

Estonian Song Celebrations during the Soviet Era: Two Ways of Constructing Nationalism

The First Estonian-Finnish Music Library Seminar
Helsinki

26/05/2016

Anu Kõlar, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre

The First Song Celebration
was held in 1869 in Tartu

The festival is held once every
five years in July on the Tallinn
Song Festival Grounds

In 2003, the tradition of
Estonian song and dance
festivals was added to
UNESCO's *List of Intangible
Cultural Heritage*



Estonians – the singing nation?

Song Celebration - this is almost a sacred notion. It stands for the true birthday of Song, a great spiritual feast, a tradition not to be missed. Estonia and Song Celebration – these two belong together like Norway and skiing or England and the Oxford-Cambridge boat race.

(The Management Committee for the Song Festivals; <http://2014.laulupidu.ee/en/story/>)



Some issues:

- how was it possible that the Soviet totalitarian regime allowed the celebration of the song festivals?
- were there any specific features that the Soviet era introduced to the organization, and the political significance of the song celebration?
- what were the most important differences between the oppressive power and oppressed towards the song festival?



The Song Celebration procession in 1950

... and in 2014



The Song Celebrations in the history of Estonia

Estonia: political history

- 1721-1918: Estonia was a province of the Russian Empire. Cultural practices and ideology were led by the Baltic Germans.
- 1918-1940: Republic of Estonia, the first independence period.
- 1940: Estonian Republic was occupied by the Soviet Union. 1941-1944: nazi German occupation. **1945-1990 : Soviet era.** Cultural life was controlled by the Communist Party; attempts to russify the education and culture
- 1988: „Singing Revolution” started
- 1991: The restoration of the independence of the Republic of Estonia

Song Celebrations

- 1869: The First Song Celebration in Tartu. In the first three festivals, only men's choirs and brass bands participated. Since 1896: song festivals in Tallinn.
- 1918-1940: choir movement flourished; 7 song festivals took place
1923: almost 500 Finns visited Estonian Song Festival;
1928: Suomen kuoroliitto (with 650 members) took part
- **1940-1990: 10 festivals were held** (in 1947, 1950, 1955...1969,...1990). The authorities forced Soviet songs into the repertoire. Estonians: „We had to sing propagandist songs in order to preserve the chance to sing Estonian songs”
- 1988: In September, the re-establishment of Estonia's independence was demanded for the first time at the Song Festival Grounds

First Song Celebration in Soviet Estonia (1947)

The period of „cautious sovietization” (Elena Zubkova):

- The repertoire consisted of mainly Estonian songs
- 12 000 female and child singers were transported to Tallinn
- The choirs were given fabric for festivals costumes; free music scores and free food



Ambivalent relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed

Female choirs in 1947

Soviet policy on nationalities

„The development of cultures national in form and socialist in content ...

... is necessary for the purpose of their **ultimate fusion into one General Culture, socialist as to form and content, and expressed in one general language**”

Iosif Stalin 1934

„**Socialist realism** was to be the method of cultural production, the code through which the regimented unity of artistic labour was to translate into an **ideal unity** of the aesthetic realm”

Encyclopedia of Contemporary Russian Culture 2007: 575



The guests from Uzbek and Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republics at the Song Festival in 1955

Soviet Estonian Song Festival in 1950

1949: mass deportation: about 22,000 Estonians were sent to Siberia

1950: accusations of bourgeois nationalism and formalism

The festivals held in 1950 and 1955 were the most politicised:

- Many songs were performed in Russian; special place was given to the songs about „wise Stalin and the dearest Party”
- Choirs and orchestra of the Soviet Army and the miner ´s choir took part
- Slogans, criticising capitalist „war mongers” were carried



The choir and orchestra of the Soviet Army at the Soviet Estonian Song Festival in 1950

1969: jubilee Song Festival, celebrating the centennial of the First Song Celebration. The song festival flame was lit in Tartu, the site of the first festival. From there it was carried through all the districts of Estonia to Tallinn



1969 Song Celebration

- The structure of the jubilee Celebration was to a large extent copied from the first Song Celebration
- The majority of the 68 songs in the festival program were pieces that had been included in earlier festivals
- The special monument and the wall of honour were opened
- One hundred oak trees were planted etc



Song celebration's meaning for the Estonian community

On the bases of different articles, overviews and memories of the singers and listeners:

- song festivals are described as the most important bearers of national identity and unity
- at the collective level, the song festivals as ritualistic, regularly repeated events have served as means for maintaining Estonian cultural values

Cultural memory studies as an appropriate method for exploring cultural event's and tradition's significance to the particular community

Jan Assmann, German Egyptologist and cultural historian on cultural memory:

- „Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)“
- „Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity
- „Cultural memory is based on texts, images, and rituals specific to each society [...], whose “cultivation” serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image“

(Assmann 1995)

Pierre Nora, French historian and publisher on *sites of memory* (*a lieu de mémoire*):

- „*A lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which [...] has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community”.
- Sites of memory are “where cultural memory crystallizes and secretes itself”
- Sites of memories include venues (palaces, cemeteries, archives), concepts and practices (rituals, symbols, emblems, basic texts), etc.
- The purpose of sites of memory is “to stop time, to **block the work of forgetting**”

(Nora 1989)

The ideas about song festival

The Soviet regime:

- being a mass event, the song festival was in some ways familiar and attractive to Soviet authorities, and thus the tradition of song festivals was permitted to continue
- applied the same model to Estonian Song Celebrations as it did to all Soviet nations' cultures: national in form and socialist in content, with the ultimate goal of achieving a unified socialist monolingual culture
- eventually, the project of making the festival socialist in content, had failed

„Singing Estonians“ as the cultural memory community:

- the Estonian nation has remembered itself often as a product of musical imagination
- the song festivals are for Estonians a kind of ritual, which task is to fix certain behavioural patterns in people's memories, and to tie past, present and future into a whole
- the song festival is one the most important sites of memory in Estonia
- a national cultural community accentuates its specific and unique features, preserves them and passes them on to the future generations



Songs have been our weapons, song festivals
our victories

Estonian President Lennart Meri,
July 1999

Thank you for your attention!

Gustav Ernesaks in 1969, after the jubilee Song Celebration: "Everybody was speechless due to the enormous success of this festival. It is unlikely that we will ever forget it"

Gustav Ernesaks (1908–1993), an Estonian composer and a choir conductor. He was one of the *father figures* of the Estonian Song Festival tradition. One of his songs *Land of my Fathers, Land That I Love* became an unofficial national anthem during the years of Soviet occupation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9EhUDkY8Sc>

