their country. The Soviets simply were never able to make the festival theirs.

After the restoration of its independence in 1991 Estonia has changed in many ways, but the song festivals have not. As Herzog argues ‘the appearance of the festival today [. . .] is very much a product of Soviet times’ (Herzog 2010: 117, n. 4). Whereas according to him, the pre-Soviet tradition ‘helped very much to erase its Soviet image’ after 1991, we would add that precisely this flexible tradition of performing the nation with songs created the basis for the cultural survival of Estonians in the second half of the twentieth century. Although cultural foundations were not sufficient in themselves ‘to ensure cultural and physical survival’, they were undoubtedly essential (Clemens 2003: 41). Nevertheless, Estonians still might consider themselves fortunate that the Soviet ideology whose intention was gradually to create a unified ‘Soviet’ culture, rather than immediately to destroy national cultures, failed, not least because of the underestimated persistence and attraction of ‘bourgeois’ nationalism.

Today, the song festival has other challenges to face. No foreign power is there to suppress Estonian collective memory. The discursive environment of present-day festivals nevertheless has changed. In a free market economy and open society commercialisation, tourism and global influences have all had an impact on the festival. In the 1990s doubts were expressed about the continued relevance, popularity and attractiveness of song festivals since resistance and survival were no longer primary concerns. Are the festivals again in danger of becoming ‘artificial creations’ (Mosse 1991: 89) or completely desacralised via commercialisation? At least their status as an important carrier of national traditions has been internationally recognised: in 2003 UNESCO declared the Baltic song festivals as part of world cultural heritage. Contrary to pessimistic opinions, the most recent, 2009 song festival saw an upsurge in numbers and emotional intensity, which can partly be ascribed to a revived perception of threat to the nation after the clash with Russia over the relocation of the Soviet war memorial (the Bronze Soldier) in 2007 (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008).

The tradition has also recently been diversified and enriched with alternatives, proving that the ritual as such is very much alive. In 2008 a mass choral 'punk song festival' with a repertoire of punk rock classics from West and East was held in the provincial town of Rakvere. The tension between state authority and popular initiative resurfaced in a new context when the minister of culture criticised the organisers prior to the event for linking the 'sacred words – song festival' with the word 'punk' (Delfi 2008). However, the minister overlooked the particular importance punk had acquired during the late Soviet period. The 'reference to the past' for this invention was a spontaneous youth demonstration demanding political change after the authorities disrupted a punk concert during half-time of a football match in September 1980 on the anniversary of 'Soviet liberation' (Graf 2008: 100–4). Later punks were the first to wave the Estonian national flag publicly during concerts in Tartu in 1988 (Püttsepp 2009: 124). Punks followed their Western peers in style but combined a sense for anarchy with anti-Soviet convictions. Thus they became actors at the forefront of what the 'Singing Revolution' was about. In 2008, recalling reactions to prohibitions by previous regimes, the minister's remarks were widely derided and the punk song festival proved more popular than anticipated. Indeed, the punk song festival has established itself as a new tradition with a mythologised history of its own.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported by grants from the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (SF0130038s09 & SF0180128s08). The authors also thank Marge Allandi for allowing us to use her unpublished MA thesis and Vello Salo for his insights.

Notes

1 For an overview of the Estonian national movement see Raun 2003.
2 On the other hand, lower class Germans often assimilated into Estonian culture (Angermann 2012).
3 The first railway on Estonian soil connecting Tallinn with St Petersburg was completed in 1870. Tartu got a railway only in 1877.
4 On the development of the mental imagination of a particular Estonian 'fatherland' see Jansen (2000).
5 Since there are no studies that analyse the social stratification of participants and visitors we cannot say anything about how the idea of a 'whole nation' taking actively part in singing was actually realised.
6 For a study discussing Sovietisation of the Baltic states with rich source material from Russian archives see Zubkova 2008.
7 Not to be confused with the national anthem, *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm.*
8 Kotli's project was later used for the song festival grounds in Vilnius as well (Tanner 2005: 69).

9 After the Kremlin intervened in Hungary, Estonia and Lithuania saw spontaneous anti-Soviet protest especially in student circles. On All Souls Day (2 November) 20,000 people, inspired by Polish and Hungarian protests, demanded freedom for Lithuania in Kaunas (Gavrilov 1956; Tannberg 2008: 166–8, Zubkova 2004: 24–5).

References

Adamson, A. and Karjahärm, T. 2004. *Eesti ajalugu gümnaasiumile*. Tallinn: Argo.

Allandi, M. 2009. *Laulupidu kui ritual: Eesti üldlaulupeod rahvusliku kultuurimälu ja identiteedi kujundajate ja kandjatena.* MA thesis, Tallinn University.

Angermann, N. 2012. ‘Die Deutschbalten – eine Oberschicht?’ in O. Pelc (ed.), *Mythen der Vergangenheit. Realität und Fiktion in der Geschichte*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress.

Boym, S. 1994. *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brüggemann, K. 2003. ‘Defending national sovereignty against two Russias: Estonia in the Russian Civil War, 1918–1920’, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34, 1: 22–51.

Brüggemann, K. and Kasekamp, A. 2008. ‘The Politics of History and the “War of Monuments” in Estonia’, *Nationalities Papers* 36, 3: 425–48.

Clemens, W. C. 2003. ‘Comparative repression and comparative resistance: what explains survival?’ in O. Mertelsmann (ed.), *The Sovietisation of the Baltic States, 1940–1956*. Tartu: KLEIO.

Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Delfi. 2008. ‘Jänes norib punklaulupeo nime kallal’, 5 February 2008. http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/janes-norib-punklaulupeo-nime-kallal.d?id=18116728. (Accessed 2 August 2011).

Dobson, M. 2009. *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Frolova-Walker, M. 1998. ‘ “National in form, socialist in content”: musical nation-building in the Soviet Republics’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, 2: 331–71.

Gavrilov, M. 1956. ‘O natsionalisticheskikh i antisovetskikh proiavleniiakh v pribaltiiskikh respublikakh’, 27.11.1956 in *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii* (Moscow), fond 5, opis’ 31, delo 59, ll. 203–12.

Giesen, B. 2006. ‘Performing the sacred: a Durkheimian perspective on the performative turn in the social sciences’ in J. C. Alexander et al. (ed.), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graf, M. 2008. *Kalevipoja kojutulek. 1978. aasta poliitilisest pööripäevast 1988. aasta Suveräänsusdeklaratsioonini*. Tallinn: Argo.

Herzog, P. 2010. ‘ “National in form and socialist in content” Or rather “socialist in form and national in content”? The “amateur art system” and the cultivation of “folk art” in Soviet Estonia’, *Narodna umjetnost* 47, 1: 115–40.

Hobsbawm, E. 2000 [1980]. ‘Introduction: inventing tradition’ in E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutton, P. 1993. *History as an Art of Memory*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press.

Jansen, E. 2000. ‘Kodu ja isamaa’ in A. Jürgenson (ed.), *Eestlane ja tema maa*. Tallinn: Ajaloo Instituut.

Jansen, E. 2007. *Eestlane muutuvas ajas. Seisusühiskonnast kodanikuühiskonda*. Tartu: Eesti Ajalooarhiiv.

Karjahärm, T. and Luts, H.-M. 2005. *Kultuurigenotsiid Eestis: kunstnikud ja muusikud 1940–1953*. Tallinn: Argo.

Kasekamp, A. 2010. *A History of the Baltic States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kuutma, K. 1996. ‘Laulupeod rahvusliku identiteedi kandjana’, Mäetagused 1/2. http://www.folklore.ee/tagused/nr1/pdf/internet.pdf. (Accessed 30 July 2011).

Laitin, D. D. 1998. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Lentsman, L. 1959. 'Informaciia. Obsuzhdenie na plenume CK KP Estonii voprosa "O sostoianii i merach uluchsheniia massovo-politicheskoi raboty v respublike", 10.8.1959', *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii* (Moscow), fond 5, opis' 31, delo 23, ll. 200–37.
Lieven, A. 1993. *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Path to Independence*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Meri, L. 1999. *President of the Republic at the XXIII All-Estonian Song Festival on July 3, 1999.* http://vp1992-2001.president.ee/eng/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=4285. (Accessed 29 July 2011).
Misiunas, R. and Taagepera, R. 1993. *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940-1990*. 2nd edn. rev. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
Mosse, G. L. 1991. [1975]. *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Ojaveski, T. et al. 2002. *130 aastat eesti laulupidusid*. Tallinn: Talmar & Põhi kirjastus.
Plaesterer, A. 1929. *75 Jahre Revaler Liedertafel 1854–1929*. Reval: Estländische Druckerei Aktien-Gesellschaft.
Põldmäe, R. 1969. *Esimene Eesti üldlaulupidu 1869*. Tallinn: Eesti raamat.
Püttsepp, J. (ed.) 2009. *Tartu muusikapäevad*. Tallinn: Aasta raamat.
Rakfeldt-Leetmaa, H. and Rakfeldt, J. 1996. 'Rahvusliku identiteedi säilitamine okupeeritud Eestis', *Akadeemia* 8, 8: 1571–91.
Raun, T. U. 2002. *Estonia and the Estonians*. 2nd edn. rev. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution.
Raun, T. U. 2003. 'Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Estonian nationalism revisited', *Nations and Nationalism* 9, 1: 129–47.
Slezkine, Y. 1994. 'The USSR as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism', *Slavic Review* 53, 2: 414–52.
Taagepera, R. 1993. *Estonia: Return to Independence*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
Talve, I. 2005. *Eesti kultuurilugu. Keskaja algusest Eesti iseseisvuseni*. Tartu: Ilmamaa.
Tamm, M. 2008. 'History as cultural memory: mnemohistory and the construction of the Estonian nation', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, 4: 499–515.
Tannberg, T. 2005. 'Die unbekannte Amnestie. Berijas Rehabilitierungspläne 1953 am Beispiel der Estnischen SSR' in O. Mertelsmann (ed.), *Estland und Russland. Aspekte der Beziehungen beider Länder*. Hamburg: Kovač.
Tannberg, T. 2008. *Politika Moskvy v respublikakh Baltii v poslevoennye gody (1944–1956). Issledovaniia i dokumenty*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
Tanner, K. 2005. 'Kellel on ja kellel pole. Eesti, läti ja leedu laulupidude erinevusest', *Teater Muusika Kino* 5: 68–72.
Thaden, E. C. (ed.) 1981. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855–1914*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
The Singing Revolution. 2006. A film by James and Maureen Tusty. Mountain View Productions, USA.
Väljaste, E. and Selirand, E. 2011. *Eestimaa laul 88*. Tallinn: n.p.
Valk, H. 1988. 'Laulev revolutsioon', Sirp ja Vasar, 17 June 1988.
Valk, H. 2010. *Pääsemine helgest tulevikust*. Tallinn: Kunst.
Verdery, K. 1995. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
Zetterberg, S. 2009. *Eesti ajalugu*. Tallinn: Tänapäev.
Zubkova, E. ю. 2004. 'Vlast' i razvitie etnokonfliktnoi situatsii v SSSR 1953–1985 gody', *Otechestvennaia Istoriia* 4: 3–32.
Zubkova, E. ю. 2008. *Pribaltika i Kreml' 1940–1953*. Moscow: ROSSPEN.