

# The Singing Revolution

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 [singingrevolution.com/about-the-history](https://singingrevolution.com/about-the-history)

On August 23, 1939, Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin signed a treaty called the “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact” (MRP). The MRP made Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union allies, and divided Europe between the two empires. One week later, on September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland from the west; shortly thereafter, Stalin invaded Poland from the east. These invasions marked the start of World War II.

On September 24, 1939, Stalin issued an ultimatum, threatening to invade and occupy Estonia if it did not permit him to maintain military bases there. The carrot he offered was a promise to honor Estonia’s sovereignty. He issued similar ultimatums to Latvia and Lithuania. Having seen the fate of Poland, the three Baltic countries saw no alternative but to yield. In June of 1940, the Soviets broke their promises, took over the Estonian government, and killed or deported virtually all the country’s political and business leaders. The same thing happened in Latvia and Lithuania. Stalin subsequently declared that the Baltic countries had “volunteered” to become part of the Soviet Union.

With other nations distracted by the war with Nazi Germany, no one came to the Baltics’ assistance. Diplomatically, the United States condemned the attack and refused to recognize the legality of the Soviet Union’s occupation and annexation of these countries. For fifty years, the U.S. did not recognize the legality of the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

The Soviet policy of “Russification,” implemented soon after the occupation, amounted to cultural genocide. It forbade the Estonian flag, imprisoned resisters, and made Russian the official language of the country. Tens of thousands of Russian workers were brought in to dilute the ethnic Estonian population.

Estonians became serfs to their masters in Moscow. Within six years of the first Soviet troops arriving in Estonia, the country lost about 25% of its population to execution, imprisonment, deportation, and escape. The occupation lasted fifty long years. Estonians became second-class citizens in their own country. Farms were collectivized and ruined, and the prosperity built up during independence was destroyed. Arrest and deportation remained a constant threat.

Most people don’t think about singing when thinking about revolutions. But in Estonia song was the weapon of choice when, between 1987 and 1991, Estonians wanted to end decades of Soviet occupation.

The Singing Revolution is the name given to the step-by-step process that led to the reestablishment of Estonian independence in 1991. This was a non-violent revolution that overthrew a very violent occupation. It was called the Singing Revolution because of the role singing played in the protests of the mid-1980s. But singing had always been a major unifying force for Estonians while they endured fifty years of Soviet rule.

In 1947, during the first song festival (Laulupidu) held after the Soviet occupation, Gustav Ernesaks wrote a tune set to the lyrics of a century-old national poem written by Lydia Koidula, “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (“Land of My Fathers, Land That I Love”). This song miraculously slipped by the Soviet censors, and for fifty years it was a musical statement of every Estonian’s desire for freedom.

The song was not allowed on the song festival program in the 1950s. But then, in the early 1960s, Estonians started defiantly singing the song against Soviet wishes, and by 1965 it was included in the program. At the hundredth anniversary of the song festival in 1969, the choirs on stage and the audience as well started singing "Mu isamaa on minu arm" a second time in the face of stern Soviet orders to leave the stage. No one did. The Soviets ordered a military band to play and drown out the singers.

But a hundred instruments is no match for over a hundred thousand singers. The song was sung repeatedly in the face of authorities. There was nothing the Soviets could do but invite the composer on stage to conduct the choir for yet another encore and pretend they intended to allow this all along. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Estonians began testing his policies of perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (free speech) to see how far they could go. The first test was in 1986, when Estonians protested a plan to build phosphorite mines throughout the country.

The environmental issue provided a relatively safe means of seeing whether people could truly speak openly without Soviet permission. Protestors did not suffer significant repercussions, and the mining project was eventually stopped. The first test was a success. A short while later, a more radical demonstration in Tallinn's Hirve Park openly spoke of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (the secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin that led to the Soviet invasion of Estonia in 1939–40). The KGB observed this event, names were taken, leaders were harassed, but, much to the demonstrators' surprise, no one was arrested.

It was illegal to own an Estonian flag during these years. Estonians tested this law by flying three separate blue, black, and white banners that effectively became the flag when flown side by side.

In the mid-1980s, six new rock songs became rallying cries for independence. These songs were repeatedly sung in large public gatherings. Soviet authorities wanted to ban them, but weren't sure what to do in light of glasnost.

Momentum and courage grew. The Estonians calculated that as long as they shed no blood, Gorbachev wouldn't be able to send in tanks to quash demonstrations. Such blatant censorship would be an international embarrassment to his carefully cultivated image. So people pushed Moscow as far as they could, taking great care to stay non-violent.

In this sense, the Singing Revolution was a strategically non-violent movement.

But there were several different political approaches to gaining independence. These largely fell into three organized groups: The Popular Front, The Estonian National Independence Party, and The Heritage Society. Each group had a different philosophy about how to gain freedom...even how to define freedom.

Many Estonians supported more than one of these organizations; some supported all three. Others felt more loyal to one or the other. There was significant tension among some of the leaders. Those who moved more cautiously felt that the "radicals" would bring Soviet retribution on Estonia, as had happened in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968; the "radicals" felt that working within the Communist system betrayed their country and dishonored those who had died and suffered under Soviet rule.

Matters came to a head in 1991 when Moscow hard-liners staged a coup d'état and placed Gorbachev under house arrest. As troops rolled into Estonia to quell any independence-minded thinking, Estonians decided to escalate their bid for freedom. Unarmed people faced down soldiers and tanks, while political leaders assembled to declare Estonia's independence.



(Acknowledgment: The history presented here draws from Ago Koerv's "An Introduction to Estonia".)

# The sound of freedom...

➤ [local-life.com/tallinn/articles/estonian-singing-revolution](http://local-life.com/tallinn/articles/estonian-singing-revolution)

Looking back over the last thousand years or so Estonia hasn't had the best of luck. A relatively small country with a similarly small population, it could have chosen better neighbours than the Scandinavians, Germans and Russians, all of whom have claimed Estonia as their own through the ages.

A tantalizing taste of freedom in the period between WWI and WWII, proved to be short-lived as in 1945 the plucky nation found itself under foreign rule once more, this time as part of the USSR. Despite resistance, some of it armed, Soviet rule continued for nearly half a century, before a unique movement helped throw off the Socialist yoke. That movement was the Estonian Singing Revolution.

*"We sang all night and everybody went home early in the morning. It was emotionally so strong that the next day there were even more people. The day after, there were even more people. People took out their hidden flags. They had these flags hidden for 50 years and now they took these out and started to wave them."*

Artur Talvik, participant.



The Revolution started in the summer of 1987, when mass protests by the Estonian people began against Russian occupation of their country. In the June evenings of that year over 10,000 people a night packed the Lauluvaljak (The Tallinn Song Festival Grounds), where they sang patriotic and national songs forbidden by the Soviet regime. These gatherings helped unite the Estonian people and ignited a renewed wave of passion for their national identity (which was being marginalised by aggressive Russification of the country), furthering the country's desire for freedom. In September of 1988, 300,000 Estonians gathered at the Lauluvaljak to continue their protest and to hear Trivimi Velliste make the

first public demand for independence.

Meanwhile, similar calls for freedom were being made by Estonia's Baltic neighbours, Lithuania and Latvia (see Latvian Song Festival for more info), whilst in Berlin students were calling for the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in Poland, the Solidarity movement was re-emerging from the underground.

Back in the Baltics, on 23rd August 1989, a vast and impressive demonstration was staged. Two million people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined hands along a 600km stretch of road between Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius. This powerful and public statement against Russian rule was deliberately timed to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, in which Hitler and Stalin had seen fit to divide up Europe between them.

The years from 1987 to 1991 were filled with numerous such public demonstrations, as well as a great deal of political manoeuvrings, the sum of which is known as the Singing Revolution. On 20th August 1991 Estonian politicians declared the nation's independence even as Soviet tanks were rolling through the countryside to quell the movement. However, the bid was successful, and several key events mark the following days:

**August 21** - Latvia declares independence.

**August 22** - Iceland is the first country to recognize the independent Baltic states.

**August 23** - Lenin's statue comes down in Tallinn.

**August 24** - The USSR recognizes Estonian independence.

By December of 1991 the USSR had dissolved.