



Songs of Resistance

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Throughout the course of history, revolutions have been staged in a number of different ways. Most often, revolution happens as violent and aggressive, full of unspeakable horrors. However, once in a while, a revolution happens through non-violent methods of resistance. In some instances, a group of people is able to achieve such an outcome through various methods of non-violent action, and in a few specific cases, the tools for such revolution include Song.

This paper will explore the use of non-violent resistance through the cultural preservation of song, and more specifically be a case study for two such revolutions: the subversion of the Soviet Regime in Estonia in the 1990's, and the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1960's. Both used song as a demonstrable tool with which to unite their community and resist oppression, while actively pursuing their freedoms. In both movements, traditional folk song was used in innovative ways, and this study will examine comparisons between the two traditions.

These two cultures, while seemingly very dissimilar share many traits that link their heritage. Both peoples were enslaved for centuries and preserved their sense of identity and community through their own folk traditions, and both subsequently relied on those traditions throughout the centuries as a uniting aspect for their people to maintain their national identities through the generations, ultimately using these traditions to stage protests and raise their voices to incite revolution.

If you ask any American if they have ever heard of the Singing Revolution, very few would answer positively. The revolution that was staged in Estonia, and subsequently Latvia and Lithuania after the acquisition of the Baltic nations in the post-world war era, against the Soviet regime remains one of the most remarkable and non-violent revolutions in history, and they accomplished it all through Song. In his book, *The Singing Revolution*, historian Priit Vesilind writes, "Estonia sang its way to



freedom...the force of the human voice massed in song was the cultural catalyst that energized, awoke, and united the nation of Estonia. It was the political and cultural statement – intimate, imaginative, poetic – that brought all Estonians together and gave them courage to rebel.”¹

Estonia has long been a country occupied by more aggressive nations. It is comprised of just over one million people. However, the small nation bares valuable access to the Baltic sea, possessing ports that are largely ice-free which makes it a valuable commodity to larger, more land-locked countries. The Estonians have been free for merely 40 years out of the last 800, existing as an independent nation between the world wars and then again since the collapse of the Soviet regime. Despite their years of servitude to other more aggressive nations, Vesilind states that “Nearly half a century of totalitarian rule (1944-1991) was more destructive to the Estonian people, their country and culture than all the earlier centuries of foreign rule.”²

Through it all, the Estonians have maintained their sense of national identity by maintaining a culture of music and song. Through their folk songs, Estonians established a love of country which united them in a single cause and gave the Estonian people a voice with which to battle the Soviet regime. During the second half of the 19th century, a nation-wide song festival was established, which still takes place every five years in Tallinn today. To hold these festivals, grounds were built with a massive stage which can accommodate up to 30,000 singers at one time. The grounds themselves have adequate room for 300,000 people, 1/3 of Estonia’s population. In the summer of 1988, a rock concert in Old Town Tallinn, which comprised of loud, angry patriotic themes, spilled over to the Song Festival Grounds where 200,000 people gathered for 6 nights, singing patriotic folk songs in unison, bringing out the forbidden Estonian national flag.

Estonia’s folk songs are songs of a people long-oppressed and their songs sprung from time spent toiling as serfs in the fields.

¹Priit Vesilind, James Tusty, and Maureen Castle. Tusty. *The Singing Revolution: How Culture Saved a Nation*. Tallinn, Estonia: Varrak, 2008, 18.

² *Ibid.*, 15.



In America, we can draw some significant parallels between the importance of folk song culture in Estonia and the importance of folk song culture, known more widely as African-American Spirituals in the United States. The Spiritual is a unique song style which evolved from an oppressed people and their desire to retain their cultural identity and to maintain the hope of freedom. Similar to the Estonian people, the African-American community used music as a means to unite, uplift, and at times resist giving up their own identity and assimilating into another dominant culture.

Spirituals were born in the fields of the south as slaves struggled to work jobs that were both physically and emotionally brutal. They were used to provide a rhythm with which to work and a way to maintain individual identity, to resist succumbing to the mentality that they were less than human. In essence, spirituals became a shared experience amongst the slaves, which carried into the African American community, becoming part of the culture even to this day. The songs were used formally in the struggle for freedom during the Civil War, and subsequently in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's.

The importance of music, and more specifically, song, is a unifying factor amongst the two cultures. The aim of this study is to examine the literature specifically and find the unifying threads between the themes of these two repertoires to answer the following questions: What, particularly, inspired these peoples? Do the songs take on a patriotic nature, exploring themes such as the love of homeland, unifying religion, misery in toil, or sorrow? Are there any comparisons that we can draw between the two culture's songs and how music is used to inspire and uplift its people?

The importance of song for both of these cultures arose for a few different reasons. First, songs provided the people with a tempo by which to work. The rhythmic drive and general cheerfulness of some of the songs arose from the need to be physically motivated by their fluidity. For the slave population in America, songs were sung to motivate the workforce and maintain a rhythm for the group to maintain. Author Dena J. Epstein characterized a group of spirituals as "worksongs" in her book entitled *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* in 1977. She wrote the following about this group of songs:



After 1800, descriptions of worksongs became more numerous, associated with a variety of different occupations ranging from field labor through domestic chores such as flailing rice, grinding hominy, spinning, and making baskets, to more industrial employments such as loading cargo, processing hemp or tobacco, and firing engines. Most common among contemporary reports were boat songs to regulate rowing, and corn or other harvest songs. Some of these songs provided rhythmic regulation of the rate of labor; others passed the time and relieved boredom, but all of them provided fuel for the perennial argument about whether the slaves were happy.³

The Estonians also used the songs similarly. There were rhythmic songs to work by for the farmers, who had been enslaved since the 1200's and forced to work in the fields for their conquerors. While many songs provided a spirited rhythm by which to work, many of them contained different themes, focusing on daily life and village activities, generally reflecting the hearts of the nation's people.

In the companion book to the film documentary, *The Singing Revolution*, Priit Vesilind summarizes the importance of folk song in daily activity as such:

Estonia had always been a nation of singers. Its wealth of folk songs gave rhythm to village life and work, and its earnest anthems often invoked the longing for self-determination. Estonians had lived for centuries in servitude, and the themes of their music were often grim; sorrow, slavery, soil, blood, birch forests, and sacrifice. But there was always hope in their hearts.⁴

This characterization also leads to a second reason for the importance of the folk song tradition in both cultures: emotional and spiritual uplift for a subjugated people. In America, the word Spiritual has implications of the divisions between secular and sacred. However, for the slaves, there was no division between the two traditions. The spiritual incorporated Biblical heroes as their own sort of mythological storytelling in an effort to bring the divine into all aspects of daily life. For, in the presence of God, all men are created equal. No one group or race is subjugate to another, and they find their worth through the eyes of their religious beliefs. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature says the following:

³ Dena J Epstein. "Worksongs." *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1977, 161.

⁴Vesilind, 21.



That the songs were sung not just in ritual worship but throughout the day meant that they served as powerful shields against the values of the slaveholders and their killing definitions of black humanity. For one thing, along with a sense of the slaves' personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties .⁵

In Estonia, songs often centered around love, both inter-personal and patriotic. Estonians focused on their personal victories in love, family and nation to keep their sense of identity and emotional unity. In short, Estonians focus on the good in their daily lives to maintain their emotional integrity, instead of relying on other-worldly or divine intervention. In his book, "The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution," Guntis Šmidchens summarizes the devotion of the Estonian patriot by drawing comparisons to German fraternity anthems.

In the German military song, the individual's fate is sealed ("I have given myself") and he asks only for the strength needed to die for his fatherland; the Estonian singer, in contrast, pledges allegiance while singing, and swears to protect and remain true until death.⁶

While the themes of these two types of songs may differ, the reason behind their existence remains the same: emotional fortitude.

The third reason for the shared importance of folk songs between the two cultures is to maintain an oral tradition amongst storytellers. In both cultures, the importance of mythological figures and legends became an important source of inspiration and revealed both group's desire to find stories and characters which transcend earthly toil and deliver them to a divine purpose. It was to this end that African-American slaves used religion in their daily lives, they "created a distinct cultural form that provided a sense of community as well as an alternative to the world of the slaveholder."⁷

⁵ Gates, Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. Print, 5.

⁶Šmidchens, 76.

⁷ Lawrence Levine. "Slave Spirituals." Slavery in American Society. By Lawrence B. Goodheart, Richard D. Brown, and Stephen G. Rabe. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1992, 99.



In Estonia, the importance of national mythology was preserved in the tradition of *regivärss*, a style of folk song sung only by women⁸, which will be discussed more fully in the discussion that follows.

The final, and perhaps most permeating, reason for the importance the folk song traditions of both the Estonian and African American traditions was that they created a sense of community and remained a way in which even those individuals who were unacquainted with one another could still conceive of a shared experience. In each of these cultures, this became the most important reason for the survival of that cultural expression and served to unify its people in resistance, leading toward revolution.

In *The Singing Revolution*, Vesilind writes that “As serfs, their (Estonian’s) lives and service belonged to German feudal landowners. Language and melody were about the only things they controlled.”⁹ By refusing to completely abandon their Estonian language and folk traditions, the people of the Baltic nation were unifying themselves, at the exclusion of the German landowners, or the Russian military. Rather than adopt their conqueror’s traditions and language, they continued the Estonian ways through both song and language.

These songs served as a cultural reference to unite individuals and served to fortify the individual against the stronger oppressors. This was the main reason that they served as such a powerful weapon to combat oppression centuries later, the exact same phenomenon that occurred here in the United States through the use of the Spiritual.

In *Slavery in American Society*, author Lawrence Levine describes the phenomenon as such:

The emotional power of the spirituals, with their promise of redemption and salvation, was a testament to the way that slaves used Christianity to transcend their bondage. Drawing on the importance of music to their African ancestors, African-American slaves created a distinct cultural form

⁸Vesilind, 27.

⁹Ibid, 24.



that provided a sense of community as well as an alternative to the world of the slaveholder.¹⁰

The aforementioned indicates that not only did the art form become inclusive for the slaves, binding them together as a community, it also served to exclude the owners, their families and the foremen whose world they inhabited. Instead, by creating their own musical language, they began to create their own society, even in the midst of being forced to survive away from their home.

In both nations, music became the tool by which they could identify with one another and create their own closed circle, even amidst those that would own and control them. It was this common language created amongst both societies that would become a tool to fortify and strengthen the bonds that held each of the cultures together and gave them the strength and courage to fight for their freedoms many times over.

Although the reasons behind the emergence of the folk song style in each of these cultures hold many similarities, the songs themselves manifested into vastly different art forms. In spite of the different styles, one thing remains similar between the two cultures: they each drew on thematic material from the emergence of these folk traditions and varied them to shape them into the tools necessary to incite revolution. Only through a closer look at some of the specific material will the similarities emerge.

In Estonia, to understand the way that songs were instrumental in the cultural revolution, it is important to establish the importance of the singing tradition as manifested in the history of its song festival tradition.

The Estonian people have long been serfs, and therefore have not been allowed to rejoice in their national heritage and culture. However, with the nationalist movement that swept Europe in the mid-19th century, Estonia underwent what is referred to as the “National Awakening” in the 1860’s to the 1880’s. It was at that time that they began to look at their heritage of song, known as the *regivärss*.

Much like the African-American Spiritual, the song style was generally one that was sung throughout the workday. However, it was sung only by women, a lead soloist

¹⁰ 101.



and a group of women which comprised the chorus. It was structured as a call and response, and the themes often referred to various events in family and village life, such as weddings, births, funerals, in addition to themes of mythological heroes and Estonian legends as a means of escape from their lives as serfs. Music was an integral part of daily life. So much so that ethnologists who were researching and cataloging Estonian folk songs “discovered in the 19th century that Estonians had one of the most extensive collections of folk songs of all the peoples of Europe.”¹¹

As the Germans brought Christianity to the Estonian people in the mid-18th century, the Moravian missionaries that came to Estonia were preaching a kind of pure religion by promoting literacy, education and temperance, which greatly appealed to the Estonian people who saw the teachings as a way to better themselves and their lives by offering the means to speak on their own behalf. The Moravians believed that a purer religion could be achieved through choral singing.

The Estonians were eager to adapt the choral style into their culture, as the religious services through ensemble singing offered the chance to incorporate their nation’s ideals into their lives.

Singing songs in their own language gave Estonians confidence quickened their yearning to gain control of their own live and land, to build self-respect, and perhaps a nation. Song-filled Moravian services provided an emotional outlet, a communal voice for a suffering people.¹²

By the middle of the 19th century, European harmonic music had become an integral part of the Estonian folk tradition. It was during this period of national awakening that the first song festival was organized. The festival was held at varying intervals until 1923, when the festival was instated at 5 year intervals. Even during the years of Soviet oppression, the festival was allowed to continue under the watchful eye of the Soviet regime. It was this venue that composers used to inspire and ignite the people unto a common purpose.

The first such composer was Gustav Ernesaks. In 1944, he wrote what would become known as the unofficial national anthem of Estonia, “My Fatherland is my

¹¹Vesilind, 27.

¹² Vesilind, 30.



Beloved.” The song was composed and premiered in Leningrad in July, therefore receiving the stamp of approval from the Soviet censors. However, they were unaware of the impact the song would have on the hearts of the Estonian people or how it might develop into a tool of resistance.

Ernasaks drew on a poem written by the Estonian poet Koidula in 1866 amidst the Estonian national awakening. The text is transcribed below.

My Fatherland is my beloved
To whom I gave my heart,
I sing to you, my greatest joy,
My blooming Estonia!
Your sorrow boils within my heart,
I feel your happiness and joy,
My fatherland!

My fatherland is my beloved,
I will not forsake it,
And even if for this I must
The die one hundred deaths!
When foreign envy slanders you,
You still live on within the heart,
My fatherland!

My fatherland is my beloved,
Here I would rest in peace,
Upon your lap I'll fall asleep
My holy Estonia!
Your birds will sing me into sleep,
You will grow flowers on my grave,
My fatherland!



Upon its publication, the journalist Carl Robert Jakobson praised Koidula's verse stating that the poem "will ring and live in the ears of Estonians as long as the Estonian language exists."¹³

The song setting by Ernesaks was originally written as a Soviet anthem and viewed as an "official expression of Soviet loyalty."¹⁴ However, shortly thereafter, it was pulled from the Soviet repertoire and was not included in the official program at the 1950, 1955 or 1960 festivals. By prohibiting the performance of this song, the Soviet authorities strengthened its importance to the Estonian people. At the conclusion of the program in 1960, the chorus, which was comprised of thousands of singers, spontaneously began singing the song and was immediately joined by the audience. Ernesaks was called to the podium to conduct, despite the censorship of the song. The episode was spun by Soviet propaganda to reflect Estonia's Soviet loyalty, and the song was allowed back on the program in 1965.

In the 1969 song festival, the centennial celebration, the song was placed second to last on the program. However, a similar situation to the previous song festival occurred when the chorus wanted to sing the song again after the concert ended. The chorus chanted the title until Ernesaks was allowed to return to the podium to conduct. Paul Vesilind recounts the scene:

The directors ordered the orchestra to strike up and drown out the chant, but no one left the stage, and few left the audience, even though the rain was falling once again. And then, through some mysterious synergy, the entire stadium began to sing in one voice, with no director, "Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love." Then they sang it again, and again. The Soviet authorities, to save face, eventually asked composer Gustav Ernesaks to take the stage and conduct.¹⁵

It is believed that had the Soviets not forbidden the inclusion of that song, the people may not have had the spark that they needed to unite in this one act of defiance. Heinz Valk, who was in attendance at these festivals writes this, "It turned out that we prepared five years for this festival, the main purpose of which really was to come

¹³Guntis Šmidchens. *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution*, 81.

¹⁴Ibid, 164.

¹⁵Vesilind, 104.



together as a nation, and sing this one forbidden song. Each person could go to work the next day knowing that the Estonian spirit survives.”¹⁶

The poem itself is laden with non-Soviet references, thereby identifying itself as uniquely Estonian. The song contains textual references to religion, used in Soviet rhetoric only when combined with governmental doctrine. The singer is always referring to himself with “I” or “my”, never the collective “we”, thereby elevating the individual. Šmidchens points out that the poetic lines which express lamentation are set in a minor key. The first line “Your sorrow boils within my heart” and the second, “When foreign envy slanders you” express extreme negative emotion, amidst more joyous textual references to “blooming Estonia” as the singer’s “greatest joy.”¹⁷ It is also worthy of note that the same minor musical passage occurs in the third stanza to the text, “Your birds will sing me into sleep.” This indicates that even the bird’s song is laden with sorrow, a reflection of the years of repression of its people.

The use of this text, and its importance in the Estonian repertoire has become a symbol of the Estonian revolution and has long been held in the hearts of Estonians as uniquely representing their national spirit. This was never more apparent than at the 1990 song festival. At the time when Estonia was on the brink of independence, as they began to be free of the Soviet strictures and were allowed to plan their own festival repertoire, this song was introduced through a dialogue between an Estonian man named Mikk Mikiver, and a girl of Estonian heritage from Toronto, named Leiki. The dialogue is as follows:

Leiki, we love this land,
We are finally moving to change it,
And if all goes well
Some of us may become its song.
Perhaps a song like the song that is now coming.

Take this song with you, Leiki.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Šmidchens, 166.



This is the song of our heart.

It has helped us endure very dark times.

Today we still sing this song on the borders between shadow and light,

But the light is growing.¹⁸

This setting of a traditional poem evokes feelings of community, nostalgia and patriotism amongst Estonians and served as a call to unite the nation against tyranny and oppression. It is a perfect representation of how the folk tradition of singing in Estonia served as the catalyst for a non-violent revolution after centuries of servitude and oppression.

Here in the United States, the tradition of spirituals united the African-American population in much the same way. Not only were certain songs used as a cry for freedom during the Civil War, but, again, such songs were used during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's. Protests, marches, sit-ins and prayer vigils often included songs as a way to communicate with one another and the opposition in a non-aggressive manner.

Although sit-ins were the main form of nonviolent action, singing became an influential mode of protest as the campaign continued. Freedom singers began creating songs based on traditional black spirituals, changing the words as necessary to “reflect the daily confrontations and ideological principles of the movement.” Young protesters used these songs to form a positive new cultural identity for blacks. Singing was also one of the main ways in which SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) fostered grass-roots leadership.¹⁹

The use of the Spiritual created a sense of community and united African Americans by referencing the folk tradition as a shared experience, and re-assigning it as a source of strength and might, a force that they were able to overcome against all odds, rather than an experience of pain and sorrow, a sentiment mirrored in the use of the folk tradition in Estonia's Singing Revolution. One such song is entitled “Oh Freedom.”

¹⁸ Šmidchens, 164.

¹⁹ Global Nonviolent Action Database. <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/nashville-students-sit-us-civil-rights-1960>.



The song has its roots in the spiritual, using the typical call and response format, one single line of text, answered by a repetition of the chorus in each verse. The text is as follows:

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
No more moaning, no more moaning, no more moaning over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
No more weeping, no more weeping, no more weeping over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
There'll be singin', there'll be singin', there'll be singin' over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
There'll be glory, there'll be glory, there'll glory over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free

The origin of “Oh Freedom!” is unknown, although it’s musical and textual elements are clearly tied to the spiritual. It was thought to be used in the post-Civil War era, and recorded in in 1956 by Odetta. It then made its re-emergence, with some altered lyrics to reflect the struggles of the African American community during the Civil Rights movement.



The song was specifically referenced several times at marches and sit-ins across the country. As early as 1941, civil rights groups were planning demonstrations on the US Capital, Washington, D.C., which served as a pre-cursor to the famous march on Washington in 1963. A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), “suggested that the participants should march down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation’s capital singing “John Brown’s Body Lies a ‘Mouldering in the Grave” and “Before I’ll be a Slave, I’ll Be Buried in My Grave”. Randolph permanently tried to ensure the legitimacy of the campaign by advocating against violence and anarchy.”²⁰

The song was referenced many times in the 1960’s in America, famously recorded by Joan Baez, and sung at the opening of the famous March on Washington in 1963, which concluded with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Much like the Estonian people who used the folk tradition as the basis for their resistance songs, “Oh Freedom!” follows the same example. In addition to the traditional call and response format, the relationship to the religious aspects of the text, and the call for deliverance to heaven all tie it intrinsically to the folk tradition. The use of the slow tempo, minor melody and uniform rhythm belies not only a devout stoicism, but, strength in sorrow.

Through each of these examples, one can draw many similarities in the uses of these songs, and while each of the traditions have been used, and re-used, as a powerful form of resistance, the thematic material varies greatly. African-American Spirituals fall into several different categories, however, the focus is very often on heavenly deliverance, in such spirituals as “Were You There?” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain”, individual strength, as in “Oh, Freedom,” and mournful songs, such as “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See,” or “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

Estonian songs tend to take on more of a devoted nature. Estonians sang songs about their devotion to family, to love, and to their land and country. In essence, the

²⁰ Aden Tedla. "Estonians Campaign for Independence (The Singing Revolution), 1987-1991." Global Nonviolent Action Database. Swarthmore College, 14 July 2011. Web. 12 May 2014.



Estonian folk songs focus on this life, and African-American Spirituals tend to focus on the next.

In each of these cultures, a people were united in nonviolent action by the use of their folk singing tradition, clearly a tradition that was intrinsically tied to their heritage, both as a means of maintaining their emotional spirit throughout their enslavement, and then brought forth as a tool to instill a sense of pride in their heritage and a source of strength to embolden them to incite change.



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