

Estonia's Singing Revolution (1986-1991)

Stephen Zunes, Ph.D*

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance

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* Stephen Zunes is a Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco, principal editor of *Nonviolent Social Movements* (Blackwell, 1999) and chair of the academic advisors committee for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

Conflict Summary:

Estonia, which had endured foreign occupation for centuries, joined its fellow Baltic Republics of Latvia and Lithuania in a nonviolent movement that enabled them to become independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Estonians began taking advantage of their unique and rich cultural tradition, particularly in choral music, to encourage a national reawakening. Estonians gathered in the thousands and eventually hundreds of thousands to celebrate their heritage in song, in what became known as “The Singing Revolution.” Raising the banned Estonian flag while gathering en masse and singing banned patriotic songs, the movement eventually gained support of the republic’s ruling Communist Party in defying Moscow, faced down Soviet tanks, and successfully declared Estonian independence.

Political History:

Estonia struggled for centuries against conquering powers, including Germans, Danes, Swedes, and Poles, before finally being incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1721. In 1920, in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, Estonia became independent. As part of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), however, the Soviet Union conquered Estonia and its Baltic neighbors. Nazi Germany then occupied the Baltic republics as part of its invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, but the Soviets reoccupied them as the tide of the war turned three years later.

Some Estonians chose to wage an armed insurgency against Soviet Occupation. Calling themselves *metsavennad* (Forest Brothers), they engaged in guerilla tactics but were largely suppressed by 1953.

Stalin began colonizing Estonia, which had lost more than a quarter of its population in the wars and occupations, with ethnic Russians. The policy of Russification involved both the suppression of Estonian culture and encouraging further Russian immigration until Russians eventually reached 40% of the country’s total population. It became illegal to fly the blue, black and white Estonian flag and any hints of nationalist sentiments were suppressed.

When reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in 1985, announcing policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (greater political openness), Estonians began to test the limits of Soviet tolerance. One of the first efforts was an environmental struggle against a proposed series of phosphate mines in 1986.

Starting in 1987, Estonians engaged in a series of mass demonstrations, including spontaneous singing of national songs which had been forbidden since the Soviet occupation. In addition to traditional songs, contemporary pop and rock musicians contributed original material, with the

Tartu Pop Music Festival in May 1988 unleashing an unprecedented openness of nationalist feelings that would highlight subsequent festivals and demonstrations, as tens of thousands of people linked hands and sang together. The following month, at the close of the officially-sanctioned Old Town Festival in the capital of Tallinn, the crowd moved onto the Song Festival grounds for spontaneous singing of patriotic songs, and in August the Summer Rock Festival took on a particularly strong nationalist flavor.

The nationalist movement was divided into three major groups: the Heritage Society, which stressed the cultural and historical side of nationalism; the Popular Front, which was open to working with Estonian Communists to reform the system from within; and the more radical and initially-illegal Estonian National Independence Party. There was significant tension between some of the leaders of these three groups, with the more cautious fearing that a more confrontational tone could provoke Soviet repression while others believed it was a betrayal to even work with Communists, who were seen as subservient to Moscow. All factions were committed to using nonviolent methods, however, recognizing the futility of challenging the Soviet Union through force of arms, and were willing to cooperate with each other at certain points in organizing rallies and events.

In September 1988, a massive song festival in Tallinn brought in a record 300,000 people, nearly a quarter of all Estonians. Political leaders were present and the public witnessed the first open calls for restoring the country's independence.

By this point, even the ruling Communist Party had joined the opposition parties in calling for greater autonomy, with the Estonian government passing a declaration of sovereignty on November 16. Now having governmental sanction for their protests, the nonviolent struggle grew and many leading Communists eventually went on record in favor of independence. On August 23, 1989—the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet takeover of the three Baltic republics—as many as 700,000 Estonians joined half a million Latvians and one million Lithuanians in linking hands which ran the length of all three countries in a show of solidarity that became known as the Baltic Chain. The government declared it a public holiday and helped coordinate the massive protest. Over the next two years, mass gatherings continued and a series of parallel institutions, such as the Estonian Congress, emerged to build an independent state from the ground up.

In August 1991, following a hard-line coup in Moscow, Soviet tanks crossed into the republic in an effort to suppress further Estonian efforts to restore full sovereignty. The Estonian Congress and Supreme Soviet then formally repudiated Soviet legislation and declared Estonia an independent state. Estonians surrounded radio and television stations, including the critical Tallinn broadcast tower, as nonviolent shields which impeded their seizure by Soviet forces. The following day, the coup collapsed in Moscow and the new Russian leadership formally recognized the independence of Estonia and the other Baltic states two weeks later.

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Strategic Actions:

One of the remarkable strategic dimensions of the Estonian nonviolent independence movement was its emphasis on culture. Music—primarily the country’s rich choral tradition—played a central role in producing a sense of unity, defiance, and hope. For centuries, foreign domination had threatened Estonian national and cultural identity. Other peoples may have assimilated in the face of centuries of foreign control, but the Estonians refused to give up their unique culture. They speak a language totally unrelated to the Slavic and Germanic languages of many of their neighbors; they are mostly Lutheran, whereas most of their immediate neighbors are Catholic or Orthodox Christians. A more immediate threat to their linguistic and cultural heritage was the huge number of Russian settlers who moved into the country since the Soviet re-conquest in 1944—to the point where these Russian settlers almost outnumbered the Estonians themselves. Despite claims of international proletarian solidarity, the 20th-century Soviet Communists were in many ways as chauvinistic in their nationalism as the czars who had occupied Estonia in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Though one of the world's smallest countries (as of the 2009, the population is estimated at approximately 1.3 million), Estonia has one of the world's largest repertoires of folk songs, and the Estonians have used their music as a political weapon for centuries. Songs were used as protest against German conquerors as far back as the 13th century and as an act of resistance against the occupying army of Russian czar Peter the Great in the 18th century. Since 1869, Estonians have taken part in an annual song festival known as *Laulupidu*, where choirs from around the country come together for a multi-day celebration of choral music, with as many as 25,000 people singing on stage at the same time. These gatherings, which have attracted crowds of hundreds of thousands, have always been as much about the popular yearning for national self-determination as they have been about music. *Laulupidu* became the cornerstone of the resistance against the Soviet occupation, when—in addition to singing the requisite songs praising the state and the Communist Party—the organizers defied Soviet officials by including banned nationalist songs and symbols. Despite divisions within the nationalist movement and despite violent provocations by Soviet occupation forces and pro-Soviet Russian settlers, the movement gained strength, and the public protests, nationalist displays, and other forms of nonviolent resistance escalated.

Estonians also engaged in a number of creative challenges to the repression used against them. For example, when displaying the national flag was still illegal, crowds would hang separate thin blue, black and white banners which—while technically legal—effectively created the Estonian flag with its horizontal bars of the same color. As a means of defying fear of public identification with the nationalist cause, 860,000 Estonians signed a petition during the summer and fall of 1988 disavowing the legality of Soviet rule and declaring themselves citizens of the Republic of Estonia. In February 1990, this symbolic act evolved into the creation of a parallel

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institution challenging Estonia's Supreme Soviet as these self-proclaimed Estonian citizens staged an election for the Congress of Estonia which met for the first time the following month.

There was also a strong commitment to nonviolent methods, even in the face of serious provocation. For example, when hundreds of pro-Soviet ethnic Russians seized the Estonian parliament in May 1990 as part of an attempted coup, tens of thousands of Estonians surrounded the building within hours but they allowed a safe passageway through which the Russian occupiers could leave.

Ensuing Events:

Since its successful independence struggle, Estonia has maintained a parliamentary democracy, primarily under the leadership of center-right parties. In 2004, the country joined NATO and became a full member state of the European Union. Initial restrictions on linguistic rights of the ethnic Russian minority were relaxed in 2001, though some tensions between the two communities and with Russia itself remain. Despite concerns of ongoing discrimination, the legacy of the nonviolent nature of the pro-independence movement has prevented the kind of inter-ethnic violence and Russian intervention which might have otherwise taken place.

For Further Reading:

- Lieven, Anatol. *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.
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- Subrenat, Jean-Jacques, ed. *Estonia: Identity and Independence*. New York: Rodopi, 2004.
- Taagepera, Rein. *Estonia: Return to Independence*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.
- Also see: *The Singing Revolution*, Sky Films Incorporated, 2008.

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