

A Song of Survival

The Baltic nations emerged on the world news scene in 1988 and 1989 as if from nowhere. For 50 years they had literally disappeared from the map, subsumed into the monochromatic zone of the USSR. Only occasionally would Americans hear that the United States did not recognize the illegal incorporation of the three nations into the Soviet Union.

When Gorbachev invoked *glasnost* and *perestroika* to release the tight controls on economic, political, cultural, and social life, the people of the three Baltic

Demographics

Estonia:

Geographic size: 17,375 sq. miles; Population: 1.5 million; Language: Estonian (official); Religion: Lutheran, Russian Orthodox; Ethnic groups: 60% Estonian, 30% Russian, 10% Other

Latvia:

Geographic size: 24,950 sq. miles; Population: 2.7 million; Language: Latvian (official); Religion: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox; Ethnic groups: 57% Latvian, 30% Russian, 4% Belarussian, 9% Other

Lithuania:

Geographic size: 25,175 sq. miles; Population: 3.7 million; Language: Lithuanian (official); Religion: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Russian Orthodox; Ethnic groups: 85% Lithuanian, 8% Russian, 7% Other



countries organized

grassroots movements that pushed the experiments to new limits. The demand to discuss the past openly and to raise the issue of “divorce” from the USSR startled and irritated the Kremlin.

On August 23, 1989, people in the Baltics formed a human chain stretching 430 miles, connecting Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius. They remembered the day in 1939 when Hitler and Stalin had made a secret pact that sealed their fate. Their

massive demonstration told the world that they existed as nations and that they yearned to be masters of their own destiny. They sang their messages and called it the Singing Revolution.

The strength of their conviction came from centuries of consciousness of who they are as people, bound by language, customs, and belief. The fact that they settled this Baltic coast so very long ago and stayed there while other tribes and

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nations migrated around them gave them a strong territorial claim. That their languages were neither Slavic nor Germanic helped to insulate them through the many years of subjugation to those more powerful neighbors. The conservatism of the peasants who kept strong ties to land and customs enabled traditions to endure.

Already in the 18th century, when the Romantic Movement was sweeping through Europe, the “lore” of these small nations had been recognized, first by foreign and eventually by their own intellectuals. The first Estonian and Latvian national song festivals, held in 1869 and 1873 respectively, reawakened a sense of unity. This ethnic awareness built a national pride in all three countries that led to their proclaiming independence from Russia in 1918.

The period of independence was short lived, however, as World War II ushered in the Soviets, then the Germans, and then the Soviets again, unleashing a blood bath in all three Baltic lands and years of oppression. Closed borders, forced collectivization, and strict controls on all aspects of cultural and social life did much to break the natural continuity of customs and traditions.

However, language held its own in all three countries, despite dictums that everyone learn Russian. Privately, and

This program is made possible by and is produced in cooperation with the Estonian Government and Estonian Ministry of Culture, the Latvian Government and Latvian Ministry of Culture, and the Lithuanian Government and Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. Additional support comes from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, the American Latvian Association, and the Lithuanian Foundation.

The Baltic Nations

very carefully, people still held on to religious beliefs and some family traditions. In Estonia, television antennas faced Finland so that people could have a glimpse of life in the West. Writers, artists, and scholars devised clever ways to circumvent Soviet censorship. For example, folklorists would argue that, under Soviet ideology, the ordinary folk, like the proletariat, should be held in esteem. In this way one could defend the study of pre-Soviet songs, tales, and traditions, and interest in authentic folklore became a form of subtle resistance.

During the 1970s collecting and

recording traditional cultural expressions increased on the professional, academic, and grassroots levels. Local folk in various rural regions and young people studying in urban settings formed performing groups to perpetuate song, dance, and musical traditions. Everywhere there was an impetus to learn as much as possible about the past and to actively relate that knowledge to the present. These activities were in full swing in the late 1980s.

The numerous folk ensembles became an integral part of the mass rallies comprising the "Singing Revolutions" in all

three Baltic nations. Some say they could not imagine the national re-awakening having occurred without the ensembles and the entire folklore movement. These ensembles continue to play a vital role today, as the authors in this section describe in their essays.

In these newly

independent countries, society is undergoing many changes. The market economy is affecting daily life, not always beneficially. Western popular culture is exerting a homogenizing influence, especially on the younger generation. The desire to join the ranks of "modern nations" sometimes clashes with the urge to celebrate one's cultural uniqueness. Will the people of the Baltic countries continue to practice and cherish their traditions now that these no longer serve the function of political resistance to a foreign oppressor? Hopefully, they will, although inevitably some transformations will occur.

Our guests from the Baltic nations at the Festival have lived through many swift and significant changes. They have much to show and tell; we have much to learn.

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Suggested Reading

General Baltics

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Baltic-American Communities

America has been connected to the Baltic countries primarily through the Baltic-American communities. Earlier immigrants lobbied the U.S. government to recognize the fledgling countries at the end of World War I, and they continued to rally aid for them. After the countries were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, newly arrived refugees worked hard to ensure that the U.S. government would never recognize the legitimacy of that incorporation. Many families did their best to aid relatives left behind or exiled to Siberia. For themselves they created their own press, ethnic education programs for their youth, and a rich cultural and social network throughout the country. When the Iron Curtain finally came down, they rejoiced in near-disbelief. Since then, many have been making frequent trips to their homelands and also hosting visiting guests and relatives here. Some Baltic Americans have returned from abroad to work in their professional capacities or even in politics. The most recent example is the current president of Lithuania, who is from Chicago. The Smithsonian Festival provides a forum for Baltic Americans to join in the presentation and celebration of their cultural roots.