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“A NATION IN CONCERT:
THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL SONG FESTIVALS IN THE ESTONIAN
INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT, 1987-1991”

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A Nation in Concert: The Role of the National Song Festivals in the Estonian Independence Movement, 1987-1991

Estonians [...] are not the kind of people to protest if they feel injustice. They will get together, say, I've got to go home, do some work [laughs]. They are not the kind of people – or not everyone, to take posters and go out and chant. But they are certainly people who can go out and sing. So that was maybe a very, a way to express yourself, a traditional way to express yourself. Otherwise what do you do? You sing, that's what you do. (Riin, personal interview with the author, March 2017)

This paper examines the role of the national song festivals in the Estonian independence movement during the years 1987-1991. Drawing from theory on social movements, collective action, nationalism, identity formation, collective memory, musicology, and festival studies, I argue that the song festivals created the atmosphere of mass confidence, euphoria, safety, and solidarity that propelled the Estonian people to demand independence from the Soviet Union. I take a cognitive, individual-based perspective of the political events to emphasize the significance of micro-level explanation of political protest and participation. This research was informed by qualitative interviews with native Estonians and contemporary publications of *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*. Analysis of the song festivals in the context of theory on nation-building and collective action, supplemented by qualitative materials, suggests that the festivals played a much larger role in the movement than most of the literature acknowledges. My findings reinforce the need for cognitive, individual-level research to explain processes of political mobilization.

Introduction

To analyze the role of the song festivals in the Estonian national independence movement, I combine criticism of the existing literature with supplemental qualitative research to argue that the festivals contributed to processes of nation-building and collective resistance. Following in Karl-Dieter Opp's (2009) tradition of injecting psychological, cognitive theory into the individual-level of political participation, I stress the importance of considering what factors and conditions urge individuals to protest repressive regimes and maintain their collective action in the face of political, legal, and violent repercussions.

I begin by outlining the literature on social movement and collective action theory, explanations of the Estonian revolution, and studies of the song festivals. While rich in detail of structural processes that precipitated Estonian independence, the literature largely dismisses the song festivals as minor events of political mobilization. I elaborate on my methodology for the Estonian case study and the advantages and weaknesses of the case study method, as well as

explain my procedure for and use of qualitative interviews. I then analyze the song festivals through three major fields: festival studies, the sociology of music, and nationalism. I ultimately argue that we cannot understand the structural processes of the Estonian revolution without first analyzing why individuals participated in the song festivals and how their participation contributed to the mass mobilization of the population for independence. I do not suggest the song festivals caused the revolution; instead, I aim to re-center their importance as a major contributing factor to the national independence movement. I conclude by summarizing my findings and relating possible areas of future research.

Literature Review

I construct my analysis through three major fields of study: social movement theory, the sociology of music, and nationalism studies. One important contribution I make to the study of the Estonian revolution lies in the intersection of these three fields, applying musicological theory about social behavior, psychology, and collective action to political theory that addresses the same concerns in a state-building context. Before I can situate the song festivals in Estonian nationhood and the late 80s' independence movement, I must first establish the theoretical frameworks that underpin my study of the Estonian song festivals. I will refer to the literature here in three ways: broader theory on social movements' and collective action dynamics, the specific work applying theory to the Estonian case, and the few theoretical analyses of the song festivals that do exist.

Before I do, however, a cursory overview of Estonia's modern political development is necessary. During the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire ruled over Estonia (and the other Baltic states), where Russians and Baltic Germans were afforded social, political, and economic

preference over ethnic Estonians. The middle of the nineteenth century made way for the first Estonian “national awakening,” as land reforms revolutionized social mobility for Estonian serfs, a period marked by increasing rates of higher literacy among peasants and the rapid development of communications technology. Various native-language publications opened, circulated, and closed, as regulated by the Tsarist officials, and several Estonian associations and societies cropped up, such as the Estonian Learned Society (formed in 1838) and the Vanemuise Society (formed in 1865), which contributed to the construction of an Estonian historical epic detailing folk culture and a national struggle (Kasekamp 2000). Modernization – in Gellner’s sense of a standardized language, universal high culture, and education system – generated two movements, the associational (modernizing) movement and the national movement, which would converge in the early twentieth century when Estonians battled for freedom on the eve of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Kasekamp (2000: 79) himself notes, “[t]he best-known symbol of the convergence of the associational and the national movements were the song festivals,” as the late-nineteenth century festivals proclaimed a shared Estonian national identity and revealed the establishment of a national network of fundraising committees (connected through Estonian-language schools and modern communications technology). With a national connectivity empowered by a liberalizing state and nation-wide technology, Estonians began to reckon with their ethnocide via Russification and Germanization. The Estonian nation “awoke.”

The Estonian case retains two important historical notes: for most of their history, Estonians have been occupied by one neighboring empire or another (German, Swedish, Russian, Nazi, Soviet); but by the time of their Soviet annexation, they, like the other two Baltic states (Lithuania and Latvia), also had a history of democratic independence. When the Bolsheviks overthrew the tsarist regime, Lenin ceded the Baltic territories to the Germans to

further resolve Russian-German tensions at the end of World War I. Estonians launched a military campaign against the presiding German officials, who soon after succumbed to the Entente Powers, and the Soviets re-invaded to take back control over the Baltics. The Estonians pushed back against the Soviet forces with a counter-military offensive, and on February 2, 1920, Estonians brokered a peace deal with the Soviet Union that recognized each state's sovereignty and legitimacy. From 1920 until 1939, Estonians enjoyed an independent democratic republic, a unique feature of Baltic society when compared to other territories that would fall to Soviet rule as Union Republics.¹ The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939 between the Nazis and the Soviets made way for Hitler's illegal invasion of Estonia in 1941, exploiting the resources of the Baltic states to maximize the "profitability" of the annexation for the war effort. The Soviet Army reestablished Soviet control in Estonia in 1944, by which time, almost one-third of the native population had been murdered, while historic ethnic minorities like the Estonian Swedes had been completely wiped out.

Stalin's rule inaugurated resistance, repression, and collectivization. Soviet nationalization of Estonia – rewriting history books, installing Russian Communist Party officials, propagating Soviet and socialist ideology – “had a devastating impact on Estonian culture life since approximately one-third of all Estonian artists, writers, actors, musicians and university faculty were banned from employment in their profession” (Kasekamp, 2000: 144), while during the 1944-1949 period, in Operation *Priboi* (Surf), Stalin deported over 21,000 Estonians east to Russia, an event that would haunt the Estonian collective memory for the next century. Estonia shared the oppressed fate of many Soviet republics – collectivization, economic

¹ The later years of the interwar independence period were marked by increasing authoritarianism. The state never became a full authoritarian state, since the Nazis invaded before the full trajectory of the Estonian regime could self-realize, but it is worth noting.

decline, cultural suppression, Russification, rule through terror – though it did have a comparably higher standard of living than the economic black holes of Central Asia. Despite Khrushchev’s thaw and his de-Stalinization campaign, the Estonians never forgot the history of their deportations, and they preserved their ethno-national culture through quiet, hidden, and subversive methods. The song festivals, which recurred every five years throughout the Soviet era, exhibited “[an] example of the balancing act between the official ideology and one’s conscience (or reading between the lines) [such as] Veljo Tormis’s ‘Lenin’s words’ which featured at the 1975 Estonian song festival and whose lyrics were about the rights of peoples to self-determination” (Kasekamp, 2000: 159). To understand Estonian reaction to Soviet rule (and the history of former occupations), we can look to the tradition of the song festivals and their reclamation in the 1980s’ as part of the Estonian national independence movement.

Social Movement and Collective Action Theory

My work primarily concerns the approaches of Sidney Tarrow (1994) and Karl-Dieter Opp (2009). Tarrow, widely considered a grandfather of the social movement field, develops three key theories that define collective action (and later inquiry into contentious politics): the political opportunity structure model, mobilizing structures, and cultural frames. He argues that a society’s political environment determines the genesis of social movements, and his political opportunity structure model emphasizes the individual’s perception of their political environment as a triggering factor for collective action.

Tarrow identifies four significant changes in opportunity structure that increase the likelihood of collective political resistance: the opening of access to participation, shifts in ruling alignments, the availability of influential allies, and cleavages within and among elites. Tarrow

himself cites the late 80s movements for liberation and democratization in the former Soviet Union as an example of access to participation. He argues that *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Mikhail Gorbachev's democratic and economic reforms, created opportunities for protest movements to take advantage of new access to public spaces, civil liberties, media, and historical narratives of Soviet oppression that groups later developed into appeals for political autonomy. The instability of governing alignments, meanwhile, introduces ambiguity into the political sphere that new actors can manipulate to redraw the contours of power within that society. Influential allies operate as important resources to movements who otherwise are resource-deficient (e.g. Boris Yeltsin, then President of the Russian Federation, credited as once saying to the union republics on the eve of Soviet collapse, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow,"² here qualifies as a republican independence ally), as political support from powerful actors signals momentum for the cause, genuine possibility for change, and reduction of personal costs for individuals considering activism. Tarrow again cites Soviet dissolution as evidence that division among elites can catalyze political change: "Splits within the elite played a key role [...] in Eastern Europe, especially after Gorbachev warned his Communist allies in the region that the Red Army would no longer intervene to defend them. This was understood by both citizens and insurgent groups in Eastern Europe as a serious division in the elite and as a signal to mobilize" (Tarrow, 1994: 89). The political environment thus prescribes the opportunities for mobilizing structures.

Mobilizing structures, for Tarrow, induce the sustainability of collective action. He contends three elements of movement organization determine the continuity of movements, which in turn decide their propensity for change: formal organization, organization of collective

² Steven Erlanger, "Tartar Area in Russia Votes on Sovereignty Today," *The New York Times*, 21 March 1992.

action, and connective mobilizing structures that link leaders to the collective (center to periphery). Tarrow considers the “formal organization” theme the reigning framework to make sense of movement organization, though an incomplete one. Not all movements contain an identifiable, hierarchical network of actors; instead, a movement can arise through its decentralized organizations of collective action, that is, “the form by which confrontations with antagonists are carried out” (Tarrow, 1994: 135). Mobilizing structures connect the centralized and decentralized approaches to movement anatomy as the communicative design that permits movement coordination and temporal sustainability, further strengthening a movement otherwise lost to dissolution and repression. To be durable, mobilizing structures must be flexible – able to withstand change in circumstance – and substantive enough to demonstrate resistance to opponents, and they can be events, organizations, or institutions. Tarrow also relates Tilly’s (1986) “repertoires of contention,” established structural and cultural actions prescribing what individuals already know how to do and what others expect of them, to suggest that modular collective action often results from innovation on socially familiar symbols or tactics. These “repertoires of contention” often underlay the chosen method of mobilizing structures within a movement that precipitate social organization. Mobilizing structures therefore arbitrate the strength of movements.

Tarrow’s final theme iterates the importance of symbolic and strategic framing for collective action. He contends, “[m]ovements frame their collective action around cultural symbols that are selectively chosen from a cultural toolchest and creatively converted into collective action frames by political entrepreneurs (Swidler 1986; Laitin 1988)” (Tarrow, 1994: 119),” highlighting how inherited symbolic discourse can construct a movement’s group identity and mobilize individuals into collective action. Tarrow draws from Snow et al.’s (1986) theory

about frame alignment processes, which argues that social psychological factors, in addition to structural and organizational factors, articulates the “interpretative orientations [...] [as] some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and [social movement organization] activities, goals, and ideology” (Snow et. al, 1986: 464) that encourage individuals to join a social movement.

Snow et. al. (1986: 464) define “frame” as such:

The term "*frame*" (and framework) is borrowed from Goffman (1974: 21) to denote "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.

As mobilizing structures link a movement’s center to its periphery, frames link individuals to the movement. Frames construct the symbolic communication that converts collective meaning into collective action. Tarrow’s assessments of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural frames will be fundamental elements to my positioning the Estonian song festivals within their revolutionary character and composition.

Like Snow et. al., Opp (2009) emphasizes the social psychological interests and incentives that impel individuals into collective action. He argues that social movement theories approach causal theoretical paradigms from two perspectives: the macro level, which includes political opportunity and resource mobilization theories; and the micro level, which includes identity and framing theory as conditions for change in individual behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Opp (2009: 330-1) offers the “structural-cognitive model (SCM)” to further analyze why individuals opt into collective action, as agents within structural constraints:

This approach is called the *structural-cognitive model* (SCM). This expression should emphasize the basic feature of the synthesis: it connects the macro level with the micro level. The term ‘cognitive’ suggests that one major variable on the micro level is that individuals perceive (or recognize) the macro changes. In other words, the ‘definition’ of the situation is important for individual action. Thus, structures (in a wide sense) *and* their perception are relevant. But ‘cognitions’ also refer to other beliefs and, in general, to all kinds of elements in the minds of individuals, i.e. in the individual’s cognitive system, that are relevant for protest behavior. In order to avoid the misunderstanding that a micro theory is limited to isolated individuals we repeat that beliefs also refer to the perception of social relationships. To be more specific, if we apply a theory such as value expectancy theory, the independent variables of this theory are the

‘cognitive’ side of the SCM. All macro or social variables that have an impact on these variables are the ‘structural’ side of the SCM. In a nutshell, the SCM is a micro-macro model.

Opp’s structural-cognitive model underscores the salience of individuals’ perception regarding political opportunities and mobilizing structures.

The SCM describes four central components of individual decision-making in political protest: identity, value expectancy theory, frame alignment, and cognitive processes and their outcomes. Identity concerns incentives and impact of identity as conditions for protest, whereas value expectancy theory refers to the perceived behavioral consequences, their valuation and subjective probabilities, as major determinants of protest behavior. Frame alignments are “mental models” of cognitive elements – e.g., discontent, grievances, perceived personal influence, group membership, membership in protest encouraging networks – and for Opp, while elements of frames *are* incentives, they do not “affect” incentives. Cognitive processes and their outcomes denote the changing of an attitude or the development of a new belief that now allow an individual to opt into protest. These four elements compose what Opp considers the missing “bridge assumption” implicit in previous theoretical paradigms: how to explain macro relationships by invoking process on the micro-level. Opp believes that, when applied to these elements, social psychological theories explaining individual behavior best prescribe sense to individual decision-making. I will follow in Opp’s tradition when I discuss the Estonian case of cultural memory, musicology, identity construction, and nation-building.

Estonian Revolutionary Theory

Here I transition into more specific social movement literature studying the Estonian revolution. I separate prominent causative theories into two sections: political and economic

events, and what little has been done on the historical analysis of music in the Estonian independence movement.

Most scholars attribute mass mobilization for the Estonian independence movement to an opening of political opportunities (R. Taagepera 1989; Miljan 1991; Sakwa 1991; Johnston & Snow 1998; Johnston & Aarelaid-Tart 2000; Kasekamp 2010). The common sequence argues that after Gorbachev introduced his *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms, Estonians, propelled by the chance to criticize the Soviet regime without serious repression and by the hurt of *perestroika*'s economic fallout, organized to demand autonomy, first still as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), then later as restoration of the independent republic of Estonia (1917-1939), which had formed after the Russian Revolution. Several political events happened along the way, encouraging mass mobilization, culminating in a declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on August 20, 1991. Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms, democratizing and market-liberalizing reforms, were meant to revitalize the Soviet Union after the long "Era of Stagnation" under Brezhnev. Gorbachev initiated political liberalization to spur his economic reform, alienating hard-liners but supporting the emergence of new political actors within Moscow, which contributed to an ambiguous balance of power at the top of Soviet central authority (McFaul 2001). Gorbachev notoriously did not concern himself with the "nationalities question" when undertaking these policies (Lapidus 1989; Sakwa 1991); thus, Moscow was thoroughly underprepared for the ethno-national conflicts that broke out throughout the 80s and early 90s across the Soviet Union, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial dispute between Armenians and Azeris and the resurgent Georgian nationalism that called for political dominance of ethnic Georgians in Georgia and restriction of opportunities for ethnic minorities. With the political sphere now open to criticizing Soviet control – in Estonian-language media, no less –

and the privatizing of industries – affording more local control over regional economic affairs – the desire for national recognition, autonomy, and independence transitioned from the private sphere, where it had been hiding for over fifty years of Soviet occupation, into the public arena.

What follows is a chronological order of events commonly referenced as key political moments in the Estonian struggle for independence. Once *glasnost* allowed non-Russian populations to condemn Stalinist brutality and his deportation policies, Estonians immediately set out to commemorate the victims of Stalin’s deportations, petitioning for “calendar demonstrations” to formally acknowledge otherwise unrecognized historical events, and developed their own Estonian-language news media, radio, and television, which for many years had been stifled in favor of Russian-language broadcasting. Then, 1987 inaugurated a year of important public resistance. In early spring, mass demonstrations broke out to protest Soviet expansion of open-pit phosphate mining in northeastern Estonia. Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart (2000: 689) argue that while:

The ecological threat was immediate and severe because the planned mines threatened to pollute the underground water for much of Estonia, [the] ecology was also symbolic of national grievances in the sense that local pollution concerns had been dismissed by Moscow planners, and that expansion of mines meant the more Russian immigration of Estonia (M. Taagepera 1989).³

The absence of a violent Soviet response to the environmental demonstrations assuaged Estonians’ fears that public criticism would provoke repression. In September of that year, “four high-ranking [Communist Party] members offered a program of economic autonomy known as the IME plan (*Isemajandav Eesti*, or Self-Managing Estonia). Legitimated by its ECP [Estonian Communist Party] origins, the plan was to increase Estonia's autonomy from Moscow by claiming control over industry and agriculture (Miljan 1989)” (Johnston & Aarelaid-Tart, 2000:

³ For a similar anti-nuclear movement in Kazakhstan, see: Babak et al., "Nevada-Semipalatinsk International Nuclear Movement," in *Political Organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan: Sources and Documents*, ed. Vladimir Babak, Demian Vaisman and Aryeh Wasserman (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 137-138.

689). Meanwhile, various social assemblies organized to promote Estonian interests. The Estonian Heritage Society (*Eesti Muinsuskaitse Selts*), a group of historians pursuing the restoration of the people's historical memory and “desovietization” of society, formed at first to tidy cemeteries and restore memorials from the war of independence, then turned to more radical, political posturing. Estonian artists, following the historians’ lead, organized the Council of Creative Unions to celebrate Estonian literature, music, and art. Each of these groups participated in the formation of the Popular Front of Estonia (EPF),⁴ which “united tens of thousands of Estonians into the first truly mass organization of the Estonian national movement. It was the child of a few experienced Estonian-minded communists and a handful of former Komsomol⁵ activists who sided with growing popular sentiment against Moscow by elaborating the gradualist frame for increased autonomy” (Johnston & Aareleid-Tart, 2000: 690). These associations entered the public and political world to voice grievances, celebrate Estonian national culture, and demand political autonomy from the Soviet central authority – actions that, before *glasnost*, would have been met by certain legal or violent response.

The following year, 1988, inaugurated explicit political action. January saw the “demotion of Stalinist ECP Secretary Rein Ristlaan in January 1988 for ‘failing to control nationalism.’ He was replaced by Indrek Toome, a former vice-premier, who established a dialogue with the autonomists” (R. Taagepera, 1989: 180). On Estonia’s Independence Day (February 24), mass demonstrations took place in the capital city, Tallinn, with about 10,000

⁴ Gorbachev, caught between conservative leaders in Moscow and liberal powerholders like Yeltsin, originally approached the “nationalities question” *accidentally* by enabling political competition, hoping for liberalizing forces that would support his reformist agenda. He began by only allowing associations through his *glasnost* democratization reforms, but once pressure had built on the ground for more freedom and agency of local and regional actors, he eventually acquiesced to the demands for political parties (Lapidus 1989; McFaul 2001). The Baltic Popular Fronts were born amid this political excitement.

⁵ The Komsomol was the political youth feeder to the Communist Party during the Soviet Era. An arm of the Soviet propaganda machine, it aimed to socialize young Soviets into the communist social and economic system and functioned as a recruitment platform for the CPSU (Kenez 1985).

attendees, to advocate restoration of the republic, even after Soviet authorities attempted to prevent publication of the events (R. Taagepera 1989). In April, the Heritage Society brought out the long-forbidden national colors during a festival in Tartu, and in May, the ECP appointed delegates to an upcoming Communist Party conference in Moscow without democratic elections, inciting widespread disdain from moderate Estonian activists. Then, “a long-scheduled festival, the Old City Days (11-14 June 1988), marked the breakthrough for the blue-black-white national flag in Tallinn [...] [as an] estimated 60,000 people participated in what came to be known as the Night Song Festival (10 and 11 June), where masses of young people waved flags to the tune of rock music up to dawn but maintained remarkable discipline” (R. Taagepera, 1989: 181).

Curiously, the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* did report on the June song festival, but in a characteristically unrepresentative manner:

Tallinn, June 14 (Tass) – For many Estonian families, the date June 14, 1941, is colored in tragic tones. It was on that day that thousands of families were illegally deported from Soviet Estonia by the Stalinist administrative-bureaucratic system. The meetings and rallies held today in Tallinn and some other cities in the republic were an echo of these events, an echo heard in people’s hearts. **Musical collectives popular in Estonia, performing in the republic capital’s concert hall, dedicated their works to the memory of the innocent people who suffered during those years.** In Tartu and Parnu, representatives of the public laid flowers and lit candles on the graves of the dead. Lines from Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem” [Rekviyem], which actors from the Tartu Theater read in Estonian, were heard. A. Saunanen, Second Secretary of the Tartu City Party Committee, was among those who spoke at the meetings. He talked about the tragic fate of his father, who was a victim of the tyranny. (CDSP, 1988b: 10). (Emphasis added).

The Soviet authorities kept tight control over the press to ensure that their version of the protest accounts would be the only one.

Nevertheless, this June festival would be the first of several national song festivals throughout the late 80s and early 90s, where Estonians would demand “the replacement of the old-guard Estonian Communist Party leadership and [wave] the banned national colors⁶”

⁶ While no consensus exists on the meaning of the tricolor blue-black-white Estonian flag, as decided by students attending the University of Tartu during the first “national awakening” of the 19th century, Karl Aun identifies three commonly-attributed “motives” for signification of the national colors: Estonian nature (blue sky, black fertile soil, white snow), similarity to the national colors of Finland (blue and white) to emphasize kinship with the Finns, and the inspiration of the “long, black night of slavery,” e.g. Estonian serfdom under the Baltic German landowners

(Kasekamp, 2001: 162-3). R. Taagepera (1989: 183) describes another example of organization-led, mass public collective action in August:

On 11 and 12 August, the republic main daily *Rahva Hää*, up to June 1988 a last bastion of Stalinism, published the text of the secret addendum of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, by which Hitler assigned Estonia (among others) to the Soviet sphere of influence. The Estonian Group for the Publication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (MRP-AEG) had reached its explicit goal. The commemoration of the pact, on 23 August 1988, started with a demonstration involving MRP-AEG and ended with a mass discussion organized by the Popular Front.

Gorbachev, responding to Estonians' cry for political power, then appointed the first native-born Estonian, Vaino Väljas, to be head of the ECP, yet Estonians remained dissatisfied with Soviet authority. Shortly afterwards came "the culmination of the Singing Revolution – a mammoth rally organized by the Popular Front in September at the grounds of the song festival, where 250,000 people, one-quarter of all Estonians, sang in unison" (Kasekamp, 2000: 163). The song festivals had the most populous attendance of any mass demonstration. By the end of 1988, the Estonian National Independence Party had formed, one of the first ever political parties to function in the USSR other than the Communist Party, and the Estonian Supreme Soviet released its "Declaration about Sovereignty," detailing Estonian sovereignty within the ESSR and the supremacy of Estonian laws over Soviet legality. The next years built on these political achievements with increased public attack of Soviet control.

The Estonian Popular Front coordinated with the other Baltic Fronts to demand independence in the Baltic Assembly of 1989, establishing the Baltic Council. Estonian Citizens' Committees "mobilized in February 1989 to register all prewar citizens of the republic of Estonia and their descendants in order to hold elections for an alternative legislative body called the Estonian Congress" (Johnston & Aareleid-Tart, 2000: 690), registering over 900,000 people (then 95% of native and exiled Estonians). Baltics' independence groups organized the

(Aun 2010). Ultimately, all conceptions of the color scheme represent nature, memory of oppression, and national identity.

Baltic Way, “a unique and peaceful mass demonstration during which more than a million people joined hands to form a 600-kmlong human chain through the three Baltic countries, thus uniting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in their efforts towards freedom” (UNESCO, 2014: 2), spanning the countryside from capital to capital to capital. Elections in March 1990 for the Estonian Congress declared Estonian independence from Soviet institutions, and the penultimate blow to Soviet authority came when the Baltic governments boycotted Gorbachev’s All-Union referendum, scheduled for March 1991 to evaluate the republics’ opinions on maintaining the Soviet Union, and instead prepared their own referenda on independence (Kasekamp 2001). When the August 1991 *putsch* occurred in Moscow, the Estonian Supreme Council immediately declared the restoration of Estonian national independence. The Nordic and Eastern European countries recognized Baltic independence first, and finally the USSR accepted the declaration on September 6. The United Nations inducted Estonia into its ranks on September 17, 1991.

A quick note here on the concurrent Moscow and Russian situation is necessary. Throughout this “white-hot mobilization” period of 1987-1991, so-called by Johnston and Aaerlaid-Tart, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was itself in chaos (McFaul 2001). Gorbachev’s “expanding agenda of change as well as uncertainty about the balance of power between these competing groups [within the CPSU] impeded the process of negotiating a new institutional order [...] [and] resurgent Russian nationalism – emerged as a consequence of Gorbachev’s political liberalization” (McFaul, 2001: 62, 66). The 1989 elections to the USSR’s Congress of People’s Deputies, hotly contested by the Estonian nation, also saw political rallies and miners’ strikes in Russia, protesting the declining economic situation in the Russian Republic. *Glasnost* introduced political opportunities for democratic opposition groups to contest Gorbachev’s leadership and the direction of the Soviet Union, while Boris Yeltsin, then

head of the Russian Republic, was selected as Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1990. Yeltsin was a visible, active advocate for increasing the republics' autonomy, as his own political self-interest concerned the heightened autonomy of Russia in the dissolution of a central Soviet state. With the Baltic events leading to the reemergence of political parties like Democratic Russia, a national organization set on dismantling the Soviet regime, some scholars speculate that "[a]lthough the achievement of Baltic independence is usually attributed to the collapse of the USSR, the opposite is closer to the truth. The Baltic popular movements hastened the pace of democratization within the USSR and undermined the foundations of the Soviet Empire" (Kasekamp, 2001: 171). Attempting two pacted transitions into a democratic federation, Gorbachev responded by presenting a 500-Day Plan to revitalize the Soviet economy, holding the All-Union referenda (whose results were skewed by several republics' refusal to participate), and establishing a 9+1 Accord with Yeltsin and other republic leaders to renegotiate a new Union treaty, intending to strengthen the sovereignty of the republics and assign the Soviet central government the responsibilities of defense, foreign policy, and inter-republic commerce (McFaul 2001). A conservative-led coup by eight top Soviet officials, the Emergency Committee, occurred on August 20, 1991. Yeltsin stepped in to call for Russian civilian military support to obey him over the Emergency Committee, and military commanders gradually switched to Yeltsin, while moderates stayed on the sidelines, and no popular mobilization formed to support the coup leaders. Dual sovereignty for Russian ensued, and Gorbachev, after the December constitution of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) effectively dissolved the Soviet Union, resigned on December 25, 1991, refusing to preside over the Soviet Union's collapse: "I have firmly advocated the independence of peoples and the sovereignty of republics. But at the same time I have favored the preservation of the Union state and the

integrity of the country. Events have taken a different path. A policy line aimed at dismembering the country and disuniting the state has prevailed, something that I cannot agree with” (Gorbachev in Dallin & Lapidus, 1995: 644). Thus ended the Soviet empire, not with a bang, but a whimper.

The Russian side note here is meant to illuminate the political environment that Estonians faced during their own period of “white-hot mobilization.” To be fair to the political causative theorists, these events check off Tarrow’s boxes: the opening up of access to participation (*glasnost* and *perestroika*), shifts in ruling alignments (Gorbachev’s re-appointing ECP members throughout the years to curry favor with Estonian nationalists), the availability of influential allies (Yeltsin and the gradual ECP acceptance of Estonian independence), and cleavages within and among elites (Yeltsin and Gorbachev’s numerous confrontations). I do not deny the importance of these conditions and events in the Estonian struggle for independence. I instead draw attention to, littered throughout these accounts of Estonian revolution and Soviet collapse, innumerable mentions of the song festivals, tying the events to identity, political action, and nationalism:

The only word to describe the intense feelings of [the song festivals] is euphoria. Anatol Liven memorably described the song festivals as “Rousseau’s General Will set to music.” (Kasekamp, 2001: 163).

[...] the spontaneous nighttime song festivals in June where thousands of Estonians gathered to sing patriotic songs, thus the movement’s label “the Singing Revolution.” At this juncture a fundamental structuring of the national movement could be discerned [...] (Johnston & Aaelaid-Tart, 2000: 676).

It is often said about Estonians that they have twice sung their way to freedom – in the end of the nineteenth century, and in the end of the 1980s. This claim, although romantic, has much truth in it. (Gross, 2002: 349).

[Our] findings suggest that the strongest factor in preserving Estonian national identity was participation in the song festivals [...] This tradition set the stage for the massive nonviolent, grassroots movement demanding Estonian freedom that was dubbed the “Singing Revolution,” which culminated in the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991. (Rakfeldt, 2015: 515).

Song was important in creating an Estonian identity internally and externally, resulting in the “singing revolution” and eventual freedom [...] The Baltic liberation movements based their rallies around the traditional cultural form (and the traditional place) of song festivals, known since the first period of national awakening in the 19th century. The traditional form of gathering and the collective rituals of choir singing

helped to lift the national spirit and to mobilize people who were alienated from politics during the Soviet era. (Brokaw & Brokaw, 2001: 17, 26).

[...] the concept of “singing oneself into a nation”, popular in Estonian history textbooks, is only partly true. Although the performance of the festival changes only slightly through the years, its political significance changes enormously [...] the ritual of common singing developed, over time, into a tradition of performing peacefully the national aspirations of the Estonian people. (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014: 259-60).

The song festival itself was seen as a regular manifestation of cultural self-being. [...] [and] the Estonians managed to convert their historical tradition of song festivals, officially allowed by Moscow within the boundaries of amateur folklore activities, into an original nation-wide protest movement. (Kanike & Aaerlaid-Tart, 2004: 82).

Despite the nearly constant mention of the song festivals as important nation-building events, the prevailing theoretical consideration remains thus:

The symbol for the national awakening period—the tradition of the song festivals—legally regained the function it had always had for the people throughout the occupation. However, as a demonstration of national protest, it still remained an expression of both power and helplessness. In this sense, it would be misleading to draw parallels between the Estonians' "singing revolution" and the "velvet revolution" that ended Russian domination in Czechoslovakia. It is not possible to "sing" or "demonstrate" oneself free from an empire. The term "singing occupation" is therefore also an appropriate reflection of the actual situation. (Ruutsoo, 1995: 172).

Most scholars consider the song festivals minor events to mass mobilization and the Estonian struggle for independence. I suspect this sidelining is rooted exactly in the disbelief expressed above: “It is not possible to ‘sing’ or ‘demonstrate’ oneself free from an empire” (italics added). Yet to attribute all mobilization to macro-level events disregards the individual nature of protest; there can be no mass without the individual. If Kasekamp (2001) is correct, and the Baltic independence movements were themselves key to Soviet collapse, then we must return to studying the Baltic movements and credit their successes with due importance. Very recently, scholars have begun to reevaluate the role of collective singing in the Estonian national movement. I follow this new turn, and add my own perspective, building on the work of a nascent tradition that argues the song festivals were critical components of Estonian independence.

Song Festival Theory

Before I continue that discussion, however, I must recognize the few theorists who do supply work on the significance of the song festivals: Smidchens (2014), Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2014), and Waren (2012).

Guntis Smidchens' monumental work *The Power of Song* (2014) is the most comprehensive account of the song festivals and the role of collective singing in Baltic independence. He translates Baltic choral, rock, and folk songs into English and decodes their poetic, cultural, and historical contexts to argue, “[in] the Baltic, at national song festivals, the relation between the individual and the nation was mediated by songs and singing traditions” (Smidchens, 2014: 52). I tie his invocation of socio-psychological theory, musicology, collective action theory, and historical background to nationalism studies. He focuses on the role of music in nonviolent resistance; I focus on the role of the song festivals as critical variables in Estonian national construction and the 1980s' independence movement.

Smidchens examines how group singing developed to be an Estonian custom. He traces the genesis of the Estonian folk repertoire – from its origins in congregational singing (a German Lutheran tradition in Estonia), supported by native-language hymnals for congregations in the wake of standardized media and print, to the cultural folk project of German-speaking elites in the nineteenth century intent on developing a national cultural tradition – and its intersection with modern European nationalism in the mid 1800s. Smidchens contends that Estonian peasants' emancipation from serfdom (1816-1830) preceded the Baltic singing tradition; once land and labor reforms allowed a growing middle class to explore leisure activities, school and community choirs arose as spaces of community and cultural development. In 1860, Johann Voldemar Jannesen compiled an Estonian song book, translating German national songs into

Estonian while subverting many to have an Estonian meaning, and soon, “many popular Estonian national songs followed Jannesen’s model of non-*regilaul* meters; a recurrent theme was the individual singer’s first-person-singular marriage to the nation, akin and not opposed to a Lutheran’s relationship to God” (Smidchens, 2014: 78). Jannesen and Jakob Hurt were among several key Estonian figures who consciously sought to define Estonian nationalism, as “[n]ineteenth-century European nationalists were inspired by Herderian ideas of folk songs as valuable heritage, as an expression of a nation’s spirit, and as a means of giving voice to a national struggle for liberation from foreign tyrants. These ideas, and more, were cornerstones of the Singing Revolution” (Smidchens, 2014: 308). These nationalists, part of the original Estonian Heritage Society, organized the first song festival, marking “[the] year 1869 [...] as the birth of Estonia as a nation of singers not only because 845 men gathered to sing on stage but also because that year saw the first explicit attempt to build a national repertoire of songs that contain uniquely Estonian melodies as well as words” (Smidchens, 2014: 84). The song festivals, then, mothered Estonian nationhood.

The song festival tradition matured in the twentieth century. The brief era of independence inaugurated the professionalization of choral singing through national conservatories. With modernization, growing infrastructure of mass-mediated publications, recordings, and broadcasting made the national musical culture an everyday part of Estonian life. When the Soviet authorities invaded the streets of Tallinn, they also claimed an institutional monopoly over Estonia’s creative arts, though Estonians would continue to subvert the symbolic meaning behind national anthems and mass public events. Smidchens sees the 1980s song festivals as part of a broader cultural tradition of public subversive resistance.⁷ He takes Vaclav

⁷ Other suppressed groups in the Soviet Union also protested their new political subordination through public subversive resistance. Davies (1980) observes how peasants on the *kolkhoz* (collective farms) engaged in subversive

Havel's concept of "living within a lie," the double-consciousness of Soviet ideological façade, to explain how social change emerged in Soviet society first through a hidden sphere, in this case, the festivals. The songs sung at the festivals incorporated themes of nostalgia for past freedom, geography, freedom from foreign rule, morality, and liberty into their lyrics and musicality, relying especially on themes of marriage, love, and romance, for "when Baltic singers rehabilitated love as a basic human value, they wielded the power of the powerless, as envisioned by Václav Havel, subverting the Soviet system of collective identity by stepping into a non-Soviet counter-world of individual relationships" (Smidchens, 2014: 317). Engaging in the song festivals, even when they remained under the administrative control of Soviet central authority, thus became an act of protest and resistance.

To judge song festivals as central to collectivization and identity construction, Smidchens analyzes the psychology of music, singing, and group singing. He notes how music can homogenize social behavior, induce emotional states, reinforce group ideologies by persuasion and manipulation, define and reinforce social identity, and create group-level cooperation (Bailey & Davidson 2003; Brown & Volksten 2006; Juslin & Sloboda 2010; Ingalls 2011). He looks to the musical therapy field for evidence that singing enhances individual health and well-being (Hanser 2010; Kreutz et. al 2004), arguing that singing may have calmed the trauma of Soviet historical domination and the contemporary fight, as singing "affected and changed singers' emotions, healing trauma and fortifying self assurance for actions that shaped historical events" (Smidchens, 2014: 323). By connecting Andersen's theory of "imagined communities" – which considers nations to be social constructions, created through perception of self-

peasant resistance, called *chastushki*, through circulating rumors and songs about their living conditions: the *kolkhozy* often represented as a prison (with Stalin and his officials to blame), with reference to hardship, exhaustion, disdain, starvation, famine, impoverishment, and lack of clothes.

belonging and recognition of others as belonging to the nation – and nation construction to singing, Smidchens (2014: 322) observes:

Benedict Andersen imagines an individual's selfless transcendence into an imagined existence among the nation's millions, "no matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes": "How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us at all but imagined sound." (Andersen, 1993: 145).

Group singing, in addition to profound psychological affects, also presents an embodied psyche, where body language translates into emotional courage and confidence. To sing well, one must stand straight, shoulders back, upright, bold. The physical manifestation of upright, proud resistance both intimidates the opposition and reassures the individual. Smidchens' psychological and physiological concerns attempt to explain the individual's experience of mobilization, reinforcing his thesis, how in "the Baltic Singing Revolution, individual leaders were less important than the national singing tradition that brought together and energized many thousands of individuals" (Smidchens, 2014: 327). Like Smidchens, I will explore music as a social, psychological, emotional, and physiological process. I will develop the connection between collective singing and group identity construction in the context of nationalism, resistance, and collective action.

Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2014), meanwhile, study the Estonian song festivals as rituals of political mobilization. Their argument, which I further extend, contends, "[b]ecause singing was so deeply ingrained into the Estonians' historical consciousness it supported the creation of the unanimity necessary to challenge Soviet rule over their country [...] the song festivals and the performative act of mass singing have always been more than the national narrative of promoting Estonian culture 'against all the odds' suggests" (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014: 261, 273). The authors emphasize the role of memory, nationalism, and performance in the construction of the song festivals as political rituals. National recollection of

the 1869 Estonian “national awakening” created the basis for an ethnic unity as “part of the narrative template underlying Estonian cultural memory, which Mark Tamm (2008: 511) labels ‘The Great Battle for Freedom’ [...] [where] the ritual of common singing developed, over time, into a tradition of performing peacefully the national aspirations of the Estonian people” (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014: 259-60). They argue that song festivals became components of Estonian nation-building through their ritualism. Rituals, according to Bernhard Giesen, “are the performative counterpart to myth [...] [and they] provide the ultimate anchor for connecting actions, they refer to the construction of meaning itself” (Giesen, 2006: 342), institutionalizing collective meaning and symbolism through repetition and formalization. For the Estonian song festivals, then, even when organized “under various regimes, the tradition was invented as a highly symbolic process marking different stages of national cohesiveness” (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014: 260).

Brüggemann and Kasekamp outline the history of the song festivals as a political project. The first song festival in 1869, while officially registered to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the emancipation of the peasants under Emperor Alexander I, was staged by Estonian national activists of the Vanemuise Society (an organization formed to promote Estonian culture in Tartu), drawing on historical templates of Christian worship, German cultural models, and the contemporary poetry and folk art produced as part of Estonia’s “national awakening.” The authors (2014: 262) argue, “[s]inging patriotic poetry in the secular festivals [replaced] the collective reading of the Scripture in the service (Mosse 1991: 79–80). Thus, the worship of the people became the ‘worship of the nation’ expressed in a ‘political style which became, in reality, a secularized religion’, and in a liturgy that enabled the people to be drawn ‘into active participation in the national mystique’ (Mosse 1991: 2).” The festival tradition continued

throughout the end of the nineteenth century as modernization, urbanization, and technological advances supported nation-wide coordination for the annual festivals. By 1910, “the entire repertoire consisted of works by Estonian composers (though the Russian governor ordered the words of some of the patriotic Estonian songs to be altered). Following the usual official conclusion with ‘God Save the Tsar’, the choirs and public spontaneously sang *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm*, the future Estonian national anthem, and shouted ‘long live the fatherland’ (Ojaveski et al. 2002: 64)” (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014: 264). During the short era of Estonian independence (1918-1940), the state co-opted the festivals from the Vanemuise Society and established the Estonian Singers’ Association (*Eesti Lauljate Liit*, ELL) to organize the festivals in five-year intervals, which then coordinated with other Estonian cultural groups – the theater, the opera, local choirs – to promote collective Estonian nationalism. When the Nazis invaded, the festival tradition ended, but when the Soviets reinvaded in 1944, they soon brought back the festivals. The Soviet Union had a long and decorated history of mass festivals meant to glorify Communist Party ideology and the General Secretaries (Rolf 2013). Soviet authorities co-opted the five-year cycle to match Soviet anniversaries and took control of the musical direction to highlight Soviet composers and ban the Estonian folk songs. Soviet control over the festivals continued throughout the occupation, though it became a tradition to finish the festival with a “spontaneous” rendition of the censored “My Fatherland is My Beloved” (*Mu isamaa on minu arm*), which became the unofficial Estonian national anthem. Through defiance of Soviet control of the program, the song festivals demonstrated public protest on a mass scale. The festivals represent a case of Scott’s (1992) “hidden transcripts,” where an oppressed group employs subversive resistance tactics to establish a collective (victim) identity as well as critique power asymmetry, as Rakfeldt (2015) argues that the strongest factor in preserving Estonian

national identity throughout Soviet occupation was participation in the song festivals. One of my interview respondents articulates this inheritance as such: “I myself always aim to attend a song festival if I happen to be in Estonia at the time. These are amazing events to take your whole family to, to be nostalgic about our recent past and remind ourselves how important it is what we have.”⁸ The song festivals, even while orchestrated by the ECP, thus maintained an underlying sense of identity and resistance that precipitated their instrumental role in the 1980s “Singing Revolution.” I build on Brüggemann and Kasekamp’s comprehensive account of the politicization of the festivals to reassert their significance in mobilizing individuals against Soviet authority.

Waren (2012) also analyzes the role of the song festivals by applying several historical and social theories to the Estonian case. Waren’s piece is the only theoretical-comparative analysis in the literature on the role of music in the Estonian national movement. He compares six collective action theories – relative deprivation theory, resource mobilization theory, biographical availability theory, intergenerational activism theory, identity mobilization theory, and “free spaces” – to argue that music contributed to the movement’s revolutionary goals. I agree with Waren, but I take much of his analysis a step further, as I argue not only was musical resistance active, it was crucial to the movement’s final years. His study is brief.

He provides helpful but incomplete application of these six approaches to the song festivals. For relative deprivation theory – which cites the gap between expectations and rewards as the main obstacle to mobilization, where social movements erupt to bring rewards back in line with expectations – he suggests the ecological protests preceding the song festivals raised expectations for the movement’s success. On resource mobilization theory, which emphasizes

⁸ Laura in discussion with the author, March 2017.

the importance of political movement's ability to organize and sustain resources for episodic action, Waren contends that music and the festivals provided the organizational structure for mobilization, bringing together people of different ages, backgrounds, expectations, and levels of involvement. Regarding the availability of young people to mount action and the intergenerational activism necessary to promote a unified national resistance, Waren claims the song festivals' musical repertoire provided the convenient historical revision needed for older activists to support and relate to younger activists. He sees the song festivals' incorporation of diverse social groups as evidence of its capacity to mobilize a collective identity. Finally, he regards the song festivals as open, accessible areas of political speech dissemination, recounting Polletta's (1999: 1) invocation of "free spaces" as "small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization." He concludes:

And within each of these theories of revolutionary action, I find examples where music played an integral role. The "free space" of the song festival ground, the use of song to mobilize resources, the role of new compositions in the development of a political identity, the nonviolent use of song in resistance to military authority, the national unity created among many factions through the use of songs and song festivals—all contribute to the conclusion that, in the Singing Revolution of Estonia, music was not a passive expression of wishful hope. Rather, music must be considered as a dynamic, unifying, cultural and political force which expresses that same wish. (Waren, 2012: 448).

I, like Waren, believe the song festivals were a significant instrument to mobilize Estonians into action, though I further situate the festivals in their historical tradition of nation-building to argue that the festivals presupposed the Estonian independence movement.

Methodology

To study the role of the Estonian song festivals in the independence movement, I use George and Bennett's (2005) three-phase outline for case study methods to structure my

research. I supplement my case study with qualitative interviews and records of the *Current Soviet Digest Press* to amplify the importance of individual, micro-level analysis. As I elaborate on the processes for both my case study and qualitative work, I will examine the limitations and benefits of each method.

The Case Study Method

Arend Lijphart (1971: 691), in his foundational essay carving out the value of comparative politics research, explains, “[the] great advantage of the case study is that by focusing on a single case, that case can be intensively examined even when the research resources at the investigator's disposal are relatively limited.” He identifies the exact reason many political science students and scholars, myself included, opt to investigate political phenomena through case studies: inadequate resources. Having decided to study Estonia, I ran into several resource problems that prohibited me from conducting the statistical research and fieldwork I would have preferred.

In an ideal world, I would have tested the theory I lay out in this paper. To test my hypothesis on the role of the song festivals, I would have conducted long-form interviews with a cross-section of the Estonian population, accounting for variables like cohort (age), gender, and rate of prior political participation to the late 80s, to collect data both quantitative (measuring whether subjects indicated the song festivals were the most important, or very important, part of their revolutionary political participation) and qualitative (investigating whether subjects indicated that group singing induced the types of emotional states that the musicologists and psychologists theorized could occur). I would have developed a statistical model to determine whether the song festivals operated as the initial mode of collective action for Estonians who

mobilized during the “white-hot mobilization” period. Statistically significant evidence for my hypothesis would have strengthened my probabilistic case study. This type of statistical modeling is one avenue for further research that would prove or debunk the argument I advance.

I could not conduct these statistical models, however, because I did not have the time, funding, or language skills to do so properly. While there are some Estonian ex-patriots in the US – the American Community Survey estimates 27,000 in 2013⁹ – many of these ex-patriots emigrated prior to the late 80s revolution and thus did not participate in the song festivals of that period or the national independence movement. To have a truly representative sample, I would need to travel to Estonia to conduct interviews, which I did not have the time or funding to do. Even if I could have arranged for a research period in Estonia, my lack of Estonian language skills would have been a significant issue. I would have needed to hire a translator to accompany me throughout the project, as most of the people I would want to interview do not speak English, or do not speak English well enough, for me to interview them. The interviews I showcase here are solely meant to establish credibility for my probabilistic arguments.

These resource obstacles led me to the case study method. I will survey the types, advantages, and weaknesses of the case study method, then explain why I selected Estonia for my theory, and what my own process entailed. Description of what the Estonian case tells us about nation-building and political mobilization will follow in the Findings and Discussion section.

⁹ American Community Survey, “TOTAL ANCESTRY REPORTED: Universe: Total ancestry categories tallied for people with one or more ancestry categories reported, more information 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates” (data table, Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program, 2013): https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_13_1YR_B04003&prodTy=table. Accessed 25 March 2017.

Lijphart (1971) lists six types of case studies: atheoretical case studies, interpretative case studies, hypothesis-generating case studies, theory-confirming case studies, theory-infirming case studies, and deviant case studies. He contends that of the six types of case studies, the hypothesis-generating and the deviant case studies contribute the most to the field, as they best generate new or sharpen preexisting theories that explain political phenomena. I use a combination of the interpretative case study and the hypothesis-generating case study method. The deviant case study method, comparing the Estonian revolution (or perhaps all three Baltic revolutions) to other post-Soviet revolutions, would have been overly ambitious for an undergraduate thesis. Both the theory-confirming and theory-infirming case study methods would have required statistical research to test either my theory or current theories (like Smidchens' [2014] on the role of song festivals in the movement's nonviolent tactics) projecting the importance of the song festivals in Estonian collectivization. The atheoretical case study method, "traditional single-country or single-case analyses [that are] entirely descriptive and move in a theoretical vacuum: they are neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses" (Lijphart 1971: 692), denotes more a data-gathering exercise than a research project, and would have been an inappropriate choice for this thesis. The interpretative study, meanwhile, "[makes] explicit use of established theoretical propositions. In these studies, a generalization is applied to a specific case with the aim of throwing light on the case rather than of improving the generalization in any way" (*Ibid.*), whereas a hypothesis-generating study begins "with a more or less vague notion of possible hypotheses, and [attempts] to formulate definite hypotheses to be tested subsequently among a larger number of cases. Their objective is to develop theoretical generalizations in areas where no theory exists yet" (*Ibid.*). My case study, which I describe below, incorporates both

methods by interpreting established theoretical positions¹⁰ and formulating a clearer approach to the role of song festivals than previously articulated in the literature.

Stephen Van Evra (1997) proposes that case studies serve five main purposes: testing theories, creating theories, identifying antecedent conditions, testing the importance of antecedent conditions, and explaining cases of intrinsic importance. He identifies three formats for testing: controlled comparisons, congruence procedure, and process tracing. I use a variation on the congruence procedure, which entails ascertaining values on the independent variable and dependent variable that are typical in most other cases, checked after to see about likelihoods (e.g. to answer whether economic downturns cause the scapegoating of ethnic minorities, we would need to ask first whether ethnic scapegoating was above normal; if not, then clearly the hypothesis would not hold). All three of Van Evra's testing formats require statistical modeling, which I could not complete. Instead, I follow his basic outline for creating theories with case studies: "To infer new theories from cases we start by searching cases for associations between phenomena and for testimony by people who directly experienced the case (actors in the case, for instance) on their motives and beliefs about the case. These associations and participant accounts offer clues on cause and effect [which we can then broaden to generalized explanations]" (Van Evra, 1997: 68). Van Evra's emphasis on individual experience as platform for theory mirrors the micro-level mobilization approach I take to analyze the significance of the song festivals in collective action.

Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2005) outline the strengths, advantages, trade-offs, and limitations of case studies in their book *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. They cite four strengths of the case study: conceptual validity, derivation of

¹⁰ See the literature review.

new hypotheses, exploration of causal mechanism, and modeling and assessment of complex causal relations. Case studies invite detailed attention to context, which statistical methods are less able to do, and conceptual refinement through a smaller number of cases, rather than a large sample (e.g. case studies enable “democracy with adjectives” theories, rather than statistical studies of democratic correlations or procedures). They acknowledge that the qualitative component of case studies empowers the heuristic process, which opens new avenues of analysis where statistical analysis is rigid (e.g. during an interview about variable X, a respondent might exclaim, “No, I was thinking Y,” which introduces a new line of inquiry). I use this heuristic process myself when evaluating the supplemental interviews I conducted, as well as those conducted by Rakfeldt (2015) on national memory and participation in the song festivals. Case studies, in their comprehensive nature of combining historical documents, political theory, and quantitative and qualitative data, better explore complex causal mechanisms than simple statistical modeling, which often by design leave out contextual and intervening variables. Case studies, then, especially in situations where research resources are limited, provide a valuable alternative to statistical modeling when analyzing the role of causal mechanisms in a theory.

That said, case studies do have their limitations. George and Bennett (2005) identify three major weaknesses: case selection bias, identifying scope conditions and “necessity,” and lack of representativeness. They acknowledge that often cognitive biases towards certain theories can bias the selection of case studies, where scholars ignore cases that contradict their theories. To resolve this issue, they suggest limiting the *scope* of the theory and specifying the conditions and key characteristics for a study’s conclusions, advice I heed in my own articulation of my research. They note how case studies only make “tentative conclusions on how much gradations of a particular variable affect the outcome in a particular case or how much they

generally contribute to the outcomes in a class or type of cases” (George & Bennett, 2005: 25), emphasizing the probabilistic, rather than causal, nature of case studies. To make valid conclusions, they argue a theorist is better off analyzing whether and how a variable mattered in a relationship, instead of how much it did, favoring a framework of “necessity” for a variable as a “contributing cause,” distinct from how much it contributed. George and Bennett (2005: 31) also acknowledge:

Case studies may uncover or refine a theory about a particular causal mechanism – such as collective action dynamics – that is applicable to vast populations of cases, but usually the effects of such mechanism differ from one case or context to another [...] in view of these trade-offs, case study researchers generally sacrifice the parsimony and broad applicability of their theories to develop cumulatively contingent generalizations that apply to well-defined types or subtypes of cases with a high degree of explanatory richness.

From this perspective of contingent generalizations that apply to very particular subtypes of cases, I approach my case of Estonia.

Van Evra (1997) develops a checklist for case-selection criteria that lists eleven important case attributes for a study. These eleven attributes – data richness; extreme values on the independent, dependent, or condition variable; large within-case variance on the independent, dependent, or condition variable; divergence of predictions made of the case by competing theories; resemblance of the case background conditions to the conditions of current policy problems; prototypicality of case background conditions; appropriateness for controlled comparison with other cases; outlier character; intrinsic importance; appropriateness for replication of previous tests; and appropriateness for performing a previously omitted type of test – reflect two broader considerations: an attribute may be more significant to the researcher depending on the stage of investigation, and case selection should aim to maximize the strength and number of tests the researcher can perform. I built my theory about the Estonian song festivals from my research, rather than the other way around, following an inductive approach. I

did not “select” Estonia to test my argument; I developed my argument from my study of Estonia.

The Estonian Singing Revolution, as a case, also fulfills several important criteria for general case-selection. While I could not collect my own data, there is a substantial literature discussing nation-building, social movements, collective action, musicology, and the Estonian revolution that is rich enough for my purposes. I admit here I am limited by English-language research on the song festivals – there may very well be more scholarship that I do not have access to and cannot read in the Estonian language – but there was enough literature I could find that mitigated this problem. The prevalence of song festivals and their mass participation numbers in the late 80s qualifies as an “extreme value” on the independent variable; this extreme value method argues, “that cases that are atypical in their endowment with the independent variable teach us the most” (Van Evra, 1997: 79). Further research could very easily be conducted on this case for controlled comparisons with other cases, or for assessing the relative power of my theory against other historical, political theories regarding mobilization in the Singing Revolution. The Estonian case therefore is an appropriate selection for the limitations of my current project.

My research follows the three-phase case study model articulated by George and Bennett (2005). The first phase concerns defining the objectives, design, and structure of the research project. During the second phase, the researcher carries out the study according to the design from phase one. In phase three, the researcher draws on her findings to assess relevant contributions to her achievement of the original research objective.

Three parts constitute phase one: specification of the problem and research objective, developing a research strategy through specification of variables, and case selection. I began my

process of theory-building by surveying the literature to initially investigate the role of the song festivals in the Estonian Singing Revolution. The constant brief references to the song festivals placed them in the periphery of phenomena explaining political mobilization in the 80s, even though nearly every account of the movement I read included at least a superficial mention. I specified my problem – the lack of attention to the song festivals in the literature – and adopted the “probability probe” case study method advanced by George and Bennett (2005: 75), projects that are “preliminary studies on relatively untested theories and hypotheses to determine whether more intensive and laborious testing is warranted.” I singled out my study variable, participation in the song festivals. I then determined my research project, while indeterminate, would be probabilistic in nature, rather than causal. To analyze my study variable, I decided I would apply existing collective action theory to nationalism studies, identity construction theory, cultural memory theory, and sociology of music theories to the case of the Estonian song festivals.

Phases two and three are elaborated in the Findings and Discussion section, so I will only briefly describe them here. When carrying out my study, I kept in mind six important guidelines: the provisional character of case explanations, the problem of competing explanations, the transformation of descriptive explanations into analytical explanations, challenges in attempting to reconstruct individual decisions, the assessment of the evidentiary value of archival materials, and general problems in evaluating case studies. When evaluating the contributions of my theory to the field, I aimed to specify as best I could the precise, contingent generalizations that explained my case, as well as the limits of my research.

Supplemental Qualitative Work

I use two supplementary qualitative sources in my research: interviews and records of the *Current Soviet Digest Press*. These interviews are not a representative sample of the population. The subjects are too young to have participated in the song festivals as adults or young adults, and their memories of the festivals and the revolution are constructed from their childhood memories and relatives' accounts rather than solely from their experience. I used a snowball sampling method to conduct open-ended interviews with several native Estonians; my interview questions are attached as Appendix A, and short biographies of my respondents are attached in Appendix B.¹¹

I also rely on the interviews conducted by Rakfeldt (2015: 511) in his study examining “the means by which Estonian national identity was preserved during 50 years of Soviet occupation.” He describes his process here:

In 1993, a quota-sampling technique was used to interview a cross section of Estonian society ($N = 930$). Descriptive statistics, and factor and multiple regression analyses were performed. Fifteen qualitative interviews were also conducted. When woven together, these personal histories create a fabric that is representative of the greater Estonian history during the occupation. The implications of these findings may reach beyond the Estonian context to further inform our understanding of the complexities and the vicissitudes of human action.¹²

On the relevance of the song festivals in his research, Rakfeldt himself notes:

...the findings suggest that the strongest factor in preserving Estonian national identity was participation in the song festivals. These festivals brought together several hundred thousand Estonians, who took part in singing songs such as “Mu Isamaa on Minu Arm” (“My Homeland Is My Love”), which is a poem by Lydia Koidula and was set to music for the first Estonian Song Festival in 1869. During the Soviet occupation, a new melody was written by Gustav Ernesaks and has been performed at the end of the song festivals ever since. This tradition set the stage for the massive nonviolent, grassroots movement demanding Estonian freedom that was dubbed the “Singing Revolution,” which culminated in the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991.¹³

¹¹ The interview questions were meant to investigate the link between emotion, collective singing, Estonian national texts, and historical memory.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Rakfeldt, 2015: 515.

Throughout his piece, he quotes from interviews he conducted to evaluate the preservation of Estonian national identity. I imagine that my ideal statistical research would have included interviews of this type – hence their inclusion here as supplemental evidence.

I also examined the Bailey-Howe Library’s microfilm reels for the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press (CDSP)* for the years 1987-1991. The *CDSP*:

...originally titled *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* and later *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* [and now *The Current Digest of the Russian Press*], was established during the Cold War, when Joseph Stalin was still in charge and the USSR was essentially inaccessible to the rest of the world. The Current Digest was an indispensable resource for news from the Soviet Union and provided access to key documents, including: all significant speeches by Soviet leaders; meetings of all Party Congresses, including the 1956 20th Party Congress and Khrushchev’s “secret speech” denouncing the Stalinist “cult of personality”; all five-year plans and reports on plan fulfillment; all important Soviet laws, including initial drafts, official public discussions of drafts, and final versions as adopted by the USSR Supreme Soviet; major Soviet treaties, including arms-control treaties, and all significant foreign policy developments.¹⁴

I looked for any mention of the Estonian and Baltics independence movements, specifically for notes of the song festivals, to analyze how the Soviet Press responded to the Baltic movements.

The *CDSP* has no direct mention of the song festivals in 1987 and 1988, the two years with the most important festivals. It does refer to various anti-Soviet events in the Baltics, however; most often demonstrations are attributed to American and Western-media backed influence, the number of participants are underreported, and the explanation for the lack of Soviet administration buy-in blames the cover-up of Estonian deportations and land dispossession.¹⁵ The most extensive account of the late 80s Baltic protests occurs in the September 23, 1987 issue with a nine-page story, “Baltic-Republic Demonstrations Reported.”¹⁶ The article reports on the August 23, Baltic Chain event as:

¹⁴ East View Press, “THE CURRENT DIGEST OF THE RUSSIAN PRESS (formerly The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press),” *East View Press*, 14 April, 2017 <http://www.eastviewpress.com/Journals/CurrentDigest.aspx>.

¹⁵ One exemplary example includes, “ESTONIAN WRITER SAYS ‘DISPOSSESSION’ OF KULAKS’ INHIBIT PRIVATE FRAMING; LITERATURE SHOULD TELL TRUTH RE ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN ANTAGONISM,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (Columbus, Ohio), 34(2): 1987a.

¹⁶ Current Digest of the Soviet Press, “Baltic-Republic Demonstrations Reported,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (Columbus, Ohio), 34(34): 1987b.

They had a pitiful look, these attempts by a group of extremists, incited by Western “radio voices,” to hold an Anti-Soviet demonstration in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, aimed at discrediting the decision that the Lithuanian people took in 1940 to restore Soviet power in this area and become part of the USSR. [...] Here, at the monument on which the simple words “To the Fatherland and Freedom,” words dear to everyone, are carved, a group of people gathered [in Riga, Latvia] who were trying to distort these sacred concepts. Having, at the prompting of American Congressman and Western “radio voices,” chosen Aug. 23 – the anniversary of the signing of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Treaty – as the day of their assemblage, they perverted the true meaning and significance of this historical fact. [...] An assemblage inspired by the Voice of America and the subversive Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, as well as by a small group of individuals who had been convicted of anti-Soviet activity in the past, was held in the Estonian capital today. (CDSP, 1987b: 3).

The *CDSP* reports the activists as few and armed, which contradicts the remarkable peaceful and well-attended reality of the events (UNESCO 2014). The Soviet Press had begun to document the nationalist, anti-Soviet feeling by the end of the late 80s, but it still succumbed to pro-Soviet propaganda, framing dissenters as radicals and uncommon. What few references I found to the Estonian predilection for song are incorporated where relevant.

Findings and Discussion

To re-center the role of the song festivals in the Estonian independence movement, I analyze the structural and cognitive aspects of participation in the festivals. Scholars like Johnson and Aaelaid-Tart (2000: 694) have argued for increased research connecting cognitive theory to political outcomes: “[t]he aggregated cognitive and psychological effects of common historical experiences plus the social psychological processes of defining and channeling responses point to a provocative yet uncharted approach to understanding movement activism and leadership.” Employing Opp’s structural-cognitive framework, I use Tarrow’s concepts of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural frames to outline the structural processes that induced collective action – the ideologies of cultural memory, nationalism, and identity, as well as the symbolism in festival literature more broadly – and socio-psychology theory, choral music theory, and musicology to assess how music and collective singing initiates the conditions for change in individual behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. I structure my

discussion through three stages: the festival, the role of music, and the ensuing, activated nationalism. Ultimately, I argue that structural circumstances (e.g. the ethno-national history of the song festival tradition) preconditioned individuals to opt into collective action, while the cognitive process of collective singing reinforced a sense of communal and nationality identity necessary to sustain that collective action.

Festivals

The social and cultural experiences of festivals are well studied and well documented. I add to the field by linking demonstration to festival, festival to politics. Festivals are spaces of cultural reproduction (Getz 2010). Festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity, and, most important to our study of Estonia, *continuity*. Donald Getz (2010), surveying the field of festival studies, identifies three discourses that organize the festival studies field: the discourse on the roles, meanings, and impacts of festivals in society and culture, the discourse on festival tourism, and the discourse on festival management. We are primarily concerned with the first discourse, as the other two evaluate the commodification of festivals, which does not apply to the Estonian song festivals of the late 80s. Festivals, like other cultural events, are socially constructed while simultaneously constructing social relations. Getz distinguishes nine core phenomena that underlie the experience and meaning of festivals: political and social/cultural meanings and discourse, especially regarding social change; authenticity; community, cultural, and place identity and attachment; *communitas*, social cohesion, and sociability; liminality and the carnivalesque; rites and rituals; myths and symbols; pilgrimage; and spectacle. His arrangement of these phenomena supply a solid starting point for us to examine the Estonian song festival.

Festivals, as repeated cultural events, bind individuals together in communities and a shared culture (Durkheim 1976). On the festival grounds, individuals inhabit the same physical space and embody respect and support for whatever theme the festival enshrines. Getz (2010: 8) observes how festivals generate and reinforce group identity, as “De Bres and Davis (2001) determined that events held as part of the Rollin’ Down the River festival led to positive self-identification for local communities. Derrett (2003) argued that community-based festivals in New South Wales, Australia, demonstrate a community’s sense of community and place. Elias-Vavotsis (2006) considered the effects of festivals on the cultural identity of spaces.” Festivals are physical, material representations of cultural and political ideas. The collective nature of festivals, rendering an individual experience a shared one, instills a feeling of community. Getz continues:

Communitas, as used by Turner (1969), refers to intense feelings of belonging and sharing among equals, as in pilgrimage or festival experiences. Research supports the existence and importance of “communitas” at planned events. Costa (2002) described “festive sociability” at the Fire Festival in Valencia, Spain, as being central to the transmission of tradition. Matheson (2005) discussed festivals and sociability in the context of a Celtic music festival. The backstage space is the realm of authentic experiences and communitas. Hannam and Halewood (2006) determined that Viking themed festivals gave participants as sense of identity and reflected an authentic way of life. (*Ibid.*)

Festivals, when repeated over time as annual events – such as the original Estonian song festivals in the late 1800s, the state-sponsored festivals of the independence period, and the five-year Soviet cycle throughout the occupation period – link that sense of *communitas* to continuity. For ethnic Estonians, each festival in the Soviet era recalled the original historical festival of 1869 and the nationalist festivals of the 1920s and 30s during the brief era of independence. This sense of political continuity in the Estonian nation, evoked by the festivals, both preserved a communal memory of the lost Estonian nation (Rakfeldt 2015) and helped bridge the gap between the restorationists and *perestroika*-minded centrists of the revolutionary movement (Taagepera 1989), as “various social constructions of the independent republic produced clear

patterns in which heterogeneous microcohorts gravitated toward the radical, restorationist wing of the national movement” (Johnson & Aarelaid-Tart, 2000: 693). Continuity would become an important organizing principle of post-Soviet Estonian politics, as automatic citizenship was limited to citizens of the inter-war republic and their descendants (Smith 1996).

In addition to reifying political ideas, the song festivals presented embodied performances of Estonian cultural rites, practices, history, and protest. While the Soviets censored the festival program throughout the occupation, festival-goers would often spontaneously sing off-program. Smidchens’ (2014: 149) depiction of the first Soviet festival provides an emblematic example:

[To demonstrate the superiority of Soviet cultural production, the Soviet cultural administration] decreed that [Estonia’s first Soviet festival in 1947] had to have more singers than ever before. Organizers quickly increased the total by six thousand by adding children’s choirs to the program. But to ensure massive adult participation, the concert needed to balance between explicit national submission as demanded by the Soviets on the one hand, and truly popular Estonian songs on the other. In the two-day song festival of June 28 and 29, 1947, the latter songs dominated. The opening concert began with seven Soviet songs: the anthems of the USSR and the Estonian SSR, a song about Stalin by Soviet composer Muradeli, and four other expressions of Soviet patriotism by Estonian composers. But this first set was followed by an old text: Koidula’s poem “My Fatherland is My Beloved,” set to a new, majestic melody by Gustav Ernesaks. Political content diminished over the remaining series of twenty-six songs, concluding with Miina Härma’s happy “Tuljak,” traditionally sung to accompany the national folk dance. The second day’s concert omitted Soviet anthems, beginning instead with “Song to Joy,” a poem by the nineteenth-century German romantic Friedrich Schiller, set to music in 1890 by Aleksander Läte. “My Fatherland is My Beloved” was repeated, and the concert again concluded with “Tuljak.”

Singing was thus a site of political action, holding “memories of songs as symbols of national identity, and as nonviolent weapons in the struggle for national culture” (Smidchens, 2014: 320).

Kanike and Aarelaid-Tart (2004: 82-3) agree, observing how throughout the occupation, “[t]he processions and two-day concerts of the Song Festival turned into anti-imperial political demonstrations, regardless of the ever-present attempts to steer the repertoire of these festivals towards something more in accordance with the Communist ideology.” During the late 80s festivals of the Baltic states:

[T]he movements [also] defined the political meaning of their public assemblies with an unambiguous visual cue: the flags of pre-Soviet, independent Estonia [...] in the big framework of the Baltic movement

for political independence, singing – whether choral, rock, or folk – was a means of rehabilitating the values that Havel had seen as the key to political reform driven by the power of the powerless: trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, and love. (Smidchens, 2014: 158-9).

One of my interview respondents expressed her belief in the song festivals as unique spaces of political activity: “Estonians were never going to win a military conflict against the Soviet army, but by conveying the idea of resistance through music and non-violent protests, it was a movement which managed to challenge the status quo in such unexpected ways that it was very difficult to suppress.”¹⁷ The song festivals thus supplied the bedrock for the drive towards independence and reconstruction of the modern Estonian nation.

As mass gatherings, festivals also exhibit the qualities of “free spaces” (Polletta 1999).¹⁸

They are open geographic areas, easily accessible. They facilitate further political group formation. Waren (2012: 447) describes the politicization of space:

In Merton's (Merton 1957) familiar terms, the manifest function of the song festivals was to keep the masses tranquil. The latent function of the song festivals allowed prospective participants to browse among groups. In addition to recruiting new members, existing groups were able to develop interpersonal ties between political factions. The availability of geographic space undeniably contributed to the success of the Singing Revolution.

Crowds offer protection to the individual who fears violent repercussions. The song festivals' crowd movement from Tallinn to outside the city also protected their political activism from the danger of Soviet authorities (in addition to reenacting the historical procession of song festival crowds from Tallinn city center to the festival grounds). One of the interview respondents also observed the role of physical space, saying:

I think that for one thing, it just allowed people to come together in one place. Even in this very robust physical sense, I think that's very important. You see other people doing the same thing, the sense of solidarity it gives you. And I think there is certainly some truth in the saying that strength needs numbers. You see all these other people in the same place with you [...] People just got together to sing, that's what they wanted to do.¹⁹

¹⁷ Laura in discussion with the author, March 2017.

¹⁸ For Polletta's definition, refer to the literature review.

¹⁹ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

While the festivals served a political purpose through their communal reassertion of national identity, their physical, spatial nature also materialized necessary group associations.

While studying festivals' embodiment of cultural and political symbols reveals them as sites of social reproduction, it also sheds light on the cognitive processes that accompany festival attendance. Getz (2010) observes how festivals are increasingly being measured by their personal impacts of psychic benefits and attitude change. Smidchens (2014: 318), discrediting the claim that the Singing Revolution ended with the Song of Estonia concert of 1988, links festivals to mass euphoria, and the importance of emotional fortitude in the independence movement:

Such misconceptions about the Singing Revolution's end date come from a misunderstanding of how nonviolent political movements work. Nonviolence takes time. Mass euphoria played a role. Intense feelings of transcendence, religious or otherwise, continue to affect people's actions long after the feelings fade. To succeed, nonviolent movements had to transition from dizzy happiness to the more measured emotions related to patience and persistence. For parliamentary tactics to succeed in the Baltics, leaders needed to know and to show that hundreds of thousands of people stood behind them, rationally prepared and emotionally ready, if needed, to die at the hands of Soviet power. Here, songs and poetry continued, as before, to reinforce the deep ideological foundations of the independence movements, cementing a national, nonviolent identity.

One of my respondents described this feeling herself: "I always cry when the choirs sing, I feel so proud, and it is beautiful."²⁰ Participation in the festivals strengthened the individual's commitment to the cause, while also signaling to Estonian restorationist leaders that they had the numbers and emotional determination they needed to push for independence. The connection between emotions and successful social movements has already been well established (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2001). Johnson and Aaelaid Tart (2000: 676) agree, contending, "By 1988 opposition became more widespread and public, culminating in [...] the spontaneous nighttime song festivals in June where thousands of Estonians gathered to sing patriotic songs, thus the movement's label 'the Singing Revolution.' At this juncture a fundamental structuring of the

²⁰ Katriina in discussion with the author, March 2017.

national movement could be discerned.” They (2000: 692) continue: “Many key intellectuals shared the stage with leaders of the Popular Front during a huge gathering on September 11, 1988. Almost one-third (about 300,000) of the Estonian population gathered at the Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn to affirm national consciousness.” Through physical and symbolic features, the song festivals themselves thus personify Opp’s structural-cognitive model linking individual decision-making and public protest.

Music

The music of the song festivals fortified Estonian nation-building through the semiotic system of the musical text and the socio-psychological processes invoked through group singing. I will structure my analysis of music in the song festivals by examining the political culture of music in Estonia, the physio-biological components of making music, and the construction of identity and social relationships through music.

To truly understand music as signifier to the national culture of Estonia, we need to understand the context of choral and folk songs as Estonian inheritance. Since I overviewed the history of the song festivals and their role in nation-building in the literature review, I add detail here on the semiotic features of music as text. Smidchens (2014: 56) notes how the festival songs, written in the 1860s and performed again and again throughout the next century and a half, “accumulated new meanings tied to national identity when, beginning in the early nineteenth century, local intellectuals studied the indigenous Baltic cultures and cultivated symbols that later were used to construct modern national cultures.” The songs themselves recorded a rich, detailed history of Estonian nation and culture. Smidchens (2014: 312) claims, the political songs’ “texts defined national identity by kinship, territory, and language, and

presented the nation's historical mission as a struggle for liberty," revolving around five themes: nostalgia for past freedom, geography, freedom from foreign rule, moral principles, and liberty (depicted through light and truth metaphors). These were the songs censored by Soviet authorities when they took on the task of re-making Soviet Estonia's cultural development.

Mimi Daitz (1995) and Erik Reid Jones (2005) both reflect on the work of Veljo Tormis, perhaps the most important and popular twentieth-century Estonian composer, to situate music-making as a political act during the years of Soviet Estonia. Analyzing Tormis' full range of choral compositions (over 200), Daitz discovers a political project of rewriting and reintegrating Estonian folk music into new pieces, commissioned by the Soviet regime, throughout the Soviet era. She (1995: 109-10) explains:

[H]is use of folk music seemed to fulfill the goals of socialist realism in music, propagated as early as 1934 by the powerful Communist Party functionary, Zhdanov. In 1949, well before his music had attracted the attention of officials, Tormis was urged by his teacher, Edgar Arro, to use folk music in his compositions. Tormis had been influenced by the choral works of Mart Saar (1882-1963) and Cyrillus Kreek (1889-1962), two of his most important predecessors in the use of Estonian folk music. And in the composition class of Vissarion Shebalin at the Moscow Conservatory (1951-1956) he was encouraged to continue in that direction.

[...]

[If] one regards Tormis's use of Finno-Ugrian folk material as a statement against the ongoing Russification of the non-Russian Soviet Republics, then about 90 percent of his choral music, much of his vocal solo and ensemble music, most of his children's music, and many of his sound tracks for films may be characterized as politically motivated, created with the intent of supporting Estonia's cultural heritage, criticizing Soviet rule over his country, and, on occasion, reproaching his own people for their foibles.

She details how Tormis' clever use of melody, accent, contemporary poetry, and historical poetry maintained a "hidden transcript" in the music that kept alive Estonian identity, even in music made for Soviet ears. Jones, while disagreeing slightly with Daitz to argue that Tormis' political stance was far less overt, still contends his dedication to preserving the choral traditions of Estonia and surrounding regions in contemporary music was essentially politically motivated. Tormis himself, quoted in Jones (2005: 10), describes his resistance of Soviet homogenization:

[T]hey were forbidden in the 60s and 70s, these words. It's complicated, and paradoxical. In 1948, when they were shouting about formalism, they said, 'Please look for folk songs' – but it was a very good slogan for me! In the 60s and 70s the Ministry of Culture here said, ah, that's nationalism. It took them 30 years

to understand what I was doing! I was not a fighter, not a dissident – but our public understood what I wanted to say in my national, folk-based work.

A main feature of Tormis' work was the use of *regilaul*,²¹ a musical style that reflects the traditional Estonian belief of being rooted in the earth, “and from the earth *regilaul* flows. *Regilaul* are songs of nature and work, life and toil, a means of communication and celebration. By tradition, these tunes are not written down, or even given titles. Instead, they are passed from one generation to the next orally, as is only appropriate for a genre that legend says comes from the birds, the wind, the rivers, and the trees” (Jones, 2005: 10). Tormis' work was a centerpiece of the Estonian song festivals in the 80s and 90s, as well as the Latvian and Lithuanian festivals (Smidchens 2014). One of the interview respondents also emphasized the role of national songs for the participants:

This was most important, that they had the opportunity, they didn't just get together and sing, they sang national songs for the first time after a very long period of time. And that was another very important aspect of this whole process – that suddenly there were all these musicians and songwriters, almost overnight, they wrote all these national songs that were coming out one after another. And they became instant hits. So everyone knew them immediately, which is also surprising to me, because again, they weren't played on radios or anywhere else. How did you even find out about them? How did you even know the lyrics? But everyone knew them – and I remember this as a child, I had my own favorite national songs that I liked best. And that's even maybe an interesting relation to a more younger generation to have this contact through singing. So maybe you didn't understand exactly what was going on, but of course you had your favorites, all the songs you liked best, that people sang when they got together. And this songwriting, it didn't...it was very widespread, you could find the same thing among many different musicians and styles, so Tallinn at the time had a big punk scene, and there were even lots of punk national songs. Like they were some of my favorites, those punk songs – and rock songs, and they were a very different style, kind of, all about freedom. So that was I think super important, I think being together, in such numbers, and singing those national songs, that was a very powerful experience. Even now, most people start crying when they even speak about this. Or they become a little teary-eyed.²²

For both Daitz and Jones, Tormis' work represents the history of subversion and national identity embedded in Estonian choral music. More than simply singing, the kind of musical text also mattered.

²¹ “*Regilaul*” translates literally into “sleigh song” (Jones, 2005: 10).

²² Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

Joachim Braun (2008), meanwhile, reconsiders musicology in the Baltic states as the site of political contestation. Braun (2008: 233) documents how across the Baltic states, “entire fields of musical activity were annihilated during the war years; for example, the violin classes created at the Latvian Conservatory by Professor Adolph Metz, a pupil of Auer, who was invited to the Conservatory by Jāzeps Vītols in 1922, were abruptly terminated with the killing of Metz in 1943.” Soviet conflict with professional musicians divided the musical community into camps of active collaborators, inert professionals, and latent oppositionists. Yet even the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* observes how Estonian university students were more likely to enter the music and arts fields than Soviet-approved work in construction, the police, or the military: “On the other hand, if you look at the makeup of the student body at the conservatory, the music school, the art institute, etc., you will find that it is mainly Estonian young men and women who are studying there.”²³ Braun believes the scholarship has failed to respect the totality of subversive art activism undertaken in the Soviet period. He (2008: 235) claims:

Marģeris Zariņš and Pauls Dambis, Arvo Pärt and Veljo Tormis, Osvaldas Balakauskas, Bronius Kutavičius, and many others exploited a kind of Aesopian musical language, be it in Baroque or Far Eastern stylizations, by using Latin titles or ancient folklore materials, or by employing modern compositional techniques.

[...]

Musical elements from East Asia also provided a vehicle for Baltic composers to express latent dissident sympathies through their works. The setting of Japanese Zen- Buddhist, polysemantic haiku became popular in vocal works of the 1960s (among the first were by Zariņš and the Estonian Kuldar Sink, 1942-1995). This influence derived from Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's notion of 'remaining silent when feelings reach their highest pitch because no words are adequate' (Normet 1979), and reached its musical peak in Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* (1977) for two violins, chamber orchestra, and prepared piano.

Braun (2008: 236) too analyzes a Tormis' piece, the *Incantation of Iron* (1972), for chorus, tenor solo, baritone solo, and shaman drum, that sets “texts from the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* as completed by the contemporary Estonian poets August Annis, Paul- Erik Rummo and Jaan

²³ *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, “FEW ESTONIANS GO INTO CONSTRUCTION WORK, THE POLICE OR THE MILITARY, BUT MOST MUSIC AND ART STUDENTS ARE ESTONIANS,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40(6): 1988a. Page 8.

Kaplinski. This composition brought into Soviet concert halls the intemperate, untamed, ecstatic elemental force of pagan folk-rites fused with modern Estonian poetry, which projected the entire work into the reality of the present.” These works, whether performed at the song festivals or informing the choral traditions of the twentieth-century Estonian music scene, outline Estonian resistance politics through the “signifying work” of music.

The sociology of music field’s first and foremost principle is that of music as a social, communicative, embodied relationship. Alfred Schutz (2015) describes a web of social relationships between the composer, the performer, and the listener that creates a “mutual tuning-in relationship” where I and Thou become We. He emphasizes the physical components of musical communication – breath in lungs to compel resonance, facial expression, gesticulation in conducting – to suggest that multi-person music-making is a composition of the body, by the body, and for the body. Spencer (2015) cites the origin of music in the muscularity and physicality required to produce sound, which produces pain, pleasure, and emotion. The link between physiology and emotion is well researched (Shafron 2010; Schaefer et al. 2013; Oppezzo & Schwartz 2014). Spencer (2015: 27) explains the connection between the body, singing, and emotion as follows:

The muscles that move the chest, larynx, and vocal chords, contracting like other muscles in proportion to the intensity of feelings; every different contraction of these muscles involving, as it does, adjustment of the vocal organs; every different adjustment of the vocal organs causing a change in the sound emitted; – it follows that variations of voice are the physiological results of variations of feeling; it follows that each inflection or modulation is the natural outcome of some passing emotion or sensation; and it follows that the explanation of all kinds of vocal expression, must be sought in this general relation between mental and muscular excitements...

He considers feelings and emotion the stimuli to muscular action that create sound. While this seems very abstract, think of the popular activity of opera-going: often people visit the opera for shows in various languages they do not understand – German, Italian, French – and make out the plot and emotion of the performers without a perfect translation of the lyrics. For Spencer (2015:

28), “in respect alike of *loudness, timbre, pitch, intervals, and rate of variation*, song employs and exaggerates the natural language of the emotions; – it arises from a systematic combination of those vocal peculiarities which are the physiological effects of acute pleasure and pain.” One of my interview respondents observed how singing ignited necessary confidence for the song festival participants:

I do think that it was also very important for the older generation to maybe free themselves, regain certain confidence, from fears. To get rid of fear through singing. Because that aspect shouldn't be underestimated. I was just thinking, my mom was more or less my age at the time [...] and she remembers very clearly the terror of the Soviet system, all these mass deportations, imprisonments without any reason, most of her family was killed without much of a reason. So there was a very, very deep-seated pain there. And so I mean going against the system like that, that's a very scary thing to do. [...] I think that since, this still happened relatively recently, we're speaking about my grandparents, my father was in Siberia with his parents, and my mom's stories from this side of the family are very difficult for me to even hear. That's recent stuff. To actually get over this fear, or gain, you have this little hope – and you probably don't even allow yourself to hope that much – but you have something in you, and I think the singing event really allowed it to grow, to regain some sort of confidence, and to maybe be also willing to accept the consequences. Seeing there being so many people around you, that gives you so much more strength. I think that was very important.²⁴

Spencer identifies four functions of music: immediate pleasure, communication of feeling, incitement of that emotion in others, and facilitation of the development of an emotional language. One of my interview respondents explained the emotion-singing nexus of the song festivals as such: “I am not sure it was a revolution at the time, or defined as such. It was singing, and this singing came from somewhere very deep inside of a nation that had been suppressed. To me it has to do with courage and at the same time with fear. And coincidence.”²⁵ Another respondent, recalling her memories of the September 1988 festival, noted:

And then I also remember people being very emotional, which was also a little strange, people getting together and being all emotional. This has something to do with the national stereotype, I suspect, as well. Stereotypes always can be well, some aspects are exaggerated, or something distorted about this, but there is probably also a little bit of truth in it as well – it seems to be some sort of generalization, right? I mean, the stereotype, the national stereotype of Estonians is that they are very down-to-earth, very calm, phlegmatic, almost. So, you don't show any emotion – and that is certainly true, like, nowadays if you see someone crying publicly, something terrible must have happened. It just doesn't happen regularly. So this public display of emotion is pretty rare. You usually probably only see it during the song festivals [laughs]. But I remember seeing it, thinking, hm, what's going on? Everyone is crying. So that I also remember.²⁶

²⁴ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

²⁵ Katriina in discussion with the author, March 2017.

²⁶ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

Singing, then, awakens, sustains, and fortifies the emotional character of a group. Group singing also transforms public space by announcing its visibility and disrupting silence. Music –noise – is an assertion of presence, where the singing group occupies auditory and physical space (Born 2013). We have seen this concept already – however less detailed – in Smidchens’ description of the mass euphoria of the song festivals. Singing establishes solidarity and mood.

Eric Drott (2015: 173) furthers this concept in his piece on the history of musical resistance in social movements, contending, “the non-representational and intensely connotative nature of musical meaning makes it a powerful medium for political contention.” He identifies two ways that music contributes to a movement’s construction: public contention and collective identity-making. Music as “signifying work” can draw symbolic boundaries and issue political messages (see above). Further, Drott (2015: 176) suggests:

[G]roup singing is something virtually anybody can take part in, while the synchronization of physical gesture required of collective performance enables individuals to experience solidarity at a corporeal level [where] the collapse of clear-cut boundaries between self and other in auditory space – boundaries that persist within a physical space – affords participants a way of transcending themselves and becoming part of a larger, social body (Traïni 2008: 24-26, Roy 2010: 16).

Other scholars also relate the nature of music to social movements (Everman & Jamison 1998, Roy 2010). Georgina Born (2011: 381, 384) establishes the link between music and the materialization of individual and collective identity, as well as political resistance:

[E]vidence from both historical and anthropological research suggests that it is the autonomy of the socialities of musical performance and practice that renders them potential vehicles for social experimentation or for the exercise of a musico-political imagination, in the sense that they may enact alternatives to or inversions of, and can be in contradiction with, wider forms of hierarchical and stratified social relations.

[...]

[It] is by analysing genre as entailing a mutual mediation between two self-organizing historical entities – musical formations (on the one hand) and social identity formations (on the other) – that we can grasp the way that wider social identity formations are refracted in music, and that musical genres entangle themselves in evolving social formations.

Gross (2002: 349), discussing the Estonian song festival case, agrees with Born: “What is behind the singing is the collective ethos. The singing of anthems, folk songs, and poems creates a

feeling of simultaneity and univocality. This is a physical realization of Anderson's 'imagined community.'" Musical relationships, then, are inherently relational, inherently emotive, and inherently social.

These concepts – music and emotion, physicality, power, identity – all apply to participation in the song festivals. Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2014: 260), analyzing the song festivals in the broader contexts of Estonian cultural traditions of choral associations and collective singing, observe:

Nationalism undoubtedly has a strong emotional element, and national festivals were 'acts of devotion' (Mosse 1991: 9). Mass gatherings [create] a sense of interdependence with other members of the collective, and this interdependence [is] 'cemented by symbolic action'. Whereas song festivals created episodic action, the formation of singing associations and choirs enabled the people to be engaged more permanently (Mosse 1991: 13).

The research establishing these relationships explains the otherwise overly-theoretical claim of Estonian singing nationalism; it seems far more natural that so many of Rakfeldt's (2015) respondents cited their participation in the song festivals as the most important factor in preserving their Estonian national identity throughout the years of Soviet occupation when considering the backdrop of music's communicative and social nature. One of my interview respondents explains, "It was also a way of protest. [Singing] served many functions, but that could have been one. There were also protests going on, in a traditional sense, posters and slogans and so on, but maybe 10,000 people attended these. They only took place in either Tallinn or Tartu, the major cities. But that's not, there's a difference between 10,000 and 300,000."²⁷ With these understandings of music in mind, I turn now to the production of nationalism.

²⁷ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

Nationalism

Pride, solidarity, joy, determination – these emotions awakened in the song festival participants through group singing, and the singing of Estonian songs, templates of cultural history and nationhood, are the foundation for nationalism. Nationalism impels collective identity-making and collective action through the categorical imperative of national self-determination (Kedourie 1994). The song festivals, and their construction of an Estonian “singing nationalism,” were vital to inducing the nationalist drive for Estonians to build their own self-governing nation-state through the festivals’ invocation of cultural memory and national identity.

Several scholars stipulate that collective memory of Estonia’s national history predicated and precipitated the Estonian revolution (Gross 2002; Tamm 2008; Rakfeldt 2015). The theorists who study national identity and memory root their work in Maurice Halbwachs (1992) seminal text, *On Collective Memory*, which contends that national identity formation arises through the collective context of memory. Toomas Gross (2002) argues that collective memory operates as a link between generations through temporal continuity that legitimates a sociopolitical order or status. He (2002: 343) refers to “reservoirs of memory” that preserve a collective memory, denoted as “institutions, cultural practices, or physical places, which carry in themselves meaningful history and thus serve as a trigger for memories and identities,” and identifies three reservoirs that encapsulated Estonian identity: the song festivals, oral history, and attachment to land. By emphasizing how collective memory is *imagined*, he links memory to nations, which, as Anderson (1993) has argued, are “imagined communities.” Gross sees the song festivals as commemorative ceremonies. Collective memory is preserved in rituals, ceremonies, and social events that trigger emotional recollection through repetition and

symbolism, and scholars like “Lieven (1993: 110) [consider] them the most powerful vehicles for the creation of national-cultural symbols” (Gross, 2002: 347). The song festivals, throughout the Soviet Era and especially during the late 80s, were thus “repetitive reminders of the Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century, [a] distinct cultural and ethnic identity” (Gross, 2002: 348), functioning as rituals of intensification, which Gross determines to be rituals situated to restore social equilibrium (as opposed to rituals of passage, which mark life transitions). His other two “reservoirs of memory” – oral histories and “hidden transcripts,” as well the national attachment to the land – are large features of the songs sung at the festivals.²⁸ Gross’ examination of the song festivals as commemorative ceremonies therefore reinforces Rakfeldt’s (2015: 514) claim that “Estonian Song Festivals [were] so significant during the occupation. The song festivals, in particular, created venues for people to mesh their actualized individual memories with their ethnic identities, thus bolstering their collective cultural memory.” Clearly, the song festivals activated a nationalism strong enough to generate the will for collective action.

Mark Tamm (2008: 499), studying the Estonian case of “how collectivities make sense of their own present through recourse to reconstructed narratives of their past,” notably leaves out the song festivals. He disagrees with Gross’s conception of memory as constituted by “reservoirs,” positing instead that memories are historical products, reconstructed through cultural *mnemotechniques* and *mnemotechnologies* (strategies and institutions that develop and sustain memory, through material objects and physical imitation). He (Tamm, 2008: 502) emphasizes the importance of repetition, how “the [national] identity is based on narrative templates, which give coherence to a nation's past. Coherence is one of the cornerstones of collective identity: repetition and consistency constitute the two most important attributes of a

²⁸ For more on this, refer to the section above on musical text as “signifying work” and semiotic systems.

nation's historical consciousness (Assmann, A. 1993),” but locates the crucial driver of Estonian nationalism in historiography, as does Ruutsoo (1995). Yet even as he (Tamm, 2008: 508-9) argues that cultural memory “derives its motive force not only from constant 'construction' and 'invention', but also from the repetition of culturally specific bodily practices associated with commemorations, demonstrations and other ritual activities,” he identifies national holidays that commemorate various battles in Estonian history, especially “The Great Battle for Freedom” that ignited the first independent Estonian Republic, as the main memory-makers in Estonia.

Tamm’s own logic, however, better suits the song festival tradition than the summer holidays celebrating “The Great Battle for Freedom.” Commemorating Estonian national holidays were banned in the Soviet Era, so even as people remembered them at home, in private, they simply could not have had the same prominence and effect as the festivals that recurred every five years.

Tamm’s repetition, ritual, and coherence all reinforced by cultural *mnemotechniques* and *mnemotechnologies* makes more sense in the song festival context. Rein Ruutsoo (1995: 172), meanwhile, denounces the song festivals as inhabiting political significance during the independence movement, claiming, “as a demonstration of national protest, it still remained an expression of both power and helplessness;” he instead sees historical identity as the main source of nation-building. But even as he dismisses the song festivals as political events, he (1995: 171) relies on the aspirational platform that singing created: “The spiritual and emotional constellation of the new ‘awakening’ identity quite clearly and knowingly repeated that of the past. Songs like "It's Proud and Good Being An Estonian" openly rehabilitated the national discourse and formed a basis for the ‘national-collective salvation’ ideology.” This basis, I argue, cannot be discounted as a throwaway step in the period of “white-hot mobilization.” It is exactly these

songs, and their preserved emotions, history, identity, and power, that connected history to present and transformed latent nationalism into collective action.

Rakfeldt's (2015) statistical model and supplemental qualitative interviews aim to empirically measure the question that both Gross and Tamm investigate: how did Estonians make and preserve their collective memory throughout the occupation? Rakfeldt finds evidence for how other memory theories – that the act of remembering the earlier Estonian republic (1918–1940) and its history, as well as secretly celebrating its holidays – also contributed to identity preservation, but he concludes that, by far, the strongest factor in preserving Estonian national identity was participation in the song festivals. He (2015: 514) explains his conclusion as follows:

“[M]emories of memories” (*mälestuste mälestused*) as internalized historical narratives that inform collective memory have the power to change the identity of individuals and of communities. When individuals act on these memories, they effect even greater change by solidifying their sense of identity. This means of solidifying a collective memory [through participation in the song festivals, among other factors] is what sustained the national identity of the Estonian people throughout the occupation, and what enabled them to pass this sense of identity on to succeeding generations.

Using regression model analyses, his findings suggest that the strongest factor in the preservation of Estonian national identity was participation in the song festivals, “which brought together several hundred thousand Estonians for the purpose of singing songs like ‘*Mu Isamaa on Minu Arm*’ (‘My Homeland Is My Love’) [...] Overwhelmingly, the strongest predictor variable was having attended the Estonian Song Festivals” (Rakfeldt, 2015: 521). Like Smidchens (2014) and myself, Rakfeldt (2015: 539) explains this phenomenon by appealing to bio-physiological responses to music:

Blood and Zatorre measured the changes in cerebral blood flow that occurred while participants listened to music that held meaning for them. They found that brain regions such as the reticular activating system, amygdala (emotions and motivation), orbitofrontal cortex, ventral striatum, midbrain, the hippocampus (seat of memory), and the ventral medial prefrontal cortex (choice, intentionality) were affected (Blood and Zatorre 2001). Many of these brain areas are linked to reward, memory, motivation, emotion, and arousal. Activation of all of these regions may lead to the taking of action, as Jerome Bruner suggests. Intentions and commitments to sets of beliefs and values in an ongoing process of “self-making” and “world-making”

unfold in the form of stories or narratives that lead to a sense of self and an identity (1990, 1991a, 1991b, 2004).

Rakfeldt provides the empirical evidence that strengthens my claim that song festivals compelled a sense of national identity, which, in turn, rendered the necessary emotional state to sustain collective action.

Other scholars also see the song festivals, regardless of collective memory, as key to establishing Estonian identity (Ruutsoo 1995; Brokaw & Brokaw 2001; Kanike & Aaerlaid-Tart 2004; Born 2011; Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2014). Kanike and Aaerlaid-Tart (2004: 79-80) argue that Estonian “singing nationalism” was a “taken-for-granted counter-cultural system of values, protecting the national identity for the growing generations [...] [and] an organic way of national existence and part of the biographies of different generations” throughout Soviet occupation, and they see the song festivals as the manifestation of this singing nationalism. While their piece focuses more on modern Estonian politics, contending that the end of singing nationalism has resulted in a cultural trauma within Estonia, they (2004: 84) do argue the song festivals were key to the 1991 revolution:

The Estonians reshaped the institutional structure of this cultural capital and turned it into political capital [...] Based on the song festivals traditions as the institutional structure of an ethnocentric counter-culture, they established an open set of politicized institutions serving in the struggle for national independence within just a few months [like the Singing Mass Protest Actions, June 1988; the formation of the Popular Front; and the formation of the Estonian Citizens' Committees].

They take a structural approach to situate the song festivals in the broader political opportunity structure of the Estonian independence movement, as do Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2014), whose work I have outlined already in my literature review. I add to these theorists' contentions through my focus on the individual, cognitive level of song festival participation. One of my respondents examined this relationship of Estonian singing nationalism herself, saying:

I do think it's certainly part of the national identity. Singing and doing it in Estonian – it's this whole tradition, which started before even the national country was formed, so it's a very, very long tradition – I

do think that that's a way of preserving our identity.²⁹ I can live here [in the United States], and then I go back in summer and go to the song festival and feel very Estonian. It is certainly a significant part of my Estonian identity, and not only singing as such, because for some people singing is very important, but not only singing, also singing in Estonian, the lyrics of the song, having them in Estonian. It's also a way to preserve your language. And language I think plays a very important role in Estonian identity.

I recently read this – there's this one woman, who lives in South Africa, an Estonian woman who has lived there all her life, fifty years, or something like that. And someone went to visit, and she has this beautiful, beautiful Estonian without any accent whatsoever, which is very rare, because sometimes people are away just a few years, and they come back and have this slight awkward accent. But what she was doing, evidently – while working, she was singing all the national songs, and folk songs, so that was her way of doing things. She was just singing. And evidently this really kept the language alive.³⁰

By investigating the nature of festivals, music, emotion, and collective memory, I link the individual experience to these processes of national identity formation and preservation only explained by the structural theorists. The individual-level work, on the other hand, attempts to *understand* what the song festivals activated in the individual participant. Brokaw and Brokaw (2001: 28) contend that choral traditions were key to the independence struggle, but their piece focuses far more on how “the singing tradition of Estonians contributed in important ways to promoting the social marketing goals of independence, a united national character, and the usefulness of peaceful protest within the country and abroad.” Again, I build on their work by placing the process of identity construction into conversation with nationalism, collective memory, the sociology of music, and festival studies. We cannot understand these structural processes of revolutions without first analyzing why individuals participate.

²⁹ Scholarship confirms this respondent's theory linking language to national identity. Kedourie (1994), surveying the theoretical contributions of Herder to the study of nationalism, argues that language is pivotal to national self-determination. Where Herder claims that “first, that those who speak an original language are nations, and second, that nations must speak an original language” (Kedourie, 1994: 61), Kedourie settles for a more Gellner-like focus on state education and standardized communication: “National self-determination is, in the final analysis, a determination of the will; and nationalism is, in the first place, a method of teaching the right determination of the will [...] to annex minds to love of the state, and therefore what is taught and how it is taught, what is suppressed and what is changed, is a matter of state policy” (76, 78-79). Language can be considered a fundamental tenet of a nation's construction of the self. This view has further evidence in the language and citizenship policies in democratizing Post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia (Schulze 2010), where a state language acts as the clearest marker of national identity – in the Post-Soviet Estonian case, language privileges ethnic Estonians, disadvantages ethnic Russians, and restricts the integration of Russian-speakers into the public arena of Estonia.

³⁰ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

Conclusion

The fundamental question of why revolutions occur does not revolve around grievance or greed theory (Demmers 2012), that is, how or why people desire revolution, but instead around *when* they decide to mobilize and begin collective action. The next question considers how individuals and movements sustain that collective action long enough to achieve their aims or surrender. Both questions demand structural answers. My study of the Estonian case aims to investigate these structural events from an individual, cognitive perspective: why did people participate in protest, and what did participation mean and do for those who protested? The song festivals of the late 80s – as festival spaces, musical processes, and reservoirs of a national collective memory – are the ideal situation to analyze these cognitive systems. They operate as structural events in the independence movement – political opportunities for ordinary Estonians to demand autonomy and voice their grievances, mobilizing events to engage otherwise apolitical Estonians in a revolutionary movement – and they harness cultural frames that resonate in the population, but they also provide the space for scholars to analyze the micro-level decision-making and responses of individuals who attended the song festivals and then decided to amplify their revolutionary engagement. The Estonian song festivals offer a unique testing ground to trial Opp’s structural-cognitive model.

I do not argue that the song festivals led to Estonian independence. Nor do I argue that song festivals, in any weakening authoritarian state, would have the same emotional and national resonance and impact that they did in Estonia. I aim instead to make a contingent generalization about the role of the song festivals in the Estonian independence movement. One of my interview respondents articulates this phenomenon well:

Well, I actually think about this, and the role of singing in this whole process, what it contributed. There was a lot going on, and inevitably at different levels, but I mean, I would say certainly that these night song festivals and this big event [the Song of Estonia] and what not in ‘88 did play a crucial role in this whole

process. Only this event would not have got us freedom for sure, you needed all these other events. But it did play a crucial role. In what way?³¹

These festivals were not minor events, as most of the literature contends; they were the main sites of political contestation and national consciousness for ordinary Estonians. The song festivals functioned as the gateway to sustained collective action in a society where resistance had been criminalized for a half century.

As repeated, ritual events, the song festivals celebrated embodied performances of national resistance and developed an atmosphere of mass euphoria that rewarded individuals who protested and encouraged them to continue. The semiotic system of the songs they sang at the festivals – recalling historical symbolism, denouncing Soviet rule, and demanding independence – reinforced group solidarity, incited further emotional highs, and reawakened a desire for national self-governance and self-recognition. The song festivals as physical representations of cultural memory and collective identity buttressed the nationalism necessary to compel a united, strong, and persistent national independence movement. Other cultural symbols did not compel the same intense, urgent, emotional response that linked individual choices to mobilizing structures (Rakfeldt 2015). The movement which began by asking for increased autonomy and ended by demanding radical irredentism needed the song festivals to create the atmosphere of mass confidence, euphoria, safety, and solidarity that propelled the Estonian nation into independence. These atmospheric conditions of the city singing squares and festival grounds delivered a nationalism that movement leaders needed to prove they had the numbers and support to challenge the formidable power of Moscow.

An important note here on the current Estonian song festivals both reinforces my contention of their role as nation-building events and presents a cautionary tale. The powerful

³¹ Riin in discussion with the author, March 2017.

role of nationalism in the song festivals, like it did in the late 80s, has come to reflect contemporary political debates. One of my interview respondents qualified her thoughts on the current song festivals as such:

Sometimes, however, and especially in recent couple of years, I've noticed that there might be a darker side to Song festivals, which is really alien to the original concept of the idea: namely the rise of nationalism and xenophobia which might get a good boost from events such as these which emphasize the importance of being Estonian and the exclusiveness of our national character. These concepts were important for Estonians to first lay claim to independence and the right for our own country. Now, however, I sometimes worry that these ideas might be misused to further xenophobic feelings among Estonians. I'm not sure how to counter that.³²

All three of my respondents, in varying terms and degrees, indicated a discomfort of the singing nationalism in the modern context of the right-wing nationalism sweeping Europe and other western liberal democracies (Wodak, KhosraviNik, Mral 2013). Curiously, their observations contradict the conclusions of Kanike and Aaelaid-Tart (2004), who argue that Estonian “singing nationalism” as a “counter-cultural system of values that served to protect national identity [...] lost its *raison d'être* after the restoration of independent statehood [...] [here considered] the traumatic loss of Singing Nationalism” (77). They argue that singing has become less important to Estonian society since independence, as the need for song festivals as “a regular manifestation of cultural self-being” (Kanike & Aaelaid-Tart, 2004: 82) has reduced since the present nation-state has become more secure. Further work studying the evolving character of nationalism in (relatively) recent democracies may shed light on other cognitive processes that sustain other types of collective action, namely fear, and xenophobia. The song festivals, a potential example of this evolution, could be another site for research into this contemporary phenomenon.

Both the “darker side” of the song festivals and their more benign form pre-1991 exhibit the festivals as sites of identity construction and group formation, where individual participants experience cognitive processes that shape their political decisions and attitudes. To fully

³² Laura in discussion with the author, March 2017.

understand how Estonians construct and realize their national identity and political beliefs, we must recognize the crucial role the song festivals play as a nation singing in concert.

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APPENDIX A

Sophie Scharlin-Petee

Interview Questions

Background

For my undergraduate thesis, drawing from theory on social movements and the sociology of music, I argue that music was a critical variable in the Estonian independence process, furthering existing work on the function of music as a protest tool and crucial element of national identity formation. I contend that music can be understood as an active variable within a movement, and not simply a vehicle for contention.

Questions

Please respond to these questions as you feel comfortable. For each question, please recall as best you can, in however much detail is possible – of course, I do not presume you can remember everything, but whatever you can remember is very helpful to me. I am not looking for any right or wrong answers, so feel free to disagree with my thesis, if you do; I am solely interested in your perspective, as you see it. Thank you!

1. How old were you when you first remember hearing about the “Singing Revolution?” Where did you first hear about it?
2. How did you learn about the political protests going on in the late 80s and early 90s?
3. How would you define the “Singing Revolution?” What does that term/concept/event(s) mean to you?
4. Did you attend any of the song festivals during the years of 1987-1991? If so, how do you remember the event – the atmosphere, the types of music, the political undertones? If not, how do you remember others’ recollections of it, to you?
5. Was your community invested, or interested, in the song festivals during that time? Why or why not? Do you remember there being any (casual or otherwise) conversation about them?
6. Which do you remember hearing about **first**, or **more**, as linked to the country’s drive for independence: the song festivals, or political events?
7. What does the Estonian tradition of the song festival mean to you?
8. Do you see the song festivals as important to Estonia’s national, culture, or historical heritage? If so, how? If not, why not?

Thanks for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX B

I had a sample size of $N=3$. My three interview respondents – Riin, Katriina, and Laura – are native female Estonians. All three were born in Tallinn, then part of the Soviet Republic of Estonia, during the late 1970s.

Riin and Laura's parents attended the "*Eestimaa laul*" (The Estonian Song) festival of September 1988, while Katriina's did not.

My thesis proposal committee recommended Riin to me as someone I could speak to about the Estonian revolution, and after several meetings with her, she got me in touch with Katriina and Laura, two of her friends, who answered the questions laid out in Appendix A in an electronic format. With Riin, I conducted an in-person long-form interview based around the same questions, an interview I later transcribed.