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“ONE DAY WE WILL WIN ANYWAY”: THE “SINGING REVOLUTION” IN THE SOVIET BALTIC REPUBLICS

In 1989, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania did not experience revolutions comparable to the events in East Central Europe. At the end of this *annus mirabilis*, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius were still the capitals of Soviet socialist republics bound in “eternal friendship” to the other twelve “brother republics” of the USSR, at least in the eyes of Moscow. The Kremlin leadership had made it perfectly clear that it had no intention of treating the non-Russian republics according to the principles of Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new thinking.” The new rules of Soviet foreign policy had nothing to do with the realm of inter-republican relations at home. Yet mentally, if compared to the situation only a few years earlier, nothing was the same in the Soviet Baltic republics. The notion of a “Singing Revolution,” coined by the Estonian artist Heinz Valk in 1988 to describe a peaceful path of political change, had made its way into the hearts of many people, not only in these three republics, but also in other parts of the USSR. But in the Baltic region, mass demonstrations of hitherto unknown scale had fostered a sense of being different. Despite this area’s having been annexed as a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and World War II, it had never become truly “Sovietized.”¹

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Literature on the process of annexation and Sovietization in the Baltic republics includes: Elena Yu. Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml' 1940–1953* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2008); Olaf Mertelsmann, ed., *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940–1956* (Tartu: Kleio, 2003); Mikhail I. Mel'tyukhov, *Upushchennyi shans Stalina. Sovetskii Soyuz i bor'ba za Evropu 1939–1941gg. (Dokumenty, fakty, suzhdeniya)* (Moscow: Veche, 2001); Arvydas Anušauskas, ed., *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: DuKa, 1999); John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, eds., *The Baltic Nations and Europe. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1994); Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States. Years of Dependence, 1940–1990* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1993); John Hiden and Thomas Lane, eds., *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Walter C. Clemens, *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Boris Meissner, ed., *Die baltischen Nationen. Estland, Lettland, Litauen* (Cologne: Markus, 1991); Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten* (Munich: dtv, 1977). Cf. Olaf Mertelsmann, ed., *The Baltic States under Stalinist Rule* (Cologne: Böhlau, forthcoming).

The fall of the Berlin Wall gave the three republics reason to pose their question even more insistently: When will it be our turn?

Although a political revolution did not occur in the Baltic republics in 1989, one might speak of a mental revolution. This could even be seen on the streets: the old national colors of the pre-war independent republics, formerly banned by the authorities, had become a nearly everyday sight. The constitutionally guaranteed domination of the communist party became contested by various alternative organizations such as the Popular Fronts. These were initially founded by the Baltic communists themselves to support Gorbachev's perestroika, first in Estonia, and then in October 1988 in Latvia and Lithuania as well. Soviet cadres and Soviet security organs seemed to be retreating, despite the fact that this may have been a mere tactic. Local political power gradually shifted to reform communists or activists from the Popular Fronts. At the end of 1989, it had become clear that there was no way back to the years of "stagnation" under Leonid Brezhnev unless violence was used. All three countries had passed declarations of sovereignty, and in December the Lithuanian Communist Party (LiCP) split into two, on one side a large pro-independence fraction, and on the other, a tiny group of orthodox supporters of the hardliners in the Kremlin. Thus 1989 was a phase of transition, although no one could foresee where it would lead.

At the same time, conflict with Moscow was increasing. Nobody could be sure what the consequences might be of the Soviet loss of its satellite states in Eastern Europe. It was conceivable that in compensation, the grip around the necks of the non-Russian Soviet republics might become tightened. The increasingly aggressive tone of the Kremlin, criticizing the independence movements in the Baltic republics, signaled that the use of violence, at least rhetorically, was still an option for guaranteeing obedience. Even worse, Moscow's hardening position in regard to the Baltic question had not yet been challenged by the Western powers, which were interested first and foremost in Gorbachev remaining stable at home. The political aspirations of the Baltic republics would only harm the general secretary's position vis-à-vis his opponents in the party leadership. With the Baltic question considered an interior matter of the USSR, in a sense Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were hostages. No one was prepared to grant them the same right of self-determination that the Central European states had achieved.² Thus, if one is to make an adequate appraisal of the situation in the three republics in 1989, the fundamental difference between them and the countries of the Warsaw Pact must be taken into account. There was no Soviet round table in sight regarding the Baltic question, a fact that is only too easily forgotten if one thinks of the later

² Kristina Spohr-Readman, "Between Political Rhetoric and 'Realpolitik' Calculations. Western Diplomacy and the Baltic Independence in the Cold War Endgame," *Cold War History* 6, no. 1 (2006): 1–42; cf. John Hiden, Vahur Made, and David Smith, eds., *The Baltic Question during the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2008).

smooth integration of these former Soviet republics into NATO and the EU in 2004. Back in 1989, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were still regarded internationally, at least de facto, as parts of the USSR, whose dissolution was simply not on the agenda. The fate of the perestroika project and peaceful change in Central Europe depended on the integrity of the Soviet state. Especially for West Germany, in late 1989 this was considered a real danger: without Gorbachev, the “German question” might be left unresolved.³

Unfortunately, research on the topic of the “Singing Revolution” in the Baltic states is still fragmentary. As a rule, historians in the three countries still have not taken their neighbors’ fate into consideration.⁴ Memoirs of the leading figures in this revolution appeared quite soon (and keep appearing), and a wave of life stories continues to enrich the shelves of bookshops in all three countries.⁵ Nonetheless, not least due to language problems, international scholarship has

³ Kristina Spohr-Readman, *Germany and the Baltic Problem after the Cold War. The Development of a New Ostpolitik 1989–2000* (London: Routledge, 2004); Helge Dauchert, “*Anwalt der Balten*” oder *Anwalt in eigener Sache? Die deutsche Baltikumpolitik 1991–2004* (Berlin: BWV, 2008). For the interesting perspective of a German diplomat, cf. Henning von Wistinghausen, *Im freien Estland. Erinnerungen des ersten deutschen Botschafters 1991–1995* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004).

⁴ An exception to this rule can be found in Mindaugas Jurkynas, *How Deep is your Love? The Baltic Brotherhood Re-examined* (Vilnius: Institute of International Relations and Political Science, 2007). The author deals primarily with the first stages of independent statehood after 1991. See also Jānis Škapars, *Baltijas brīvības ceļš. Baltijas valstu nevardarbīgas cīņas pieredze pasaules kontekstā* (Rīga: Zelta grauds, 2005). About the respective countries: Meldra Usenko, *Sarežģūtais gājums: veltījums Latvijas Republikas neatkarības atjaunošanai* (Riga: Tautas Frontes Muzejs, 2002); Arvydas Anušauskas and Česlovas Bauza, *Lietuvos suvereniteto atkūrimas. 1988–1991 metais* (Vilnius: Diemedžio Leidykla, 2000); Valdis Blūzma, ed., *Latvijas valsts atjaunošana. 1986–1993* (Rīga: LU žurnāla “Latvijas Vēsture” fonds, 1998); Jüri Ant, ed., *Kaks algust. Eesti Vabariik, 1920 ja 1990 aastad. Eesti Vabariik—80* (Tallinn: Eesti Riigiarhiiv, 1998).

⁵ Apart from memoirs, the following list also includes collections of documents: Kazimiera D. Prunskiene, *Leben für Litauen. Auf dem Weg in die Unabhängigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1992); Algirdas Brazauskas, *Scheidung vom Kreml* (Vilnius: Danielius, 1993); Dainis Īvāns, *Gadījuma karakalps* (Riga: Vieda, 1995); Mart Laar, Urmas Ott, and Sirje Endre, *Teine Eesti 1. Eesti iseseisvuse taassünd 1986–1991. Intervjuud, dokumendid, kõned, artiklid; Teine Eesti 2. Eeslava. Intervjuud, dokumendid, kõned, artiklid* (Tallinn: SE&JS Meedia- ja Kirjastuskompanii, 1996); Edgar Savisaar, *Usun Eestisse* (Tallinn: TEA, 1999); Vytautas Landsbergis and Anthony Packer, *Lithuania, Independent again. The Autobiography of Vytautas Landsbergis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Sandra Kalniete, *Es lauzu, tu lauzi, mēs lauzām, viņi lūza* (Riga: Jumava, 2000); Arnold Rützel, *Estonia: Future Returned* (Tallinn: Ilo, 2003); Rafik Grigoryan and Igor Rosenfeld, eds., *Iseseisvuse anatoomia / Anatomiya nezavisimosti / The Anatomy of Independence* (Tartu: Kripta, St. Petersburg: Bazunov, 2004); Edgar Savisaar, *Peaminister. Eesti lähiajalugu 1990–1992* (Tartu: Kleio, 2004); Virgilijus Čepaitis, *Su Sajūdžiu už Lietuvą. Nuo 1988.06.03. iki 1990.03.11.* (Vilnius: Tvermė, 2007); Marju Lauristin, *Punane ja sinine. Peatükke kirjutamata elulooraamatust. Valik artikleid ja intervjuud 1970–2009* (Tallinn: AS Eesti Ajalehed, 2010); Heinz Valk, *Pääsemine helgest tulevikust* (Tallinn: Kunst, 2010).

rarely considered all three countries evenly.⁶ The best overviews are found in general publications from the 1990s.⁷ Since this time, Baltic historians have mainly been concerned with describing and assessing the horrors of deportation and Sovietization.⁸ Mentally, the present statehood of these countries is still closely connected to the story of regaining independence and thus, this story often provides a background for current political conflicts. Many of the (mainly young) leading protagonists of the late 1980s are still active politicians in their respective states today, and even now there are personal conflicts rooted in those years that have not been forgotten.⁹

From the Russian perspective, too, the topic of the Baltic states is very sensitive and still too politicized to be easily the subject of in-depth research. Primary sources concerning the Baltic role in the dissolution of the USSR have not been sufficiently examined.¹⁰ It is thus fair to agree with the recent claim of Alexander von Plato that the Baltic share in this process has been “mostly underestimated.”¹¹ In fact, in many respects the Baltic republics were, as

⁶ The author of the present article is no exception. This explains the predominance in this chapter of Estonian examples and sources.

⁷ See the general works by Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Kristian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (London: Routledge, 1997); the edited volumes Jan A. Trapans, ed., *Toward Independence. The Baltic Popular Movements* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Andrejs Urdze, ed., *Das Ende des Sowjetkolonialismus. Der baltische Weg* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1991). On the respective three countries, cf. Rein Taagepera, *Estonia. Return to Independence* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1993); Juris Dreifelds, *Latvia in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); V. Stanley Vardys and Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania—The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1997); Janis J. Penikis and Andrejs Penikis, *Latvia—Independence Renewed* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1997); David J. Smith, *Estonia. Independence and European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2001); Artis Pabriks and Aldis Purs, *Latvia. The Challenges of Change* (London: Routledge, 2001); Thomas Lane, *Lithuania. Stepping Westward* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁸ See the respective articles by Alvydas Nikžentaitis (Lithuania), Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Latvia), and Karsten Brüggemann (Estonia) in Helmut Altrichter, ed., *GegenErinnerung. Geschichte als politisches Argument im Transformationsprozeß Ost-, Ostmittel- und Südosteuropas* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006).

⁹ Mikko Lagerspetz and Henri Vogt, “Estonia,” in Sten Berglund, Tomas Hellén, and Frank Aarebrot, eds., *Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998), 57–93.

¹⁰ See the early account on Estonia by Michael Brettin, *Das Scheitern eines unfreiwilligen Experiments. Die sowjetische Nationalitätenpolitik in der „Perestrojka“ (1985/87–1991) dargestellt am Beispiel Estlands* (Hamburg: Dr. Kovač, 1996), and a broader study that repeatedly refers to the Baltic republics: Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State. A Tidal Approach to the Study of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Alexander von Plato, “Einige internationale Voraussetzungen der Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands,” in *Tr@nsit online* (2009), http://www.iwm.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=167&Itemid=231 (accessed 17 June 2010).

Gorbachev wrote in his memoirs, “the weakest link of the union”¹² (and not the Islamic areas, as has been claimed by H el ene Carr ere d’Encausse¹³), since here, in the “Soviet West,” the legitimacy of Soviet territorial expansion was contested not least in terms of historical morals.¹⁴ Nonetheless, in February 1987, while on visit to Latvia, the Soviet general secretary obviously did not yet consider the Baltic question particularly critical, since he claimed at that time that the events of June 1940 leading to annexation proved that nobody could “break the revolutionary will of the people.”¹⁵ But it was exactly this moral aspect of Stalin’s annexation politics that later made the year 1989 so crucial for the Baltic republics’ secession from the USSR because it marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Thus the circumstances of their original incorporation into the USSR were brought back onto the political agenda. The anniversary reminded capitals all over Europe of their own accountability in the fate of these three states, first due to the Hitler-Stalin Pact and later due to the Yalta conference.

Why “Singing Revolution”?

In 1989, the Baltic republics’ vision of their “return to Europe” seemed to lie in the far future; this dream obviously contradicted Gorbachev’s vision of a “Common European Home.” While Gorbachev saw the Baltic republics under the Soviet roof, from the viewpoint of the republics themselves, “Europe” was “available” only outside the USSR. Our knowledge of the processes that led to the secession of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the USSR is still quite superficial. The German weekly *Die Zeit* wrote in 2002 on the occasion of the Eurovision Song Contest, held that year in the Estonian capital Tallinn: “The year 1991 came, the revolution; hundreds of thousands sang their folk songs, loudly and again and again, until the communists left.”¹⁶ It wasn’t that easy, though. The

¹² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 510.

¹³ H el ene Carr ere d’Encausse, *Risse im roten Imperium. Das Nationalit atenproblem in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna: Molden, 1979).

¹⁴ See the comprehensive article by Serhy Yekelchyk, “The western republics: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltics,” in Ronald Grigor Suny, ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. III, *The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 522–48.

¹⁵ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Tverdo idti dorogoi perestroiki i uglubleniya demokratii. Rech’ na vstreche s partiinym, sovetskim i khoziaistvennym aktivom Latviiskoi SSR 19 fevralya 1987 goda,” in idem, *Izbrannye rechi i stati*, t. 4: *Ijul’ 1986 g.—apr. 1987 g.* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), 393–409. On Gorbachev’s visit to Estonia, cf. Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, 511–12; Peeter Kaasik, Kaarel Piirim ae, “Hirvepargi k onekoosolek ja Eesti vabanemine,” in T onu Tannberg, ed., *Hirvepark 1987. 20 aastat kodanikualgatusest, mis muutis Eesti l ahiajalugu* (Tallinn: MT U Kultuuriselts Hirvepark, 2007), 8–70, 25; Mati Graf, *Kalevipoja kojutulek. 1978. aasta poliitilisest p oorip aevast 1988. aasta Suver aansusdeklaratsioonini* (Tallinn: Argo, 2008), 202–10.

¹⁶ Frank Lenze, “Hier spielt die Musik. Zwei Gesichter der europ aischen Schlagerstadt Tallinn,” *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), no. 22, 23 May 2002, 65–66; similarly, this stereotypical idea is found in

“communists” did not leave simply because of the masses singing patriotic songs, as the idea of the “singing” revolution seems to suggest. Singing is a canonized part of national culture in the Baltic states, with an especially long tradition in Estonia and Latvia, where the first national singing festivals took place in 1869 and 1873, respectively. This tradition was continued even under Soviet power. Singing thus became an important element of popular resistance against the new Soviet regime, although in part this “resistance” was camouflaged by the ideology of singing being “national in form” (and supposedly “socialist in content”). And yet, the old and new patriotic songs that, from the 1960s, were gradually reintegrated into the song festivals’ programs carried another vision of national reality. In the Soviet Baltic republics, a “national form” was (still) unthinkable without it having “national content,” despite the Soviet education in schools, party sub-organizations and the media. Thus one might argue that an unconscious “Singing Revolution” had already started in 1960, when at the end of the Estonian Song Festival in Tallinn the audience demanded to sing “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My fatherland is my love, written by Lydia Koidula), a song whose words date back to the 1860s and that was sung at the first Song Festival in 1869. The Estonian composer Gustav Ernesaks had written a new melody to these lines for the first Soviet Song Festival in 1948, whereupon the song immediately became extremely popular. It was banned, however, from the next festivals in 1950 and 1955, despite the fact that its composer, Ernesaks, had been awarded the Stalin Prize. In 1960 “Mu isamaa” was still banned, the idea of “fatherland” being substituted on the program with Isaak Dunaevskii’s classic Soviet patriotic hymn “Pesnya o Rodine” (Song of the Motherland). However, despite the official programming, the choirs started to sing “Mu isamaa” at the end of the festival and Ernesaks came to the conductor’s podium.¹⁷ From this point in time onwards, his song was always part of the program of the song festivals, and thus the narrow ethnic concept of Koidula’s “fatherland” superseded Dunaevskii’s broader idea of a Soviet “motherland.” In this way, “Mu isamaa” became a national alternative to the Soviet Estonian anthem, which incidentally was also composed by Ernesaks (with text by Johannes Semper).

The Baltic national past was difficult to assess for the Soviet authorities. While the independent republics and authoritarian regimes between the wars were condemned as having been “fascist,” the peoples’ existence under the thumb of Baltic German landlords and Russian authorities prior to 1917 fit the schemes of class struggle and anti-tsarist resistance very well. In at least one of its axioms, the Soviet version of history was easily compatible to the national narratives in the Baltic republics, especially in Estonia and Latvia: antagonism toward the

the book of the Finnish rock musician Harri Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon. Eesti rockpõlvkonna ime* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2008), 8.

¹⁷ Cf. Toivo Ojaveski et al., eds., *130 aastat Eesti laulupidusid* (Tallinn: Talmar & Põhi, 2002), 148–49.

Germans.¹⁸ In this context, singing songs from the era of the so-called national awakening in the second half of the nineteenth century could be presented in the Soviet discourse as praising the Estonian and Latvian peasants’ fight against the Baltic German upper class. One had only to add the discursive element of the Russians’ “brotherly help” to these small peoples and the idyllic picture of traditional Soviet “friendship of the peoples” was reaffirmed. Historians in the three republics often used this approach for researching their individual nation’s past. Since every Soviet republic was charged with describing its own territory’s past, according of course to ideological demands, it was even possible to redefine basic elements of the pre-Soviet national identity. During perestroika and in the early years of regained independence, historians continued to build on these national traditions.¹⁹

Thus, the cultural form of protest that was articulated during the perestroika years had its own decisively national tradition, but it was recreated and legitimized anew in 1988. In the dialectic rhetoric of these years, singing patriotic songs meant supporting Gorbachev and the reformers’ agenda in the Kremlin (naturally, with the minimal goal of gaining more autonomy from the center always in mind). In 1988, Estonia became the avant-garde of this particular type of Baltic support for perestroika, and thus it was here that the notion of “Singing Revolution” was created. Of course, at the beginning this metaphor used the powerful semantics of “revolution” dialectically, in the Soviet context. This “revolution,” however, was socialist only in rhetoric; in form and content it was explicitly national.

A series of summer music festivals in Estonia helped create this powerful metaphor. In May 1988, the still-banned Estonian national colors were widely displayed at a music festival and the first national heritage days held in the university town of Tartu. Already in 1987, the rock musician Alo Mattiisen had played his song “Ei ole ükski ükski maa” (No single land is alone) in this town, a song that subsequently became very popular during the “Phosphorite War,” as will be discussed below. The next year, he performed five “patriotic songs” based on poems written in the nineteenth century, among others “Eestlane olen ja eestlaseks jään” (I am and will be Estonian). But it was the Night Song Festivals in Tallinn in June that became the first significant event in this Estonian summer of music. These nights were initially a spontaneous continuation of the traditional Old Town Days, which were held in early June 1988. After the official program was over, people went to the song festival arena a few kilometers outside the

¹⁸ Toivo U. Raun, “The Image of the Baltic German Elites in Twentieth-century Estonian Historiography: The 1930s vs. the 1970s,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 30, no. 4 (1999): 338–51, 348.

¹⁹ Cf. the reflections of Jüri Kivimäe, “Re-writing Estonian History?” and Leo Dribins, “The historiography of Latvian nationalism in the twentieth century,” in Michael Branch, ed., *National History and Identity. Approaches to the Writing of National History in the North-East Baltic Region. Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1999), 205–12, 245–55.

center to continue playing music during the “white nights.” On 11 June, the final evening of the Old Town Days, more than 100,000 people took part in the night festival. Estonian flags were raised and Mattiisen’s “Patriotic Songs” were sung repeatedly. These mass meetings continued during the following nights and marked on 14 June the anniversary of the mass deportations of Baltic people in June 1941, when the Soviet regime removed approximately 10,000 people from Estonia, 15,000 from Latvia and 18,000 from Lithuania.²⁰ A few days later, inspired by these singing nights, Heinz Valk wrote an article for the cultural weekly *Sirp ja vasar* (Sickle and hammer) under the headline “Laulev revolutsioon” (Singing revolution).²¹ The movement now had a name, and it was a revolution, although Valk made it clear that its mission was above all to remain peaceful. During these nights of singing, a feeling of national unity was encountered by the masses, and after them, there was hardly any way to return to the Soviet past. Valk wrote that being part of these festivals “was worth suffering humiliation and self-denial for decades.” He described the singing masses moving to the rhythms, waving dozens and dozens of national flags: “People were laughing and smiling, unanimous, with no malice, no hate, only one word in their hearts: Estonia!”²² The national “Singing Revolution” was born.

Political perestroika in the Soviet Baltic republics

In mid-June 1988 in Estonia, Soviet power gave in to the political demands being increasingly articulated in the media and supported by the singing masses. This was of utmost importance for the Baltic independence movement as a whole. Still in December 1987, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had harshly criticized, in a secret note, the Baltic republics’ leaderships because they had not prevented “nationalist manifestations” like the demonstrations in all three capitals held on 23 August, the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.²³ But a mere half year later, Estonia had become the avant-garde of perestroika in all of the USSR. On 16 June, the first secretary of the Estonian Communist Party (ECP), the Russian-born Estonian Karl Vaino, was replaced by the reform-minded Väino Väljas, who due to his ideas on national development under Soviet rule had been removed from the Central Committee of the ECP in 1980 and sent to Central America as a Soviet ambassador.²⁴

²⁰ Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 130–31; Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 347–48.

²¹ Heinz Valk, “Laulev revolutsioon,” *Sirp ja Vasar*, 17 June 1988, 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Graf, *Kalevipoja kojutulek*, 240–41.

²⁴ Ibid., 325–33.

However, singing patriotic songs was only one factor that led to this decision. More decisive was the initiative in April of a group of Estonian communists to found the Popular Front in Support of Perestroika (*Rahvarinne Perestroika Toetuseks*). The Popular Front was supported enthusiastically in Estonia and the idea of forming such a front quickly spread to the neighboring republics. One of the initiators was Edgar Savisaar, who together with Siim Kallas, Tiit Made, and Mikk Titma, already in September 1987, had published a program for the economic autonomy of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic.²⁵ This still-informal movement had announced a demonstration to be held in the Song Festival Arena on 17 June 1988 in order to remind the Estonian delegates to the nineteenth party conference in Moscow of their responsibility for their republic's fate.²⁶ Obviously, the ECP feared the agitation of the Popular Front activists, and by removing Vaino they wanted to appease the critics in their own ranks who supported the Popular Front initiative.²⁷ The first step taken by the new First Secretary Väljas was to meet the national demands of the nascent Popular Front. On 23 June, the Supreme Soviet officially legalized the traditional national colors and the old anthem of the state, although it did not replace the Soviet Estonian symbols. The Estonian Popular Front held its official founding congress on 1 and 2 October.

In Latvia and Lithuania, changes in the leadership were only possible after a visit by Gorbachev's “troubleshooter” Aleksandr Yakovlev in August 1988, although in Latvia, despite the orthodox Communist leadership, a local Helsinki human rights group had already been founded in 1986. But in October 1988, following Aleksandr Yakovlev's visit, the hardliner Boris Pugo was removed as first secretary and the reform-Communist Anatoliis Gorbunovs became chairman of the Supreme Soviet.²⁸ Among the new leadership's first decisions was the re-legalization of Latvia's national symbols, just a few days before the Latvian Popular Front (*Latvijas Tautas Fronte*) held its founding congress on 8 and 9 October.²⁹ In this initial period, it seemed that the Popular Fronts founded to

²⁵ In Estonian, this program was called *Isemajandav Eesti*, abbreviated as IME, which forms the Estonian word for “wonder.” It was published in the daily *Edasi* on 26 September 1987.

²⁶ According to Heinz Valk, Vaino together with the Soviet minister of defense, Dmitrii Yazov, organized a military action to crush the meeting on 17 June. Reportedly, Gorbachev did not want to risk a possible bloodbath in Tallinn, not the least because of his reputation in the West. Valk, *Pääsemine*, 298–99.

²⁷ Seppo Zetterberg, *Eesti ajalugu* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2009), 580; Sulev Vahtre, ed., *Eesti ajalugu VI. Vabadussõjast taasiseseisvumiseni* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2005), 379–81.

²⁸ According to Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, 511, Yakovlev confirmed that most Balts were supporters of the reforms and the union. The Soviet leader claimed to have been concerned for the first time about the danger for the USSR coming from the Baltic republics at just this time. Cf. Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 317.

²⁹ Jānis Škapars, ed., *Latvijas Tautas fronte 1988–1991. Veltījums Trešajai Atmodai un Latvijas tautas frontes dibināšanas desmitgadei* (Riga: Apgāds Jāņa sēta, 1998); Andrejs Penikis, “The Third Awakening Begins: The Birth of the Latvian Popular Front, June 1988 to August 1988,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 27, no. 4 (1996): 261–90.

support Gorbachev were receiving assistance from the “center,” i.e. Moscow, and thus the local parties were forced to make concessions. In Lithuania, the reform-communist Algirdas Brazauskas became the first secretary of the LiCP on 20 October. On 22 and 23 October, the Lithuanian Popular Front (*Lietuvos Persitvarkymo Sąjūdis*, literally “Reform Movement of Lithuania”) was officially founded, and in mid-November the Supreme Soviet declared the old flag and anthem to be the symbols of the republic. On 25 November *Sąjūdis* elected Vytautas Landsbergis as its chairman.³⁰ In all three republics, the “bourgeois” national holidays again became official.

To borrow from revolutionary history, we might call the Popular Fronts the “Soviets” of the “Singing Revolution,” because they established a sort of “double power” as had been done in Russia in 1917. This time, however, the “Soviets” effectively paved the way for a multiparty system. It is difficult to say whether, from the outset, the initiative to establish independent societal organizations outside the party was meant to destroy the one-party system. At least according to their early rhetoric, the Popular Fronts aimed at providing independent support for Gorbachev’s reforms and not necessarily at becoming an alternative to the Communist Party.³¹ Initially, many members of the Popular Fronts remained party members. In the long run, however, the close cooperation between parts of the republican communist parties with the Popular Fronts, at least initially supported by Gorbachev, paved the way for the split of the parties into reformist and orthodox wings. Simultaneously, the new political center of the Popular Fronts encouraged more radical groups to emerge. These included *nationalist opposition* groups, which contested the legitimacy of all Soviet institutions and rejected any compromises with the communists, and *orthodox communist* opposition, which above all articulated the concerns of the non-indigenous population of predominantly Russian origin.

While in Lithuania and Latvia the first conflicts were carried out basically within the framework of the Popular Fronts,³² in Estonia, nationalists and dissidents founded in August 1988 the Estonian National Independence Party (*Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltumatus Partei*, ERSP). This party later organized so-called Citizen Committees and in 1990 became the strongest group in the alternative parliament, the Estonian Congress. This body was designed to be the democratic

³⁰ Roman Batūra, ed., *Siekiant nepriklausomybės. Lietuvos sąjūdžio spauda. 1988–1991 m.* (Vilnius: “Valstybės Žinios”, 2005).

³¹ This has been confirmed by one of the leading figures of *Rahvarinne*, Edgar Savisaar, “Kalender 1988,” in Edgar Savisaar, Rein Ruitsoo, Kadri Simson et al., *Rahvarinne 1988. (Kakskümmend aastat hiljem)* (Tallinn: Tallinna linnavalitsus, 2008), 162–210, 209, and by Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, 510.

³² In Lithuania, the “Lithuanian Liberty League,” founded already in the late 1970s as an underground organization, was the bearer of this conflict. Cf. Gintaras Šidlauskas, ed., *Lietuvos Laisvės Lyga. Nuo “Laisvės šauklio” iki nepriklausomybės. Dokumentai, konferencijos medžiaga, kalbos, straipsniai, bibliografija* (Vilnius: Leidykla “Naujoji Matrica”, 2004).

bearer of continued Estonian statehood, with voting rights only being given to those registered for the Committees who could prove that they or their forebears had been citizens of the Estonian Republic in 1940 (including non-Estonians and exiles).³³ When on 24 February 1989 the Estonian tricolor officially replaced the flag of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) with a ceremony carried out on Tallinn’s castle tower “Tall Hermann,” the national opposition did not take part, arguing that it was a humiliation of the Estonians’ urge to freedom to show these colors on occupied territory; the opposition, therefore, had its own event on the Town Hall square.³⁴ However, this was a conflict of political tactics; by February 1990, 790,000 provisional citizens had been registered and the Popular Front became one of the parties represented in the Estonian Congress.

On the other extreme of the political spectrum, the national minorities in the Baltic republics, mostly Russian speakers, became increasingly concerned. In Estonia and Latvia they created local orthodox centrist movements known as Interfront (in Lithuania: *Edinstvo*), which supposedly were under the control of the Kremlin through the local trade unionist organizations. Any policy of fostering autonomous rights on a republican basis challenged the status of these non-indigenous populations, which had often been sent to the region as the working-force for centrally governed enterprises. Their migration to the Soviet Baltic republics had been a major concern for Estonians and Latvians, who in 1979 made up only 64 percent and 53 percent, respectively, of their republics’ populations, and to a lesser extent for Lithuanians (80 percent). The pro-Soviet “internationalist” pressure groups undeniably introduced an ethnic aspect into the struggle, an aspect that the Popular Fronts had initially tried to avoid. In claiming to be the voice of the traditional Soviet “friendship of peoples,” they blamed the national majorities of supporting ethnic separatism. In this respect, the Popular Fronts integrated reform-minded people not only from the ethnic majorities and the communist parties, but initially also from the local Russian-speaking communities.³⁵

Thus, as always occurs during revolutions, radical fractions came to the surface that challenged pragmatic reformists. But during the aforementioned “summer of music” in Estonia, people became self-assured enough to think the hitherto unthinkable. The festival “Eestimaa laul” (Estonian Song) on 11 September 1988 was attended by an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people in the presence of communist party leader Väljas. At this event, Trivimi Velliste, an activist from the Estonian Heritage Society founded in late 1987, openly demanded the re-establishment of Estonian independence for the first time. This was a bold step

³³ Eve Pärnaste, ed., *Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltumatuse Partei. ERSP aeg. Kogumik* (Tallinn: MTÜ Magna Memoria, 2008); Eve Pärnaste, ed., *Eesti Kongress. Siis ja praegu* (Tallinn: Eesti Vabariigi Riigikantslei, 2000).

³⁴ Mati Graf, *Impeeriumi lõpp ja Eesti taasiseseisvumine 1988–1991* (Tallinn: Argo, 2012), 62–63.

³⁵ The ethnic question is another aspect of the Singing Revolution that has not been subject of serious research. Cf. Grigorjan and Rosenfeld, *Iseseisvuse anatoomia*.

that was instantly criticized by leading members of the Popular Front initiative, such as Edgar Savisaar, since no one could foresee the reaction of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, on the same day Valk formulated his acclaimed sentence in front of the crowd: “One day we will win anyway,” which instantly became the credo of the Estonian “Singing Revolution.”³⁶ Even for the most hardnosed politicians among the crowd, it became clear that in time, autonomy would be not enough. At the end of the festival, the 80-year-old Ernesaks conducted the majestic choir singing his “Mu isamaa.” This time, there was no recollection of a “Soviet homeland” left. The mental secession from the USSR was already on its way.

When a few weeks later the founding congress of the Estonian Popular Front was held in Tallinn, the people demonstrated national unity with a torchlight procession through the Old Town, accompanied by patriotic songs. And again, the government gave in, with the Supreme Soviet declaring the republic’s sovereignty on 16 November 1988.³⁷ After this decision, which effectively placed republican law above union law, the nascent political change in the Soviet Baltic republics met fierce resistance in Moscow. It was the first time in Soviet history that a SSR had demanded its right of sovereignty, as granted by article 72 in the Soviet constitution.³⁸

Political stalemate in 1989

In late 1988, the Kremlin had to face the fact that “support for perestroika” in the Baltic republics did not necessarily mean unconditional loyalty to the union, but quite the opposite. Nonetheless, Estonia’s boldness in declaring sovereignty led to fruitless juridical debates with Moscow in the months to come, while Estonia was waiting for the other Baltic republics to follow. To some extent, the confrontation with radical groups like the ERSP was responsible for this stalemate in Estonian relations with the center. Lithuania eventually took the lead in the political movement while Latvia remained rather passive. Despite the wish of the Lithuanian *Sajūdis* to support Estonia, in November 1988 the newly elected communist leadership in Vilnius, with Algirdas Brazauskas at the top, was not yet ready to pass a draft declaration of sovereignty. Lithuania finally took on the political movement on 16 February 1989, the anniversary of Lithuania’s independence in 1918, when *Sajūdis* declared full independence as its goal. This was followed by an official declaration of sovereignty in May.³⁹ Latvia followed

³⁶ Valk, *Pääsemine*, 304–8.

³⁷ Toivo U. Raun, “The Re-establishment of Estonian Independence,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 22, no. 3 (1991): 251–58; Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, 512.

³⁸ Brettin, *Das Scheitern*, 241–55; Graf, *Kalevipoja kojutulek*, 355–403.

³⁹ Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania* (Vilnius: baltos lankos, 2004) 320; Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 317, 321.

only in late July. By then, this step did not stir up any trouble in Moscow. This was thanks to the Estonian leadership in the person of Arnold Rüütel, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR, having withstood challenging verbal pressure in the Kremlin, where he had been summoned on 18 November 1988, two days after the declaration of sovereignty was approved in Tallinn. In March 1989, the Popular Fronts of all three republics had won a majority of the Baltic republics' delegates elected to the USSR Congress of Peoples' Deputies, and by May, all three had passed laws declaring their indigenous languages as state languages.⁴⁰ In Lithuania, this led to a final split of the LiCP. An extraordinary party congress held in late December 1989 voted overwhelmingly for independence, whereupon the orthodox minority formed a LiCP leadership within the CPSU. Finally on 11 March 1990, the Lithuanian Supreme Council re-established independent statehood and abolished the Soviet Constitution.⁴¹

This represented the Baltic fall from grace in orthodox Soviet eyes. Newly elected President Gorbachev declared an economic blockade on Lithuania in April, while simultaneously offering Latvia and Estonia special status within the union. This approach, however, remained unsuccessful.⁴² By then, multiparty elections in Estonia and Latvia to the local Supreme Soviets (soon to be renamed Supreme Councils) had given pro-independence parties a majority. In Lithuania, elections had been held in late February with a second ballot in early March. *Sajūdis* gained around 100 seats out of 141, but on its list there were candidates from other newly founded parties such as the Social Democrats or Christian Democrats represented as well. The reform communists were represented by 40 deputies, 17 of them from the *Sajūdis* list. The orthodox communists got only 5 seats in the Supreme Soviet. This was the body that declared independence on 11 March.⁴³ In Estonia and Latvia, where elections were held on 18 March, the pro-independence results were somewhat lower than in Lithuania due to these republics' large immigrant populations. In Estonia, the *Rahvarinne* got 40 seats out of 105, supporters of Moscow almost 30, and others, among them a group of reform communists called Free Estonia, more than 30 seats.⁴⁴ In Latvia, after run-off elections *Tautas Fronte* got more than 130 seats out of 201.⁴⁵ A period of transition to the restoration of independence was established in Tallinn on 30 March and in Riga on 4 May.

⁴⁰ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 323; Rein Taagepera, “A Note on the March 1989 Elections in Estonia,” *Soviet Studies* 42, no. 2 (1990): 329–39.

⁴¹ Alfred Erich Senn, “Lithuania’s Path to Independence,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 22, no. 3 (1991): 245–50.

⁴² Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 322–24.

⁴³ Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 324; V. Stanley Vardys, “Litauen unter der Sowjetherrschaft und auf dem Wege zur Unabhängigkeit,” in Boris Meissner, ed., *Die baltischen Nationen. Estland. Lettland. Litauen* (Cologne: Markus Verlag, 1991), 223–68, 240–41.

⁴⁴ Vahre, ed., *Eesti ajalugu*, 286.

⁴⁵ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 331, claim that the “supporters of independence elected exceeded the necessary two-thirds (134) for control of the Latvian Supreme Soviet”.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the Central European states, Soviet power in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania did not end despite unilaterally declared independence. Moscow tried to come to terms with the constitutional requirements for a Soviet republic to withdraw from the USSR. New rules, however, would have made the task “virtually impossible.”⁴⁶ The resulting impasse could not hide the fact that, ultimately, the real power remained in Moscow’s hand. In January 1991, first Vilnius and later Riga witnessed violent attempts to restore the old order. In Vilnius, after Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene had decided to raise food prices substantially, the government had to resign. Obviously using this moment of weakness in the Lithuanian Soviet Republic, on 10 January Gorbachev demanded the restoration of the Soviet constitution from the Supreme Council and refused to guarantee to refrain from using violence. On 11 January the Soviet army and internal troops of the Ministry of the Interior (OMON) stormed strategic places in Vilnius, including the Press House building and the railway station. Two days later, when in the early morning the special military unit “Alpha” along with the OMON troops attacked, among other facilities, the Vilnius TV tower, fourteen people died and over a hundred were injured. The following days, a parallel scenario developed in Riga, although Boris Yeltsin, the president of the RSFSR, in reaction to the events in Vilnius had come to Tallinn to sign agreements with Estonia and Latvia, thus establishing bilateral relations. As had been done in Vilnius, barricades were erected in Riga to protect strategic buildings. Nevertheless, on 20 January, when in Moscow a crowd of 100,000 people demonstrated its support for the Baltic republics, OMON troops stormed the Ministry of Interior in Riga, killing five people and injuring nine.⁴⁷

As a result, not least thanks to international media coverage, Soviet power in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was finally discredited, although Moscow was only ready to negotiate a Union Treaty. By March 1991, all three Baltic republics had carried out referenda resulting in significant majorities for independence, which demonstrated the backing by large portions of the non-native populations as well.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Soviet power collapsed only in August 1991, when the old *nomenklatura* of the regime dug their own graves with the ragged coup d’état of the State Committee of the State of Emergency. When in reaction, Estonia and Latvia finally followed Lithuania in declaring full independence, all other Soviet republics except Russia (which had, among others, issued a declaration of sovereignty in 1990) followed suit. The Soviet super power imploded and the State Committee eased the rebirth of the Baltic states, which were recognized almost immediately on the international arena.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 396.

⁴⁷ Ainius Lasas, “Bloody Sunday. What did Gorbachev know about the January 1991 events in Vilnius and Riga?,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 179–94, 185–86.

⁴⁸ 90.5% in Lithuania (turnout of 84.7%), 73.7% in Latvia (87.5%), and 77.8% in Estonia (82.9%). Meissner, ed., *Die baltischen Nationen*, 405; slightly different numbers in Ruutsoo, “Tagasivaated ‘vabaduse teele’,” 304.

⁴⁹ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 398–99.

It should be remembered that Soviet power was still present on Baltic territory even after the (re-)admission of the three states to the UN on 17 September 1991. The final units of the then Russian army left Estonia and Latvia only three years after the putsch, on 31 August 1994, exactly one year later than in Lithuania. Thus, the pathos of the day was revived, with World War II actually ending only in August 1994 on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea.

The meaning of 1989 for the Baltic states

In this context, 1989 bears primarily symbolic relevance for the three Baltic states. For one triumphant moment, their independence movement became part of the European *annus mirabilis*, since a calendar of 1989 events is not complete without the “Baltic Chain” (also called the “Baltic Way”), a mass demonstration that took place just a few days after the famous Pan-European Picnic on the Austrian-Hungarian border. On 23 August, the fiftieth anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the People’s Fronts of the three Baltic republics organized a human chain connecting the three capitals Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, in order to peacefully remember the murderous consequences that this pact had held for them. It is estimated that between 1.2 and more than 2 million people joined the almost 600 kilometer long chain to protest Soviet domination. This powerful example of peaceful resistance not only caught the attention of the international media, it was also an almost singular demonstration of Baltic mutual consensus.⁵⁰ Thus, the political significance of 1989 for the Baltic countries was the fact that from then onward, neither Moscow nor the Western powers could completely ignore the political urgency of the Baltic question. Whoever wanted to end the Cold War had to provide a solution for this problem as well.

The West did not instantly support the goals of the Baltic republics, but nonetheless, the reaction of the Central Committee on 26 August 1989 felt disproportionately aggressive, revealing the Kremlin’s helplessness in this regard. In the eyes of Moscow, the “Baltic Chain” had been nothing more than “nationalist hysteria.” The pronouncement of the CC, read in the news program “Vremya,”

⁵⁰ Shortly before the 20th anniversary of this event the “Baltic Chain” has been registered in the UNESCO-list “Memory of the World”: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-baltic-way-human-chain-linking-three-states-in-their-drive-for-freedom/> (accessed 25 September 2012); <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/474728> (accessed 9 August 2012). Cf. Vytautas Visockas, *Baltijos kelias. The Baltic way* (Vilnius: Mintis, 2000); Lembit Koik, 23. *august 1989. Balti kett* (Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 2004); Kalev Vilgats, “Külo Arjakas: Balti tee ehk Balti keti korraldamine otsustati kolmepoolse komisjoni kohtumisel Pärnus,” *Pärnu Postimees*, 22 August 2009, <http://www.parnupostimees.ee/154982/kullo-arjakas-balti-tee-ehk-balti-keti-korraldamine-otsustati-kolmepoolse-komisjoni-kohtumisel-parnus/> (accessed 25 September 2012).

even claimed: “Matters have gone too far. There is a serious threat to the fate of the Baltic peoples. People should know the abyss into which they are being pushed by their nationalistic leaders. Should they achieve their goals, the possible consequences could be catastrophic to these nations. A question could arise as to their very existence.” According to this statement, the Popular Fronts were aiming at the destruction of the union and they “terrorized” those still loyal to socialism.⁵¹ At this time, Soviet dominance was already history in Central Europe. However, the violent events in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991 proved that these words were not empty threats.

For the time being, the only victory won by the “Baltic Chain” for the Popular Fronts was a moral one, although at the diplomatic level, as Spohr-Readman has shown, the Baltic question became important from this point in time, not least thanks to the Chain’s impressive impact. Nonetheless, the Western powers continued anxiously to avoid open support of the Baltic case, despite the Kremlin’s aggressive tone. Especially West Germany was far from committing itself to a solution for the situation of the three countries, despite its historical responsibility. While claiming peaceful self-determination for the Germans, Chancellor Helmut Kohl simultaneously rejected this very right for the Baltic peoples, losing thereby a balanced European perspective. Germany only recognized the independence of the Baltic countries in the late summer of 1991, even later than Gorbachev had. And it is quite symbolic that Kohl paid his first visit to the three countries only in 1998, when he went to Riga to meet the prime minister of the Russian Federation, Viktor Chernomyrdin.⁵²

The mobilizing potential of historical memory

The significant event of the August 1989 “Baltic Chain” became a focal point for glasnost in the Soviet Baltic republics. At the same time, it reminded the rest of Europe of the forgotten victims of the allied victory in Eastern Europe, a victory that had been possible thanks to a dictator no less despicable than the common enemy Hitler. Despite the decision of the EU to commemorate 23 August as European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, the Hitler-Stalin Pact was never a central European *lieu de mémoire*.⁵³ Nonetheless,

⁵¹ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 328; Rein Ruutsoo, “Tagasivaated ‘vabaduse teele’—Rahvarinde roll Eesti ajaloos 1988-1993,” *Rahvarinne* (1988): 234–321, 284; Seraina Gilly, *Der Nationalstaat im Wandel. Estland im 20. Jahrhundert* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002) 341; Brettin, *Das Scheitern*, 192–201; Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, 517.

⁵² Cf. Spohr-Readman, *Germany and the Baltic Problem after the Cold War*, *passim*.

⁵³ Stefan Troebst, “Der 23. August 1939—Ein europäischer lieu de mémoire?,” *Osteuropa* 59, no. 7–8 (2009): 249–56, see URL: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-08-11-troebst-de.html> (accessed 12 July 2010). For the EU parliament’s resolution, see <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0439+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed 25 September 2012).

the Western part of the anti-Hitler coalition, despite the US government’s policy not to recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states, de facto accepted the Pact’s consequences and never actually questioned Stalin’s territorial gains.⁵⁴ The feeling of having been abandoned and sacrificed by the Western democracies was very vivid in the Baltic republics during the early postwar years, and this was a crucial aspect that gave moral fuel to the Baltic opposition movements in the late 1980s. No doubt the mobilization of dissent based on historical legitimacy was above all an act of anti-Soviet sentiment. Between the lines, however, these common efforts in the Baltic independence movement were also an appeal to Western historical responsibility. The three countries were not only claiming their secession from the Kremlin, but were simultaneously demanding their moral right to “return to Europe” as approved by the West.

The date 23 August was always a focal point of Baltic dissent, as were the traditional independence days of the three interwar republics. While the former stood for the Baltic victimhood, the latter represented the continuation of an ideal mode of independent existence (something the people’s democracies of Central Europe did not need to the same extent). Therefore, throughout the Soviet period “calendar demonstrations” expressed this national protest, although they were generally quite modest in form, such as wearing clothes or small arm ribbons of the national colors, or simply graffiti being written on the walls.⁵⁵ On 23 August 1979, forty-five Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians signed the “Baltic Appeal” to the general secretary of the UN, which demanded the public disclosure of the pact and its protocols, annulment of its consequences and restoration of the independent republics.⁵⁶ In the late 1980s, these anniversaries became popular to a much greater degree. With every year, people were less afraid of taking part in displaying non-Soviet identities. In less than three years, small local demonstrations of a few hundred people had transformed into large-scale political events that attracted the attention of a world-wide audience, the culmination being the “Baltic Chain.” While on one hand, this demonstrated the decline of the central authority in the Soviet Baltic republics, on the other hand, it proved how effective history can be for mobilizing the masses.

The first protest meetings that attracted a significant number of people in all three capitals occurred on 23 August 1987. Sources speak of more than 5,000 people in Riga, in Tallinn of more than 2,000, and in Vilnius 200 to 300.⁵⁷ Displaying the

⁵⁴ Jonathan d’Hommedieu, “Roosevelt and the dictators: the origin of the US non-recognition policy of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states,” in: Hiden and Made, eds., *The Baltic Question during Cold War*, 33–44.

⁵⁵ Basic information provided by Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 250–71.

⁵⁶ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 270.

⁵⁷ Estimates vary. The numbers given here are from Ruutsoo, “Tagasivaated ‘vabaduse teele’,” 255. Cf. Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 308: Riga: “over 10,000”; Tallinn: “at least 5,000”; Vilnius: “over 1,000”. For Tallinn, cf. Kaasik and Piirimäe, “Hirvepargi kõnekoosolek ja Eesti vabanemine”; Graf, *Kalevipoja kojutulek*, 216–28.

national colors was still a legal offence, and a number of people were later arrested. Just one year later, during the first summer of the “Singing Revolution,” the situation had changed completely: Hundreds of thousands took part in the demonstrations on 23 August, and showing the national colors had become legal, at least in Estonia. The authorities limited their activities to close observation. By 1989, millions of people took part in the “Baltic Chain.” The Baltic question had become decisively important for the fate of perestroika, since it gave the conservative Soviet opposition reason to be concerned about the integrity of the entire country.

In the international arena, it became increasingly hollow to declare the Baltic question simply an internal matter of the USSR. The Popular Fronts were clever to concentrate their propaganda on the secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin Pact instead of the entire complex of occupation and annexation from June 1940. If they had emphasized the latter, they would never have been able to create the international commitment they received, not least because this would have annoyed the Kremlin even more. Moscow still held true to the Stalinist legend of the spontaneous “socialist revolutions” simultaneously occurring in all three countries in the summer of 1940.⁵⁸ In contrast to this orthodox Soviet view, according to Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian historical memory, there was only one common experience after 1940: occupation, annexation and deportation. Most decisively in this respect, the living memory of these crucial years still existed in many families, since many people who were allowed to return from Siberian exile after Stalin’s death were still alive in the late 1980s. In these families, the younger generation was quite naturally acquainted with the differences between the history taught at school and private remembrance.⁵⁹ However, it was not only Stalinist terror that was remembered in the late 1980s and increasingly discussed in local media: The societies in all three countries still had a pre-Soviet memory of the independent republics, although this was unavoidably idealized. Almost half a century of Soviet indoctrination had not been able to extract these memories. Although the region became increasingly adapted to Soviet realities, at least on the surface, after open terror was no longer used in the USSR from the late 1950s, remembering the 23 August was a question of historical justice.

In the Soviet Baltic republics, history thus became the most important source of legitimacy of anti-Soviet protest. It is quite noteworthy that these anti-Soviet convictions were very powerful, especially among the younger generation. Politburo documents concerning the Baltic republics are full of discussions of anti-Soviet youth protests, and even record some cases of violence committed on

⁵⁸ Lauri Mälksoo, *Illegal Annexation and State Continuity. Case of the Incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR. A Study of the Tension between Normativity and Power in International Law* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003); Jan Lipinsky, *Das geheime Zusatzprotokoll zum deutsch-sowjetischen Nichtangriffsvertrag vom 23. August 1939 und seine Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von 1939 bis 1999* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004).

⁵⁹ Peeter Tulviste, “History Taught at School Versus History Discovered at Home: The Case of Estonia,” *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 9, no. 2 (1994): 121–26.

ethnic grounds against Slavic “occupants.”⁶⁰ According to Elena Zubkova, it was especially irritating for the regime that the youth were leading the protest in the Baltic republics.⁶¹ Indeed, it had nothing to do with the Soviet historical narrative that history was a very popular subject at the University of Tartu.⁶² It was history that legitimized the belief in an independent future, and it seemed to prove the three nation’s roles as victims of dictators. Additionally, history during the years of perestroika provided motivation for establishing an active civil society in the three republics, a civil society that today is missed by certain veterans of the Popular Front.⁶³ Quite naturally, these successful years of political activity become idealized, especially by those whose personal reading of the past did not correspond to the hitherto established national narratives of the “fight for independence.” At that time, history was used for “popular” vengeance as well: On 25 March 1988, the anniversary of mass deportations from the Baltic Soviet republics in March 1949, the Estonian Heritage Society demanded the names of all those deported to the interior of the USSR to be documented and published. It was thought that this select historical documentation, based on a victim narrative, would unite the ethnic community and could be used as a weapon against the foreign power.⁶⁴

These initiatives for historical glasnost wanted to push the Soviet leadership into acknowledging that Stalin had been Hitler’s accomplice in dividing Eastern Europe. How far would perestroika legally go? Shortly before the demonstrations in August 1987, a group was formed in Estonia with a single goal: The Estonian Group for the Publication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (*Molotov-Ribbentropi Pakti Avalikustamise Eesti Grupp*). This group (which formed the core of the ERSP) organized a meeting in Tallinn’s Hirve Park on 23 August.⁶⁵ One year later, on 10 August 1988, the Estonian historian Heino Arumäe published, for the first time in the USSR, the entire text of the pact, including the protocols in Estonian, in the daily *Rahva Hääl* (Voice of the People). The text was based on copies from German archives. A few days later, the Russian-language daily *Sovetskaya Estoniya* followed suit and published the text in Russian as well. Latvian and Lithuanian periodicals subsequently made the text available in their languages.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Here the author relies on his own work in the RGANI. He is currently preparing a study based on these sources.

⁶¹ Elena Yu. Zubkova, “Vlast’ i razvitie étnokonfliktnoi situatsii v SSSR 1953–1985 gody,” *Otechestvennaya istoriya*, no. 4 (2004): 3–32, esp. 23–27; Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml’*, 42–43. According to Graf, *Kalevipoja kojutulek*, 240, still in late 1987 the official media asked why the youth was so eager to participate in anti-Soviet demonstrations.

⁶² Cf. Anu Raudsepp, *Ajaloo õpetamise korraldus Eesti NSV eesti õppekeele üldhariduskoolides 1944–1985* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2005).

⁶³ Ester Šank, “Valusad küsimused. Kuhu on kadunud kodanikuühiskond,” *Rahvarinne* 1988, 323–26.

⁶⁴ Ruutsoo, “Tagasivaated ‘vabaduse teele’,” 259.

⁶⁵ Tannberg, *Hirvepark 1987*.

⁶⁶ The Latvian teacher’s journal *Skolotāju Avīze* published part of the text already on 23 July 1988. Cf. Gert von Pistohlkors, “Der Hitler-Stalin-Pakt und die Baltischen Staaten,” and the translation of Heino Arumäe’s article in *Rahva hääl*, “Noch einmal zum sowjetisch-deutschen Nicht-

On 18 May 1989, the Estonian Supreme Soviet was the first administrative body of the USSR to declare the clauses of the Hitler-Stalin Pact null and void. Supported by *Sajūdis*, it demanded the newly elected Congress of Peoples' Deputies to do the same. In Moscow, the Baltic deputies, mostly candidates supported by the Popular Fronts, sought tight cooperation with the "Interregional Group" established by reform-minded communists around Yurii Afanas'yev, Gavriil Popov and Boris Yeltsin.⁶⁷ On 2 June, they managed to be represented in a Commission for the Legal Assessment of the Pact, led by Gorbachev's close advisor Yakovlev and by Savisaar (among the members: Marju Lauristin from Estonia, Landsbergis and Kazimir Motieka from Lithuania, and Mavriks Vulfsons from Latvia).⁶⁸

The decision of the congress of 24 December to recognize the existence of the secret protocols and to declare their clauses "legally unjustified and invalid from the moment of signing" is significant for the relationship between the Union and the Baltic Soviet Republics.⁶⁹ However, this decision had no practical consequences, since the annexation as such was not condemned. As late as 2010, this issue was still not resolved at an official level. And as mentioned above, the former status of the Baltic republics as parts of the Russian empire and the USSR sets them apart from the former people's democracies of Central Europe.⁷⁰

The Culture of the "Singing Revolution"

In assessing the "Singing Revolution," historians and political scientists have concentrated on official statements, elections and plebiscites, the conflict with the

angriffspakt," in Erwin Oberländer, ed., *Der Hitler-Stalin-Pakt 1939. Das Ende Ostmitteleuropas?* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1989), 75–97, 114–24. The text was published in Latvian ("Literatūra un māksla"; "Padomju jaunatne") and in Lithuanian ("Sajūdzio žinios"; "Literatūra ir menas"). Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 319.

⁶⁷ Denis M. Ablaev, *Mezhregional'naya deputatskaya gruppy: stanovlenie, razvitie i itogi* (Moskva: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi oblastnoi universitet, 2008).

⁶⁸ Heiki Lindpere, *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Challenging Soviet History* (Tallinn: Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, 2009). Cf. also the DVD by Toomas Lepp, "Dokumentaarfilm: Eestlased Kremliis" (Tallinn: Eesti Kultuurfilm, 2006), which quite convincingly follows the narrative that it was the Baltic delegates who were responsible for the collapse of the USSR.

⁶⁹ Translation of the Resolution of 24 December signed by Gorbachev, in Lindpere, *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, 173–75.

⁷⁰ Influential Russian commentators like the historian Nataliya Narochnitskaya, who is in charge of the Parisian branch of the governmental "Institute for Democracy and Cooperation," call the decision of December 1989 a "mistake" because they made it impossible for the Russian Federation to take a clear position in a future process of reparations with the Baltic republics. See "Rekomendatsii rossiiskikh istorikov: Rossiya i Pribaltika: kompetentnye otvety na istoricheskie pretenzii limitrofov," *Sootchestvennik. Informatsionnyi portal*, <http://compatriot.su/estonia/news/51807.html> (accessed 10 August 2007). For a general account, see Karsten Brüggemann, "Russia and the Baltic Countries: Recent Russian-language literature (Review Essay)," *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 4 (2009): 935–56.

center, and the Baltic countries' relations with the West. Historians of the USSR, looking traditionally from the center, refer first and foremost to the decline of the central power.⁷¹ One of the main topics is the astonishing fact that, in general, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a quite peaceful process, even in the Baltic region, despite the bloody events of January 1991. Concerning Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Walter C. Clemens has taken an unorthodox approach to the secession. According to him, the factor “culture,” in a wider sense, is decisive for explaining the behavioral differences between the Soviet and national “cultures,” whereby for him, a “societal fitness” of the peoples in the Baltic region was created not least by the long tradition of Protestant cultures of reading.⁷² Heiko Pääbo has observed that the potential for violence based on ethnicity was rather low in Estonia in the crucial years 1988–90.⁷³

In fact, there was indeed a moment of tension. On 15 May 1990, Interfront organized a meeting on Toompea Hill in the center of Tallinn to protest the recent decisions concerning a “transition period” towards independence (30 March) as well as the final abolition of the name “Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic” in favor of the traditional “Republic of Estonia” (8 May); this decision was preceded by a similar step in Latvia four days earlier, in reaction to Lithuania's declaration of independence in March. During the Interfront meeting, some of the demonstrators tried to break into government buildings in the castle on Toompea Hill. In reaction to the new prime minister Savisaar's call for help via radio, masses of Estonian supporters of the government came to Castle Square, pushing the mostly Russian demonstrators into the small area of the castle, with the Estonians outside the complex. Violence seemed to be at hand, since the Russians sat in a trap with no way out. According to then foreign minister and later president Lennart Meri, the situation was saved first by a Russian general and member of the Supreme Council, who managed to calm down the masses, and second by the Estonians on Castle Square, who slowly opened a narrow path for the demonstrators to leave the site.⁷⁴

⁷¹ From the central perspective, see Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia. From Nicholas II to Putin* (London: Penguin, 2003), 485–507; Manfred Hildermeier, *Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917–1991: Entstehung und Niedergang des ersten sozialistischen Staates* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1998), 1052–60.

⁷² Walter C. Clemens, “Culture and Symbols as Tools of Resistance,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009): 169–77, 172. See Walter C. Clemens, *The Baltic Transformed. Complexity Theory and European Security* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001). Cf. Guntis Smidchens, “National Heroic Narratives in the Baltics as a Source for Nonviolent Political Action,” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 484–508.

⁷³ Heiko Pääbo, “The Role of Non-Violent Resistance in Proclaiming Independence in Estonia,” in Talavs Jundzis, ed., *Development of Democracy. Experience in the Baltic States and Taiwan* (Riga: Latvian Academy of Sciences, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, 2006), 126–36. According to him, opinion polls in 1988–89 “showed that the support of the Intermovement varied from 35–43% within non-Estonians.”

⁷⁴ Andreas Oplatka, *Lennart Meri. Ein Leben für Estland. Dialog mit dem Präsidenten* (Zürich: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1999), 321–23; Graf, *Impeiriumi löpp*, 163–65.

There is another major factor with regard to the culture of the “Singing Revolution,” however, that is open for further research. Although many scholars often refer to the “mass movements” that reshaped the political landscapes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, we do not know very much about the people who took part in these movements. We do not know, for instance, exactly who went out into the streets. Social scientists like Henri Vogt have chosen to collect individual stories to give a portrait of the “revolutionary” generation, but even the limited number of respondents in his case only reveals how open the situation in 1989 was. According to Vogt, “collective utopias” mobilized individuals to go to the streets. His quite general claim about these common goals—one could “become more ‘European’ but simultaneously also more ‘national’”—can hardly be disputed.⁷⁵ These public dispositions were so important because for half a century the communist dictatorship had been trying to suppress them with the single socialist utopia, which propagated quite a different form of collectivity. The year 1989 brought the individual note back into social consciousness. In the Baltic case, however, the “collective utopia” that mobilized the masses, regardless of generational differences, was merely a return to the cultural patterns that had been developed during the first half of the twentieth century.⁷⁶

Apart from this general approach to these mass movements, I would like to examine the issue of youth participation here, which was of utmost importance for the “Singing Revolution,” not the least because of the motivation music offered. Vogt discusses the memories of those born from 1964 to 1973, whereby he consciously concentrates on the generation of those who actively took part in the 1989 protests from the early stages onwards. However, if Zubkova is correct in stating that already in the 1960s, Moscow was alarmed by the predominance of the participation of the younger generation in smaller protest activities (especially at universities),⁷⁷ then perestroika in the Baltic republics was a logical continuation of this protest culture. From the beginning, the “Singing Revolution” was a youth movement in terms of activity on the streets. As has been stated above, the dissent did not only involve people singing traditional songs from the late nineteenth-century “national awakening” period. In all three Baltic republics, rock music played a decisive role in displaying anti-regime protest. Since the 1970s, local rock music that was “Western” in form but “national” in content motivated especially younger people, who thus were involved in a sort of continuous passive anti-regime protest, since the Kremlin always tried to fight the most recent waves of “decadent” Western culture. In this sense, the influence

⁷⁵ Henri Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment. A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 240.

⁷⁶ Cf. for instance Toivo U. Raun, “National Identity in Finland and Estonia, 1905–1917,” in Norbert Angermann, Michael Garleff, and Wilhelm Lenz, eds., *Ostseeprovinzen, Baltische Staaten und das Nationale. Festschrift für Gert von Pistohlkors zum 70. Geburtstag* (Münster: LIT, 2005), 343–56.

⁷⁷ Zubkova, “Vlast’ i razvitie,” 24–25.

that jazz had had on the informal movements of the 1960s was carried into the 1980s by rock and punk. Whereas in 1967, the concert of the Charles Lloyd Trio (featuring Keith Jarrett) during the “Tallinn-67” jazz festival fostered the image of Estonia as the Soviet Union’s “window to Europe,”⁷⁸ the performance of John Lyndon’s band Public Image Ltd. during the Tallinn “Rock Summer” in August 1988 prepared the Estonian capital for their “return to Europe.”⁷⁹ Punk had been the trigger for protest already in 1980, the year Tallinn hosted the sailing competitions of the Moscow Olympic games. On 22 September 1980, the anniversary of Tallinn’s “liberation” in 1944, a concert of the punk band Propeller, organized for the special occasion of a soccer match celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Estonian Television, was abruptly interrupted by officials, whereupon hundreds of young people marched toward the city center shouting anti-Russian slogans calling for the resignation of Brezhnev and the ESSR’s minister of education, Elza Grechkina.⁸⁰ Since punk was an authentic anti-Soviet protest, it was punks who were among the first to display openly the old Estonian tricolor. Thus it came as no surprise when in 1988 a punk song figured among the iconic (and ironic) hits of the “Singing Revolution”: J.M.K.E.’s “Tere Perestroika” (Hello Perestroika).⁸¹

However music was not the only medium for youth protest. The first mass demonstrations in all three republics were organized around the issue of environmental hazards. This issue had the advantage of being intrinsically apolitical, although in the Baltic republics, protest against pollution caused by state-run industrial plants also meant fighting against the immigration of more workers from the Soviet interior,⁸² an issue that had already been openly addressed in 1979 by the aforementioned “Baltic Appeal.” With a “green” agenda, the new possibilities for intense criticism under Gorbachev were tested. Environmental issues first came to the surface in autumn 1986 in Latvia, where the young

⁷⁸ Valter Ojakäär, *Sirp ja saksofoon. Eesti levimuusika ajaloost 3* (Tallinn: Ilo, 2008), 352–69; Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, 56–57.

⁷⁹ Tony Blackplait and Cat Bloomfield, *Eesti punk 1976–1990. Anarhia ENSV-s* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2009), 282–91, 300–7, 310–15.

⁸⁰ Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, 35–40, 65–73; Blackplait and Bloomfield, *Eesti punk*, 36–44; Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 253.

⁸¹ About J.M.K.E. see Blackplait and Bloomfield, *Eesti punk, passim*; for a video of “Tere Perestroika,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBt8qBdz0gA&feature=related> (accessed 18 July 2010). The text reads: “The sky’s cloudless, the sea’s blue / Everybody’s breathing free and deep / Hammer and sickle are no longer a threat / Now they symbolize joyful work / Hello perestroika, democracy / One country is becoming free of dictatorship / Hello perestroika, hello happiness / The red flag isn’t so horrible anymore [...] The uniform of militia no longer sickens / Now it’s nearly beautiful / You’ll see militia and punks / Shaking hands [...] In Virumaa not a well remains dry / An airship lands in front of the mausoleum / Well what do you say? / The democracy is so great / That one can only wonder [...]” Quoted from the CD “Külmale maale” (Helsinki: Stupido Twins, 1989).

⁸² See to the following Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 304–7.

journalist Dainis Īvāns, later one of the organizers of the Popular Front, raised questions about a planned hydroelectric complex at Pļaviņas; later the planned construction of a subway in Riga came under the focus of critics as well. In the spring of 1987, the so-called Phosphorite War occurred in Estonia, during which especially the students in Tartu went onto the streets. Estonian specialists claimed that the planned expansion of open-pit phosphate mining in the north of the country would render the whole region infertile and possibly endanger the water supply of the entire republic. The Estonian environmentalists were also concerned about the development of the industrial port Maardu near Tallinn. But the phosphorus mining mobilized open protest: Accompanied by Mattiisen's aforementioned rock-hymn "Ei ole ükski ükski maa," on 1 May 1987 Tartu students "substituted green ecological banners for the standard red ones during the traditional May parade."⁸³ While ecology protests reached less industrialized Lithuania later—the first mass demonstration against the Chernobyl-style Ignalina nuclear power plant was held in autumn 1988—the success of the protest movements in Estonia and Latvia was decisive. First, in October 1987, the USSR Council of Ministers decided to stop phosphate mining projects in Estonia, and in November 1987 it also cancelled the building of the hydroelectric complex in Pļaviņas. In both cases, but especially crucial in Estonia, this demonstrated that the party was not omnipotent, and that even in the USSR, civic action could achieve something against bureaucratic resistance. Prominent members of the ECP, including Rūitel and Savisaar, joined the protests, and the republican Council of Ministers, led by Bruno Saul and Indrek Toome, promised not to sanction continued planning until all ecological concerns had been addressed. This showed that even the ECP leadership supported local concerns over central planning.

Still, the psychological aspect in 1987 of the gradual disappearance of fear may have been even more important. As one of Vogt's Estonian respondents remembered, this "was the first experience [...] that you can go to the streets, you can demonstrate, and nothing happens, no repression follows."⁸⁴ This positive "first experience" was primarily shared by students, artists and representatives of the intelligentsia (in Estonia and Latvia alike). Thus it is no surprise that these were the groups that went out onto the streets again in the summer of 1988. The entire culture of protest changed with them. It seemed that there was no longer any need for violence, since the state apparatus, at least tactically, had pulled back its troops. In September 1980, when protesting students in Tallinn pulled down Soviet flags and pushed over streetcars,⁸⁵ violence seemed the appropriate expression of youth protest. Everyone who had seen the brilliant film "Vai viegli but jaunam?" (Is it easy to be young?), shot by the Latvian director Juris Podnieks

⁸³ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 306.

⁸⁴ Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment*, 23.

⁸⁵ Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, 68.

and released in 1986, knew about the violent potential of the youth, a potential that had been fed by the social stagnation of the Brezhnev era. Podnieks' film opens with a concert of the band Pērkonis in Ogre in 1985, with the scenes spliced with coverage of the trial of several teenagers who were charged with demolishing two train compartments after the concert. Podnieks then empathetically looks at the personal life of these young people, presenting ideas of self-realization that for the most part were completely foreign to Soviet clichés.

During the “Singing Revolution,” the fact that intellectuals took the concerns of the youth seriously was important for the unity of the society. This already had a tradition: The issues raised indirectly by the youth riots in 1980 were supported by the famous “Letter of 40,” signed in October 1980 by Estonian writers, scientists and artists, as well as by representatives of official cultural institutions.⁸⁶ In Latvia, Podnieks' acclaimed 1986 film had portrayed the needs and ideals of Latvian youth. This mutual understanding reached a new level after 1987, when the intelligentsia directed the vibrant protest energy of the youth into social activism. One aspect characterized both groups: they were relatively young. The reform movement was mainly conducted by representatives of a generation that only knew about massive state violence through hearsay or personal family history. As Vogt has stated, these people “were unaware of the ‘impossibility’ of a revolution,” by which he refers to the Czech experience in 1968, and thus, “it was possible for them to make one.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

Much like the other revolutions of 1989, the “Singing Revolution” in the Soviet Baltic republics was characterized by an unusual level of youth engagement. Due to their commitment to issues of national development in terms of the environment and industrial production, due to their collective past and the way history was taught in schools, and due to independent cultural expression, the movement gained momentum and visibility on the streets. The Kremlin's hands were tied: The new leadership did not want to risk damaging international relations by television footage covering violently suppressed demonstrations on the Baltic Sea coast. It is often claimed that the chain reaction leading to the dissolution of the USSR started in Gdańsk in September 1980 and ended in Moscow in August 1991. However, as Elena Zubkova has pointed out, anyone who would like to know the reasons for the collapse of the world's first socialist state must take into account what happened in the Soviet Baltic republics during the first ten years

⁸⁶ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 269; Sirje Kiin, Rein Ruutsoo, and Andres Tarand, *40 kirja lugu* (Tallinn: Olion, 1990).

⁸⁷ Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment*, 24.

after their annexation.⁸⁸ According to Zubkova, the Soviet experiment never had a chance there, even after Moscow decided to turn the “dangerous borderland” into a “show case” (*vitrina*) of Soviet success.⁸⁹ Thus the region played the role of a predetermined weak link in the construction of the Soviet Union, as expressed in the words of Valk: “One day we will win anyway.” One might see the Baltic republics as a case of particular “imperial overstretch,” if not in military and economic terms, then surely because the USSR extended itself beyond its abilities with respect to cultural needs.

The Estonian social scientists Peeter Vihalemm, Marju Lauristin and Ivar Tallo have insightfully suggested a differentiation for marking the various stages of social change during the “Singing Revolution.” According to them, the “revolution” reached a “mythological phase” in 1988, and passed into an “ideological stage” in 1989.⁹⁰ The first period brought a historical rebirth and created an optimism that had hitherto been considered impossible in the near future. Today we might speak of a “Yes, we can” moment, a moment that produced the unity felt during those summer nights of music, a short period of euphoria all too easily mythologized today. The subsequent stage of ideological stalemates was then perceived as a time of outer tensions and internal conflicts concerning a single goal—independence.⁹¹ Thus, while 1989 was in some respects a year of disappointment, the summer of 1988 has been encapsulated in collective memory as the “Singing Revolution.” During the summer of 1988 a whole society changed, although the people in the Soviet Baltic republics had to wait another three years for this change to become political reality.

⁸⁸ Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml'*, 7, 43; for comparison see Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, 521.

⁸⁹ Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml'*, 125, 337.

⁹⁰ Peeter Vihalemm, Marju Lauristin and Ivar Tallo, “Development of Political Culture in Estonia,” in Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm, eds., *Return to the Western World. Cultural and Political Perspectives on the Estonian Post-Communist Transition* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 1997), 197–210.

⁹¹ Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment*, 28, quotes the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski (*Postimees*, 19 September 1991), who stated that in 1989, “those who kept on meeting joined different camps,” the supporters of the Popular Front and the “national radicals.”