Estonians campaign for independence (The Singing Revolution), 1987-1991

23 August 1987 to September 1991

Country: Estonia

Goals: Estonians sought an end to the Soviet occupation of their country, and demanded full Estonian independence.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 024. Symbolic lights
• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units

Methods in 4th segment:

• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 024. Symbolic lights
• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support  » 2 million people joined the capitals of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia with a human chain
• 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
• 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 5th segment:

• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 024. Symbolic lights
• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
• 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 6th segment:

• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention  » Declaration of Independence
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 024. Symbolic lights
• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
• 171. Nonviolent interjection
• 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 135. Popular nonobedience

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- A broad cross-section of ethnic Estonians
- Activists
- Lawyers
- Historians
- Intellectuals
- Singers
- Students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The Heritage Society (led by Trivimi Velliste), the Popular Front (led by Marju Lauristin), the Estonian National Independence Party (ENIP), Citizens’ Committees Movement (led by Tunne Kelam), the Congress of Estonia, the Estonian Supreme Council

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
Activists in Lithuania and Latvia who were also campaigning for national independence and an end to Soviet occupation.

Involvement of social elites:
Choir conductors

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Activists opposing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact
- Heritage Society

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Estonian National Independence Party (ENIP)
- Popular Front

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Citizens’ Committees Movement
- Congress of Estonia
- The Estonian Supreme Council

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 8 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Soviet Union occupation government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Two Estonian policemen threatened to fill a broadcasting tower with Freon gas in order to prevent Soviet soldiers from taking control of it.

Repressive Violence:
Soviets sent tanks into Estonia to stop the Estonian call for independence. Protesters from Interfront (a group of Russians living in Estonia who opposed Estonian independence) also threatened and harassed the Estonians who demanded independence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Estonians have long held a tradition of singing. Beginning in 1869, Estonians have held a song festival every five years called the Laulupidu during which thousands of Estonians gather to sing together.

During the 1940s, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, stationing about 80,000 soldiers in Estonia alone. Forced to live under Soviet Communism, Estonians were subject to KGB surveillance, deported to work in Siberia, and prohibited from singing Estonian nationalist songs or waving the Estonian flag.

As the decades went by, all three Baltic countries found ways to maintain their cultural identity, although this became more difficult as the Soviet government encouraged Russian emigration to the Baltics as a means of promoting its policy of Russification.

However, at the 1947 song festival, after singing songs about Communism, Lenin, and Marx, the Estonian choir began to sing a nationalist song that had been inspired by an old Estonian poem. The song was entitled “Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love,” and although the Soviets responded by forbidding the singing of the song, the song became the unofficial Estonian national anthem.

In 1969, on the 100th anniversary of the song festival, Estonian singers again used the festival as an opportunity for them to express their desire for national independence. After finishing their official Soviet-approved program, the Estonian choir sang additional traditional Estonian songs and refused to leave the stage. Soviet officials responded by ordering the brass bands to drown out the singing, but the instruments did not prevail. Eventually, as thousands of Estonians continued to sing, the Soviets were forced to let the conductor come back onto the stage to conduct the song.

Throughout the 1970s, the song festivals continued, but Estonians still lived under Soviet domination.

However, in 1985 Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), hoping to stimulate the stagnant Soviet economy and reform Soviet socialism. In 1987, Estonians decided to test these new policies of openness. During that year, Estonians organized protests against the Soviet plan to carry out strip-mining in Estonia. By using nonviolent methods and focusing the issue on the environment, the activists conjectured, Gorbachev would not use force to stop
the protests. Their conjecture proved correct as the protests successfully stopped the mining.

Following this victory, several Estonian activists attempted to openly contest the legality of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a treaty between the USSR and Germany that divided up many of Europe’s countries between them (for example, it permitted the USSR to annex Estonia). The activists decided to organize a demonstration at Hirve Park, but were limited in their ability to publicize the event. They therefore relied on word-of-mouth and illegal radio—such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe—to spread the news.

On August 23, with KGP officers watching the event and taking photographs, the group arrived at Hirve Park and found several thousand Estonian attendees. Although the police shut off the public address system, demonstrators responded by using rolled up paper megaphones to be heard over the crowd. They spoke and spoke, but were not arrested. This event caused a stir among Estonians for it was the first time that Estonians had spoken publicly against the Soviet occupation and gotten away with it.

Following this, the Heritage Society was formed in 1987. Using discussions about Estonian culture as a cover, the Heritage Society planned to push free speech to the next level by speaking out more about Estonian history and Soviet violence. In addition, while at demonstrations, Estonians lit torches in a symbolic act of “Lighting the torch of patriotism.” Within a couple of months, the Heritage Society had grown to about 10,000 people.

In April 1988 the Popular Front—a more moderate legal group that advocated Estonian sovereignty within a loose confederation with the Soviet Union and thus stopping short of full independence—was also launched.

In the summer of 1988, during song concerts that attracted thousands, creative Estonian protesters became increasingly emboldened and brought separate blue, black, and white banners to fly side by side, creating the visual effect of flying the Estonian flag—an act that had been forbidden for years. In June, a summer celebration festival in the capital city of Tullinn erupted into a spontaneous singing jamboree, an event in which close to 100,000 participated. Increasing numbers of Estonian flags started to blossom at the demonstrations, people waving them brazenly. These demonstrations continued over several nights, and following these events the campaign grew even larger.

For example, in reaction to the growth of Estonian independence sentiment, members of Estonia’s Russian population formed a movement called Interfront to combat Estonian independence. This group made demands for national unity, and accused the Estonians of treason.

However, by August 1988 human rights activists, former political prisoners, intellectuals and independent youth groups also founded the more radical Estonian National Independence Party (ENIP), a group that demanded complete independence. Despite its status as a competing movement, the less radical Popular Front continued to grow and in September 1988 staged a rally at the song festival grounds that brought together more than 300,000 Estonians, nearly a third of the entire population. At the rally the head of the Heritage Society was given the opportunity to speak in front of the crowds, a speech in which he demanded complete restoration of independence—a demand the Popular Front did not yet support.

In an attempt to quiet the unrest in Estonia, Soviet leader Gorbachev replaced the more hard line Estonian Communist Party Leader with a more moderate official. In 1989, lawmakers who were trying to strike a balance between increasing Estonia’s freedom and avoiding a crackdown from the Soviets now felt that they could risk making more changes. They passed a series of laws that replaced the soviet flag with the Estonian flag, made Estonian the national language, and declared that Estonians laws would take precedence over Soviet laws. Gorbachev angrily responded by saying that these laws violated the Soviet Constitution, and threatened the lawmakers with arrest.

Because Moscow continued to deny that the occupation of the Baltic nations was illegal, more than a million Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians organized and formed a 600 km human chain from Estonia in the north to Lithuania in the south on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Activists held signs that declared “Freedom for the Baltics.” (For more on the campaigns in Lithuania and Latvia, see “Lithuanians campaign for national independence, 1988-1991” and “Latvians campaign for national independence, 1989-1991”)
Four months later, Gorbachev was forced to admit that there were secret clauses in the Pact that led to the original Soviet invasion of Estonia, but this didn’t change the fact that Estonia was still occupied. Therefore, Estonians decided to use a new strategy. Because the Pact was understood to be illegal, Estonian citizenship therefore still existed, and could be used to emphatically deny the legitimacy of the Soviet occupation.

Estonian organizers therefore decided to register all Estonian citizens for an election that would set up a parallel Estonian government. Within months, as a result of the work done by the Citizens’ Committees Movement that was formed for this purpose, 860,000 people registered as Estonian citizens and generated an overwhelming referendum. By February 1990, the newly registered citizens had voted for an alternative governing body called the Congress of Estonia.

In March of that year, the Congress met for the first time, an action that Moscow could not prohibit due to its new policies. In reaction, feeling threatened by the progress the Estonians had made, an association of Russians who lived in Estonia -- Interfront -- began organizing increasingly hostile demonstrations.

In May 1990, the day after the Estonian Supreme Council made it illegal to fly the Soviet hammer and sickle, Interfront protesters marched on Toompea, the capital of Estonia. The protesters shouted a list of demands, some of which included the restoration of the Soviet flag and the disbanding of the Estonian Supreme Council. As hostilities continued to escalate at Toompea Castle and it looked as though a coup would be attempted, Estonian leaders sent out a call for help. In response to the call, thousands of Estonian citizens flocked to Toompea and trapped the Interfront protesters within the compound. However, just when it looked as though violence would break out, the Estonian crowd opened up a path to allow the Interfront protesters to leave. The Estonians shouted “Out! Out! OUT!” as the Russians retreated.

In 1991 the Soviets began violent crackdowns of the independence campaigns in both Lithuania and Latvia. Expecting a similar attack on their country, Estonians put up barricades around the capital. This was also a time when significant changes were taking place in the Soviet Union: A coup was staged in Moscow, and Gorbachev was arrested by Communist hardliners who thought that he had gone too far with his reforms (see “Defense of Soviet state against coup, 1991”). The hardliners sent tanks into Estonia.

In order to defend the country’s most important source of free information, two young Estonian policemen were given the mission to defend Estonia’s primary broadcasting tower. In addition, the Estonians surrounded the tower with trucks as a barricade. The Estonian Supreme Council held a special council, to which they invited all competing factions of the independence movement. At the meeting, a resolution was hammered out and a unanimous vote was made, declaring Estonia’s independence. The events in the parliament house were broadcasted on Estonian television.

The next morning, Soviet trucks broke through the truck barricade, but a group of Estonians stood in front of the Soviet troops and formed human shields around the TV and radio station.

The Soviets broke through this human barricade, but as they were storming the tower, the two Estonian policemen threatened to fill the tower with Freon gas, killing everyone in the tower. Unsure how to proceed, and given the uncertainty in Moscow, the Soviet soldiers waited 12 crucial hours debating what to do next. Within this time frame, Boris Yeltsin publicly declared that Russia was seceding from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet troops were ordered to leave the broadcasting tower.

Over the next few days, the Soviet Union continued to fall apart, and Estonia attained its independence.

Research Notes

Sources:

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See also:

http://countrystudies.us/estonia/4.htm

www.ce-review.org/00/27/estonia27_history.html

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**Additional Notes:**
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