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## **The Singing Revolution: The Nonviolent Restoration of the Baltic states' Independence in Light of Novel Soviet Policies and Repression**

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**The Singing Revolution: The Nonviolent Restoration of the Baltic states' Independence  
in Light of Novel Soviet Policies and Repression**

**Bachelor's Thesis – Social Movements and Political Violence**

**Leiden University**

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“A nation who makes its revolution by singing and smiling should be a sublime example to all.” – Heinz Valk, 1988.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The 20th century was, thus far, the most tumultuous and transformative period of the global political realm. The period saw two World Wars, the Cold War, numerous civil wars and revolutions, decolonization, warfare developments, the advancement of international cooperation, the emergence of various social movements, etc., all of which shaped politics as we know them today (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006). Many of these transformational events took place in or involved Europe, and this research places its focus on a set of countries in Eastern Europe – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, also known as the Baltic states.

The Baltics differ linguistically but share similar histories and cultures, stemming back to medieval Europe (Brokaw & Brokaw, 2001). The 20th century saw the three nations through turbulence and change. In 1918, all three declared independence from the Russian Empire and were subsequently internationally recognized as democratic republics. The independences, unfortunately, were short-lived: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereinafter – the Soviet Union or the USSR) occupied and annexed the countries during the summer of 1940, after which they were occupied by Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1944, until the Soviet Union re-occupied the Baltics in 1944 (Taagepera, 2018).

The Baltics remained part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991; however, it must be noted that these countries were the first to secede from the Union, triggering the downfall of the superpower (Siegelbaum, n.d.). Throughout the nearly 50 years of Soviet occupation and repression, the Baltic people continued to privately safeguard their cultures and to garner hopes to one day be independent again. These hopes were renewed when Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet General Secretary, introduced changes to the USSR’s foreign relations under the ‘New Thinking’ policy in 1986 (Piirimäe, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in (Šmidchens, 2016).

‘New Thinking’ influenced both the foreign and domestic policies of the USSR, the latter of which was significantly affected by the *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) of Soviet foreign policy, as decision-making powers were shifted from the central government to the Republics of the Union and increased the overall transparency of Soviet activities (Piirimäe, 2020). With the introduction of these policies, the Soviet Union ultimately catalyzed its own dissolution: the restructured dynamics of foreign and domestic affairs empowered national movements, undermining “the legitimacy of the regime” (Piirimäe, 2020, p. 1).

Among the emerging national movements were also those of the Baltic states. In light of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the first protests erupted in 1986 with the overall situation in the Baltics shifting as of 1987, when the countries began widespread nationalist mobilization. The independence movements started as small groups and were later joined by Baltic intellectuals and pro-nationalist members of the countries’ Communist parties, ultimately establishing Popular Fronts in each country and mobilizing the public (Baltic Defence College, n.d.; Piirimäe, 2020). These events marked the beginning of the nonviolent Singing Revolution<sup>2</sup> in the Baltics, which gained its title from singing and culture as its main nonviolent tactics, and the end of the Soviet Union.

Despite being a hallmark moment in history, the three small countries’ nonviolent victory against the repressive nuclear superpower of the 20th century remains underrepresented in academic literature. Therefore, this research project will employ a single case study with the process-tracing method and attempt to build upon previous research on the success of the nonviolence in and Soviet repression against the Baltic independence movement. Subsequently, this research aims to answer the following question: How did nonviolent resistance influence the response of Soviet repression during the Baltic states’ Singing Revolution?

### **Literature review**

The following section reviews the literature related to the two main themes of this research – the Singing Revolution and nonviolent resistance and repression – in order to outline the main

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<sup>2</sup> “The Singing Revolution” may refer to both the nonviolent independence movement in Estonia and in the Baltic states. In this research, the Singing Revolution refers specifically to the Baltic movement.

arguments and propositions present in academic scholarship and to identify the literature's key strengths and weaknesses. A literature review can, therefore, help to evaluate the quality and thoroughness of current literature on the specific topic, which is essential for identifying a gap in the literature to position the newfound analysis in (Knopf, 2006).

## **The Singing Revolution**

The Singing Revolution is the term associated with the events and independence movement of the Baltic states between 1987 and 1991, the latter being the year of the official independence restoration of all three nations. The movement gained its name in 1988 due to the use of "songs as the unifying symbol and nonviolent weapon of choice in the struggle for national self-determination" (Šmidchens, 2016). It is found that the majority of the literature focuses on either or both the choice and use of culture and symbols as a nonviolent weapon and on the examination of one of the three Baltic nations.

While the Singing Revolution is a socio-politically significant proof of successful secession from one of the biggest and most influential nations at the time, it clearly lacks representation in academic scholarship. Piirimäe (2020) investigates the emergence of the Revolution in light of Gorbachev's policies, stating that "the elements of [the end of the Cold War and the USSR's collapse] still remain puzzling" (p. 1). The author, therefore, attempts to understand how the socio-political reforms enabled the success of the independence movements. Piirimäe's findings are significant, revealing that the Soviet Union's stability and the future success of 'New Thinking' depended on "center-periphery relations" (p. 12), which were fiercely challenged by the newfound empowerment of the national movements, ultimately undermining "the legitimacy of the regime" (p. 1). This research is crucial in understanding the socio-economic and political realities of the time, providing a thorough outline of the political framework the Singing Revolution existed in.

Many scholars have placed the focus on the rather unconventional nonviolent weapon of choice during the Revolution – culture and, in particular, songs. This theme in the literature discusses songs both in the Baltic and in a particular country's perspective. Kudiņš (2019) investigates three Latvian songs from the Singing Revolution as symbols of nonviolent resistance. By examining each song in its lyrical and cultural context, historical significance, and reception,

the author characterizes “in detail the unique local aspects” (p. 29) of the Latvian nonviolence songs. Similarly, Waren (2012) has conducted research on the role of music in the Estonian context of the Singing Revolution to explore its impact on political mobilization. The author finds strong support for the integral role of music in resource, identity, and political mobilization.

Both Kudiņš (2019) and Waren (2012) help to accentuate the significance of music in the Singing Revolution both politically and nationally by outlining its role in uniting people in a specific Baltic country in their common goal. Šmidchens (2014) has conducted the most holistic research on the power of singing in the Singing Revolution in a book that thoroughly examines various aspects of the movement’s nonviolent culture and the tactical choices. For example, Šmidchens (2014) outlines the power of the Soviet Union in relation to the power of the occupied nations’ citizens, examining how Soviet repression and censorship aimed for praise of the Union and complete surrender to their political ideologies (pp. 135-159). Moreover, the author discusses the construction of nonviolent singing traditions in light of the aforementioned censorship, which helps to overall provide a significant examination of the singing traditions in the framework of the Soviet Revolution.

Clemens Jr.’s (2009) analysis of the Baltics’ shared history of culture and symbols complements the aforementioned authors’ research. Though Clemens Jr. (2009) focuses on history, the author makes a conclusion that the Baltic states possess both soft and smart power, which are “the ability to persuade (...) and to convert and apply assets wisely and skillfully to achieve constructive ends” (p. 169), respectively. Elaborating that their roots lie in culture and its expressions, Clemens Jr. provides insight into how culture and songs became the main nonviolent weapon of the Revolution.

Two crucial articles unrelated to the musical aspect of the Singing Revolution have been identified, both of whom present ideas and perspectives necessary for a better understanding of the movement itself, as well as the surrounding (inter)national discourse and mobilization tactics.

Lazda (2009) analyzes the Singing Revolution in the case of Latvia in order to make inferences of the impact of its events on democratic processes in the reestablished democratic state. The author argues that there is “overemphasis on ethno-cultural nationalism” (p. 518) in research,

which fails to recognize the deeper complexities behind the Singing Revolution. Having identified the Latvian independence movement's main ambitions – “to be transethnic and transnational” (p. 519) –, Lazda explores their impact on the nationalist mobilization in the country, emphasizing minority inclusion. The research finds that without the decisive support of the Latvian minority population, the vote for reestablishment of independence would not have passed; however, the ideology and promises based on which minorities were mobilized were not delivered upon after 1991. Therefore, Lazda's (2009) scholarship prompts questions regarding the Singing Revolution's mobilization and ideology, which should be reviewed in light of the democratization of and high minority percentages in all Baltic states.

Finally, Bergmane (2020) brings attention to the international discourse surrounding the Singing Revolution, focusing on the Soviet use of force in the Baltics in January 1991, which resulted in civilian deaths yet remained nonviolent from the movement's side. Accentuating that “Western relationships with state violence have always been ambivalent” (Bergmane, 2020, p. 39), the author brings light to the international reactions to the violent events. Condemnation of the events was delayed yet stronger than with previous instances where violent force was used against civilians under Gorbachev's administration in Georgia and Azerbaijan, highlights and raises questions regarding the different treatment of the Baltics during the time. Bergmane (2020) finds that the international response to the January 1991 attacks was significant to keeping “Gorbachev on the democratization track” (p. 57) and triggering global disapproval of the Union's policies, while the Secretary General had intended for it to stay an issue of domestic politics.

Among the scholars discussed, disapproval or shortcomings of the literature on the Singing Revolution can be identified. For example, Piirimäe (2020) emphasizes that previous scholarship has proven to be biased towards exploration of the Revolution and its impact in Estonia and Latvia, accentuating the need for a more thorough and tantamount investigation in the future. Kudiņš (2019) expresses similar sentiment, noting that the main focus of the literature has, thus far, been on the Estonian Singing Revolution, which may arise from the term's Estonian origins. In addition, Bergmane (2020) highlights that there has been little discussion in the scholarship on the Soviet Union's violence towards the Baltic states despite it being a critical turning point in the Union's downfall. Significantly, the vast majority of academic scholarship either excludes or pays little attention to the events of the Singing



Revolution in Lithuania; a significant gap that must be filled in order to ensure a holistic understanding of the movement.

Finally, an interesting observation can be made on the origins of the literature discussed. The majority of the research has been conducted by scholars of Baltic, specifically Estonian and Latvian, ethnic backgrounds. While this may be coincidental, it is fascinating to observe that the main interest in the topic of the Baltic independence movement appears to come from Baltic researchers worldwide.

### **Nonviolent resistance and repression**

Repression is covered more extensively in academic scholarship; however, there is room for further research into the relation between nonviolent resistance and repression, as this perspective falls short in current literature. Research from Chenoweth et al. (2017) reviews decades worth of literature on the interplay between the two, concluding that there is “little mention of nonviolent resistance (...) in the state repression literature and vice versa” (p. 1951). Similarly, Davenport (2007) expresses that literature on state repression, too, lacks attention in scholarship. Both Davenport (2007) and (2009) systematically outline the concept and role of state repression, embedding it in a broader framework on political order.

Additionally, Lawson (2015) outlines that nonviolent resistance research focuses on “dynamics within opposition movements (...) [and the] international context” (pp. 455-456). Therefore, nonviolent civil resistance has an advantage over its adversary due to the ability to successfully mobilize the public and delegitimize the opponent. Chenoweth and Stephan (2014) add onto this idea by expressing that mobilizing a massive, diverse group of participants may “impose unsustainable costs on a regime” (p. 96), helping to achieve change in the status quo.

Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2014) research on the circumstances enabling the success of civil resistance is groundbreaking in its focus on the (then) under-researched phenomenon. They argue that “contrary to conventional wisdom, (...) civil resistance remains the best strategy for social and political change in the face of oppression” (p. 95), supporting these claims with statistical data on nonviolence’s success rates. Overall, the authors’ research is imperative for

understanding civil resistance, as they thoroughly elaborate upon its success factors, best examples, and possible outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The aforementioned scholarship contributes valuable knowledge on nonviolent resistance, repression, and the Singing Revolution, bringing clarity to various themes and aspects of the movement. Nonetheless, the overall contribution to the knowledge gap on the Revolution falls short, as no research has combined both themes to the extent needed to fully comprehend the intricate course of events of the 1980s independence movements in the Soviet Baltics. This timeframe in the Baltics, therefore, remains underrepresented in current academic scholarship. More extensive inquiry into the developments of the Revolution is required to fully detail and to bring clarity to the circumstances in which it emerged and operated in. Such academic scholarship could, then, be placed in the bigger framework of literature on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

This thesis, due to its scope and timeframe limitations, cannot provide the thoroughness needed to extensively examine the interplay between the movement's nonviolent tactics and the Soviet (repressive) responses. Nonetheless, it can be viewed as the necessary step needed to add onto the scholarship on the topic in order to create a more holistic understanding of the Singing Revolution.

## **Theoretical framework**

The following section provides the working definitions of the core concepts used in and presents the main argument of this research.

### **Core concepts**

Three core concepts – nonviolent resistance, repression, and the ‘New Thinking’ policy – have been identified as crucial for understanding the findings and analysis of this research. All three of these concepts are, therefore, elaborated upon both in general definitions and in the specific context of the Singing Revolution.

Nonviolent resistance is the independent variable of this research, while repression is the dependent variable. Hence, the section on core concepts includes the conceptualization and operationalization of the two variables of this research.

### Nonviolent civil resistance

Nonviolent civil resistance can be defined as “political action that relies on the use of non-violent methods (...) [and] involves a range of widespread and sustained activities that challenge a particular power, force, policy, or regime (...). The adjective ‘civil’ in this context denotes that (...) a movement’s goals are ‘civil’ in the sense of being widely shared in a society; and it denotes that the action concerned is non-military or non-violent in character” (Roberts & Ash, 2009, p. 2). This definition encapsulates nonviolent civil resistance, detailing the characteristics of this specific type of political action. Moreover, Chenoweth & Stephan (2014) identify that “civil resistance remains the best strategy for social and political change in the face of oppression” (p. 95).

Types of nonviolent civil resistance include, for example, economic boycotts, social and political noncooperation, as well as nonviolent protest and persuasion. Nonviolent resistance includes communicating with a wider audience through the use of symbols, radio, and writing, as well as symbolic public acts, music, and rejection of authority (Albert Einstein Institution, n.d.). These particular nonviolent action methods are expected to have been used in and, therefore, found associated with the Singing Revolution.

### Repression

Repression can be defined as “the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions” (Davenport, 2007, p. 2). Davenport (2009) subsequently adds that, generally, repression can be seen as “part of the government’s repertoire of socio-political control strategies” (p. 381).

Davenport (2007) identifies that repression may violate, for example, freedom of speech or assembly, as well as the civic freedom to boycott and peacefully protest, therefore, expressing

one's beliefs without political backlash. This is in line with the repressive actions taken by the Soviet Union against the Baltic states (as will be outlined in the following sections) through censorship of media and culture, erasure of Baltic cultures under the regime, and the implicit prohibition of opposing the ruling power. It should be noted, however, that Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' eased some of the restrictive Soviet practices, marking a change in the socio-political framework of the USSR.

### 'New Thinking', *perestroika*, and *glasnost*

To fully understand the emergence of the Singing Revolution and the (inter)national context it is positioned and must be considered in, it is crucial to elaborate upon 'New Thinking' and its *perestroika* and *glasnost* sub-policies both in theory and in practice.

'New Thinking' was the Soviet foreign policy introduced by Gorbachev in 1986, which paved the road for the end of the Cold War. The policy "ended the military-strategic confrontation between the Soviet Union, the US and their allies, (...) and ended the ferocious ideological struggle" (Piirimäe, 2020, p. 2) between the two superpowers of the time. Piirimäe (2020) emphasizes that the interaction of the 'New Thinking' with the domestic policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* inadvertently began the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

*Perestroika* was the overall policy reform related to transforming the socio-economic and political systems of the USSR in light of the nation's economic stagnation of the 1980s. The *perestroika* reforms were complemented by the idea of *glasnost*, which increased the transparency of political processes and government institutions and allowed for citizens' involvement in various affairs (HISTORY, 2019; Piirimäe, 2020).

Gorbachev's main goal was to focus on economic acceleration and people's diplomacy, which was achieved – the reforms liberated and empowered the Soviet people. The unexpected side effect, however, was the opportunity and sense of hope they found in their newfound political and socio-economic liberties, which they quickly learned to take advantage of, beginning the successful, nonviolent independence movements. Piirimäe (2020) notes that the development of these reforms "must be analyzed in its socio-political setting" (p. 11).

## **Argument**

The research question – How did nonviolent resistance influence the response of Soviet repression during the Baltic states’ Singing Revolution? – requires an examination of nonviolence’s impact on repressive counteractions. The hypothesis of this thesis is, therefore, as follows: the Singing Revolution’s nonviolent resistance had a significant effect on triggering a repressive response from the Soviet Union due to the threat it posed to the Union’s existence. However, the thesis is expected to uncover other factors that may have affected the USSR’s decisions regarding a repressive reaction to the movement’s actions.

The interplay between the nonviolent tactics and Soviet repression was, nonetheless, delicate and extensive. It is possible that, in light of ‘New Thinking’, which strived to showcase a more democratic USSR, Gorbachev held back on the use of force due to the attempted positioning of his improved leadership. It is also likely that, not having experienced much backlash to their nonviolent resistance, the Singing Revolution was more prone to pushing the Soviet limits, ultimately demanding renewed independence. By assessing the Soviet use of force against civilians in January 1991 as a critical turning point in the Singing Revolution, Bergmane (2020) points towards a form of ‘political jiu-jitsu’ – “when violent repression against a nonviolent movement backfires against the regime using it” (Peace Science Digest, 2016) – in the course of the events.

## **Methodology**

The following section specifies the methodology employed for this research, including a discussion of the selected research design, justification of and elaboration on the case selection, and an overview of the data collection methods.

## **Research design**

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative discourse analysis is conducted based on a single case study. Applying discourse analysis to a single case study is key to successfully evaluating the interplay between the variables and creating a better understanding of the Singing Revolution’s outcomes.

Discourse analysis is a form of textual analysis, which explores and analyzes how discourse creates a particular narrative through ideas and concepts, giving “legitimacy and meaning to social practices and institutions” (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 309) in a specific historical situation. Discourse analysis is considered to be applicable for this research, as it looks at the discourse itself while placing the texts and the associated meanings in a broader perspective, which can stem from the intended audience to “the broader relations of power and authority [shaping the] context” (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 310). The consideration of the surrounding context, therefore, allows to evaluate the case of the Singing Revolution and associated Soviet repression more thoroughly by considering the particular political and (inter)national framework.

A single case study allows to thoroughly evaluate a specific case, which is what this research aims to do in regard to the Singing Revolution. Moreover, single case studies are found to provide “a detailed analysis of political phenomena, with rich textual description [and] a good match between theory and evidence” (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 208). Subsequently, single case studies tend to have higher internal validity but a lower external validity, meaning that the findings may be hard to generalize outside the context of the specific case (Halperin & Heath, 2012). Moreover, single case studies are commonly associated with the process tracing method, which can help to achieve the envisioned ‘thick description’.

Process tracing is “a method of within-case analysis [used] to evaluate causal processes (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 429)” that is associated with single case studies. While a discourse analysis allows to consider the wider context of the case in the analysis, a single case study and process tracing, in particular, enables a careful examination of the case’s inner causalities. By, for example, identifying and analyzing the interplay between key events and actors, it is possible to make “stronger evidence-based inferences [and to create] better understanding of how a cause produces an outcome” (Beach, 2016, p. 463). The research design, therefore, enables a thorough consideration of the internal and external framework the case is positioned in due to the complementary nature of both methods.

## Case selection

As previously outlined, the case selected for the thesis is the Singing Revolution, referring to the Baltic states' independence restoration movement of the late 1980s. The reasons for the selection of this social movement in the particular context are threefold, with the underlying goal of understanding the ways in which the interplay between the movement's nonviolence and the Soviet repression enabled a successful, nonviolent independence restoration of the three nations.

First, this research is an explicit endeavor to create a better understanding of the history and culture of the author's homeland and the nations surrounding it. Growing up in post-Soviet Latvia, there are two main things you are taught to take great pride in: the culture, especially that of folk and choral singing and dancing, and the blessing that is growing up in a free, democratic country. While both of these are taught and explained from a young age, the importance of the intricacies and relations between these two aspects in restoring an independent Latvia (and the Baltics) are less discussed, leaving knowledge gaps to fill, as presented in the literature review. A single case study of the three Baltic states' Revolution is, therefore, the best choice for the examination of the nonviolent road to renewed independence.

Second, having previously conducted research on the democratization processes in post-Soviet Baltics, it became clear that academic literature on the Baltic region and the various political transitions and regimes it had gone through was lacking. Taking into account that the Baltic Singing Revolution not only successfully restored the independences of three nations annexed by a nuclear superpower, but also initiated the superpower's ultimate collapse, it can be evaluated that the research on these events is significantly lacking, as concluded in the section on literature review. Accordingly, this research both helps to further identify gaps in research on the Baltic states' shared struggles and attempts to contribute more holistic findings to the academic scholarship.

Finally, the decision to look at the overall independence movement in the Baltics, rather than putting the focus on one of the countries, arose from the wish to create a more holistic overview of the Singing Revolution. Most scholarship on the Singing Revolution focuses on one aspect, such as patriotic song analysis or emergence of the nonviolent stance, or one of the three states.

Considering the Baltic movement altogether allows to exclude selection bias and to outline the context and lay the findings in a broader (inter)national and political context.

### **Data collection**

As mentioned, the research design is based on qualitative discourse analysis; therefore, the data collected for the purposes of the research will be qualitative, too. In order to answer the research question, it is necessary to gather data on the general interplay between nonviolent resistance on repression, as well as specifically on the Singing Revolution and any potential repression arising from the Soviet Union against the Baltic states during the Singing Revolution. Such data will allow to draw case-specific conclusions based on valid scholarship on the subject. Moreover, the data collection allows for triangulation of the data – “[the] use [of] multiple sources of data and methods of data collection whenever possible” (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 177) –, which enables the cross-checking of findings, ensuring higher credibility through the presentation of various perspectives.

The data consulted for this research comes from secondary sources, which include academic research articles and books, as well as online articles. Academic scholarship provides extensive discussion and analysis on the topic at hand, while being highly reliable due to the standards of political science research. In addition to such literature, online articles and essays (by policy and research centers or dedicated to case-specific events) are consulted to give more insight into particular aspects of the Revolution. All data sources used are readily available online through Leiden University library’s online catalogue or through searches on Google and Google Scholar; however, not all academic sources allowed full access. This was the case for the books consulted, as the majority had limits on the number of pages or chapters available for online access.

### **Findings and analysis**

The following section discusses the findings and analysis of the research conducted for this thesis. As per the process tracing method, several key events have been identified in the interaction between the nonviolent resistance of the Singing Revolution and the counterreaction of Soviet repression. These are discussed in event-specific sub-sections, putting focus on how



nonviolent action triggered repression or advanced the tension between the two actors during the course of the Revolution. Additionally, the discourse surrounding the Singing Revolution and associated events and meanings is reviewed in the (inter)national context to evaluate how this discourse may have influenced or been influenced by the course of action.

### **Historical context: Emergence of the movement in light of ‘New Thinking’**

The introduction of ‘New Thinking’ by Gorbachev in 1986 was meant to reform the socio-economic, political, and federal functioning of the Soviet Union and introduce a more transparent and liberal governance model to place the citizens in. However, it was also a rather subtle attempt “to forge domestically and project internationally a new Soviet identity” (Bergmane, 2020, p. 27), which could help to establish the USSR as a more peaceful, liberal, and trustworthy political power. While the policy reforms did, for a while, help work towards that goal, the newfound liberation was soon embraced by those hoping for the restoration of their previous nations.

Out of the three Baltic states, Latvia was the first to publicly show disapproval of Soviet policies in 1986 by fighting for their country’s environmental protection and protesting against the potential building of a hydroelectric plant on Latvia’s biggest river. Soon after, the Estonians started working towards nationalist mobilization and popularizing the idea of autonomous, fully independent Baltic states. This notion spread across the region in 1987, and dissidents in the nations came together with the intellectuals and nationalists of the Communist Party to establish the Popular Fronts that would go on to become the main drivers behind the Revolution (Piiromäe, 2020; Taagepera, 2018).

By 1988, which is recognized as the year of the Singing Revolution, the Baltic states had “pushed beyond the limits of Gorbachev’s proposed reforms for the Soviet Union” (Lazda, 2009, p. 523). As a result, the Baltic independence movement was alive and eager to fight for the occupied nations’ right to self-determination and renewed independence.

## **Cultural heritage as the backbone of the Singing Revolution**

As the name – the Singing Revolution – implies and as outlined in the previous sections, the Baltics’ shared cultural heritage and the singing traditions, in particular, served as the backbone of the nonviolent civil resistance in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Annus (2016) emphasizes that “the loss of national self-determination and the colonial overwriting of national histories defined the tenor of the Baltic experience of the Soviet regime” (p. 5). This consideration of the (at the time) ongoing Soviet repression helps to explain the choice of the Baltics’ cultural heritage as the nonviolent weapon, especially having been empowered and liberated by the Soviets to the extent required to begin incorporating the silenced cultures into their determined fight for renewed autonomy. It allowed the Baltic population to embrace and unite in their shared cultural past while using it to showcase the nations’ strength and resilience.

Clemens Jr. (2009) notes that music and mass media coverage helped to spread and solidify the strength of the nationalistic ideas. Having had their cultures and any nationalist themes portrayed in them censored for nearly half a decade, these ideas and hopes helped to ignite the national liberation movements. Šmidchens (2014) elaborates more upon the singing culture behind the Singing Revolution in a discussion on the songs’ rhetoric. While one may expect the songs of a nonviolent revolution to be of nonviolent rhetoric, that is not always the case. Baltic nationalist songs have long discussed the role of the enemies and their actions in the region’s history, portraying morals, struggles, and dilemmas in the lyrics. Many of the Baltic songs are, therefore, rather nationalistic and related to themes of war and liberation, while many deal with the themes of unity. Della Porta and Diani (2006) express that “referring to myths and heroes of the past” (p. 182) can, indeed, help to legitimize the protest in a nationalist context by adding additional meanings in the existing discourse.

As singing is one of the cornerstones of the Baltic cultural heritage, the songs sung in the Singing Revolution were widely regarded as symbols of national identity, which helped to view them as “nonviolent weapons in the struggle for national culture” (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 320). In addition to the strong symbolism of the singing traditions, it helped to produce and upkeep the hope and faith necessary for the long, patient, nonviolent movement’s success (Šmidchens, 2014).

While the triumph of the Singing Revolution was phenomenal, it must be acknowledged that the countries were neither the first to successfully employ nonviolent civil resistance against oppressive regimes nor acted without any external influence or inspiration. When discussing nonviolent resistance, della Porta and Diani (2006) explain that resistance “repertoires are handed down [and] reproduced over time, (...) and the forms of action used in one protest campaign tend to be recycled in subsequent ones” (p. 182). Similar ideas are expressed by Chenoweth and Stephan (2014), although they emphasize the need to adjust previously used methods to the relevant local political realities.

Related to the ideas of passing along the knowledge of civil resistance, Clemens Jr. (2009) reveals that the Baltic independence movements had learned from Gene Sharp’s research and work on nonviolent resistance methods, as outlined in Albert Einstein Institution (n.d.). Lazda (2009) adds onto the list of civil resistance cases influencing the Singing Revolution by noting Czechoslovakia and the United States Civil Rights movement as inspirations behind legitimizing the singing struggle of the Baltics. Noteworthy, Gene Sharp had taken notice of the Singing Revolution and expressed that it “stands as a major milestone in the history of the modern world” (Šmidchens, 2016).

### **The Baltic Way**

The most recognizable event of the Singing Revolution is the Baltic Way, which has received global attention due to its scale and impressive show of unity and strength of the Baltics under the Soviet state. Because of its “appeal to cultural nationalism” (Lazda, 2009, p. 518), the Baltic Way was picked up by international media as an exemplary event in the three small nations’ demand for independence.

The Baltic Way took place on 23 August 1989, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the World War 2 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact<sup>3</sup> between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The event saw nearly two million inhabitants of the Baltic states, who had joined their hands and elbows in order to form a human chain spreading across all three states, from Tallinn, Estonia through Riga, Latvia to Vilnius, Lithuania. The Baltic Way moved people around the world, and

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<sup>3</sup> The Pact contained a secret clause, in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union divided spheres of influence in Europe. Accordingly, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were ‘given’ to the USSR (Lazda, 2009; The Baltic Way, n.d.).

solidarity demonstrations in support of the Baltics took place worldwide, including in Germany, Canada, and even Australia (The Baltic Way, n.d.).

The main intention of the Baltic Way was to “promote democracy as well as strengthen the transnational position of (...) the Baltic states” (Lazda, 2009, p. 530) throughout the Soviet Union and beyond its borders. The depiction of the joint struggle in the countries’ forced occupation was meant as both a symbolic show of perseverance and as a plea to the international community for help in forcing the Soviets’ hand in their fight for independence. The Baltic Way was, thus, a brilliantly designed event directed at the worldwide mass media, through which they achieved their aspirations of highlighting and stressing the importance of their political captivity in the discourse of global politics.

### **Baltic elections of 1990 and the turmoil of Gorbachev’s decaying power**

In the spring of 1990, half a year after the Baltic Way, the Baltic states held their elections to the Supreme Soviets or their Republic parliaments. These elections caused great turmoil in Soviet domestic politics, as many of its Republics expressed the demand for either more autonomy or even full independence from the USSR by casting their ballots and weakening the Communist Party’s standing in the Union. Significantly, in the Baltic states, the parties advocating for full secession from the USSR won the majority. The long years of public mobilization and nonviolent resistance were beginning to pay off, sending a clear message of protest to Moscow from all over the Soviet Union (Beissinger, 2002; Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1992; Lazda, 2009).

Gorbachev began to understand that his ‘New Thinking’ had likely reached its potential and made plans for other initiatives in a swift attempt to change the discourse of domestic politics. More specifically, he strayed away from the idea of having both a strong USSR center in Moscow with socio-economically strong Republics. Instead, Gorbachev scheduled a referendum for March 1991 in order to renegotiate the Treaty on the Creation of the Soviet Union of 1922 “in favor of the idea of an extremely decentralized federalism” (Beissinger, 2002, p. 94). The plan did not work, however, as between 1990 and 1991 (especially in light of the Barricade attacks) his power and leadership kept attracting criticism and decaying in the eyes of the Soviet Union and the world. Instead of attending the treaty renegotiation

referendum, the Baltic states held their own independence referendums in February and March 1991, solidifying their intent to secede (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1992).

### **The Barricades and the shifting international discourse**

In January 1991, Moscow took concrete steps in its attempt to regain control over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania through the use of Soviet (para)military forces to occupy several high-importance buildings in Riga and Vilnius and against the civilian population. The violent confrontations became the most dramatic aspect of the Singing Revolution, as the Soviet Union had decided to use its military against the nonviolent civil resistance (Lazda, 2009). There had been indirect warnings of imminent attacks prior, when it had been made clear that “if Estonia [or any other Baltic state] pushed too far, Moscow could react with force” (Piirimäe, 2020, p. 13). Moreover, the Baltic states’ governments had actually feared that the “Soviet forces might destabilize the situation in their republics in order to declare a state of emergency” (Bergmane, 2020, p. 33), which would allow them to impose direct presidential rule and regain power over the region.

The first attacks took place in Vilnius on 12 January 1991 when the Soviet military forces had intended to occupy the city’s broadcasting tower, where they were met by hundreds of nonviolent citizens attempting to guard it. Their efforts did not, however, pay off: though the Soviets stalled a bit, they continued moving their tanks through the crowd and opened fire on the unarmed citizens. This attack took the lives of fourteen people, wounded over a hundred, and marked the beginning of Soviets occupying Vilnius’ buildings, as they continued by taking over the radio and telegraph buildings. By taking control over the main forms of mass communication from the Baltic civil society, the Soviets aimed to silence the population and the movement, regain control over the spread of information within the Union and internationally, and prevent the further development of a narrative in which independence was seen as legitimate. The next day, Gorbachev placed the blame on Lithuanians while the Baltic independence movements called upon their citizens to “defend their freely elected parliaments” (Bergmane, 2020, p. 32).

From 13 January 1991 to 27 January 1991, barricade systems were set up in the areas surrounding key buildings in the three capitals of the Baltics. These barricades, which gave the horrific events their name, saw people of all ethnic backgrounds take turns in the 24-hours-a-day mission of guarding the freedom that the Baltic people had wished for for decades and nearly achieved. Luckily, no Soviet attacks took place in Tallinn; however, Riga suffered a fate similar to that of Vilnius. On 20 January 1991, the Soviet ‘special forces’ attempted to seize the Latvian Ministry of Internal Affairs, killing five people and injuring more along the way (Bergmane, 2020).

The attacks in Riga were the final straw in the international political community’s tolerance towards the repressive Soviet regime. Bergmane (2020) explains that the only action taken against the USSR immediately after the events in Vilnius came from the European Parliament and Canada, who had suspended credit lines, technical assistance, and aid packages. Meanwhile, the United States and some of the bigger European political powers stalled in taking action against the Soviet Union after the Vilnius attacks, only speaking out after the Soviets had carried out attacks in Riga, as well. Unfortunately, swifter condemnations of the Vilnius attack and actions against the USSR may have saved lives. While the politicians were contemplating their moves, people across Europe were gathering in small demonstrations to pay their respects and share their reactions to the brutality of the Soviets.

The Barricade attacks were not the first time that the Soviets had used force against their civilians, however, the attacks on the Baltic states were perceived differently by the international community. First, it was because the Singing Revolution and its leaders had always ensured that the movement would not turn to violence, creating more sympathy towards the Baltic people. Second, neither the United States nor its allies had recognized the Soviet annexation of the Baltics under international law. This non-recognition policy helped to shape the public discourse post-Barricade attacks, as the Western countries followed and covered the ongoing events extensively, putting the spotlight so close to the Soviet attacks, they had no choice but to hold back on their violent attacks in order to maintain legitimacy. While this policy did not help achieve the Baltics’ independence, they gave the events “greater visibility on the international stage” (Bergmane, 2020, p. 56).

‘New Thinking’ and the seemingly transformed Soviet Union presented itself internationally as a friendlier, more liberating and less forceful nation. The Barricade attacks completely

shifted this narrative, changing political discourse and revealing the true backbone of the USSR in its fight for political survival. As a result, Gorbachev's declining power, along with the existence of the USSR, entered its final phase.

### **August coup d'état attempt and Official Restoration of Independence**

In August 1991, the Soviet Union was near its collapse when a group of hardline opponents of Gorbachev initiated a coup d'état attempt to take over control of the USSR from Gorbachev, who they thought was failing as Secretary General. While the coup failed, it did fast-track the demise of the Soviet Union and made Gorbachev lose much of his influence (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1992).

The Baltic states saw the instability in Moscow and took advantage of the situation, declaring the end of the transitional periods of their independences, which had begun in spring 1990. Therefore, announcements of the Official Restoration of Independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania followed: their "powerful identities and traditions of political and cultural activism that were nonviolent at their very foundations" (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 327) had succeeded in the battle against the regime that had repressed them for 50 years. Four months later, in December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

The Baltic states' joy of liberation is still felt today, 30 years later. There have been smaller and bigger victories along the road, including the establishment of democratic regimes, the regained rights to their own cultures and land, and the international recognition of the nations as equals, for example, through their membership of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There is expression without censorship, and the cultural heritage is as relevant as ever: from choral singing to folk dancing and beyond. It has always been in the Baltic blood, and it is now being safeguarded as closely as ever.<sup>4</sup>

Having successfully restored their independences from the repressive occupation by the Soviet Union, which lasted half a century, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania celebrate. Marking both the Independence Proclamation Days and Restoration Days, they celebrate themselves and their

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Baltic states' Song Festivals, which started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, were added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (UNESCO, n.d.).

neighbors with deep gratitude for those who nonviolently fought for their freedom and consequently suffered from the Soviet repression during the late 1980s.

## **Conclusion**

The final section of this research project provides the concluding summary, elaborates on identified limitations of the thesis, and provides ideas for future research on the Singing Revolution.

### **Summary**

This research has attempted to evaluate the impact of the Singing Revolution's nonviolent resistance on triggering a repressive response from the Soviet Union. The literature review and the analysis illustrated that there was, indeed, significant effect of the nonviolent resistance on triggering repression from the USSR, proving the hypothesis to be true. Moreover, the selected research design successfully enabled the structured analysis, providing a clear overview of the course of the movement. The analysis points towards Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' policies being the main catalyst behind the USSR's demise, considering they created the political framework that enabled and empowered increased action from independence movements. This, however, cannot be conclusively deduced from this research and would require the examination of the other 12 Soviet Republics in light of 'New Thinking'.

This research shows that (physical) Soviet repression arose only in a time that Moscow considered to be of critical importance to the regime's existence. Additionally, the levels and types of repression were influenced by domestic politics, independence movements, as well as the international fora and the subsequent discourse. It was crucial for the Soviet Union to be seen as improved and 'friendlier' internationally, as any negative discourse surrounding the regime hurt its political standing.

Finally, the research illustrates the claim that the Baltic states catalyzed the downfall of Gorbachev's regime. They were the first to mobilize and to start expressing their disapproval of the Soviet Union, the first to declare their intent to renew their independence, and the first to officially secede from the Union. Nonviolent resistance alone could maybe not have



achieved it, but ‘New Thinking’ and the discourse surrounding the USSR gave the Singing Revolution the push and framework needed to fight their battle successfully.

### **Limitations and future research**

Based on the research conducted, it is possible to identify several limitations of this thesis and to make suggestions for future research on this topic.

The findings of this thesis may have been affected by language bias. All sources consulted in the research process were in English due to the prevalence and quality of academic scholarship in the language. Consulting sources in one of the three Baltic languages or in Russian may have been beneficial, as more extensive information could likely have been available on the Singing Revolution. However, the conscious decision to consult only English-language materials was made for two reasons. First, the use of sources in multiple languages would have required more extensive research outside the scope of this thesis. Second, the evidence may have been presented differently due to the contextual use of language and phrasing and to research conducted by either side involved; sources in English likely present a more objective viewpoint.

According to the properties and assumptions of a single case study (as outlined in the section on research design), it can be assumed that the in-depth analysis has helped to conclusively establish the causal narrative of the variables of the research; therefore, this thesis has a high internal validity. Although the generalization of the results of a single case study tends to be difficult, this thesis has contributed to the understanding of the Soviet Union’s (repressive) stance and response in relation to the Baltics’ independence movement. These findings could, therefore, likely be examined in regard to the other Soviet Republic or even Soviet satellite states’ secession attempts.

Undeniably, there is room for more representation and understanding of the Singing Revolution in academic scholarship, as well as for more extensive research on all aspects of this social movement. Several ideas can be identified for future investigation of the Singing Revolution in light of the findings of this thesis.

First, it could be insightful and valuable to evaluate the impact of the Baltic states' movement on the other independence movements in the Soviet Union at the time. With the Baltics having seceded first, they may have influenced or inspired the other Soviet Republics to take action in restoring their freedom. Similarly, future scholarship could examine the (potential) role played by cultural values and expression in other independence movements, both within the USSR and beyond. Finally, there is room for investigation of the international opinions of the Soviet Union's socio-economic and political stance and efforts, as well as of any international criticism the Soviet Union may have received at the time. These two aspects could be considered in the context of both the slow collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, examining the international community's potential effect on Soviet domestic policies and Gorbachev's leadership.

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