

So anregend diese Studie neue Wege beschreitet, die Kulturszene der „goldenen Sechziger“ zu analysieren, und so wesentlich auch ihre Ergebnisse sind, bleiben doch – gerade aus geschichtswissenschaftlicher Sicht – Fragen. Die Rolle der Kommunistischen Partei, sei es als Kontrollleurin und Sanktionsinstanz, sei es als Arrangeurin von Neuerungen im Kulturleben, bleibt weitgehend ausgespart. Ebenso unklar bleibt, welche gesellschaftspolitische Relevanz Theaterneuerung und Aktionskunst hatten, wie die Resonanz im öffentlichen Raum ausfiel. Allas konzentriert sich – methodisch gesehen durchaus akzeptabel – auf einen kleinen Kreis von Aktivisten, doch fällt es auf, dass sie die Möglichkeiten der Oral History nur recht verhalten genutzt hat. Themen wie die Verarbeitung der Traumata des Zweiten Weltkriegs und die Bewahrung der estnischen Kultur tauchen nur am Rande auf. Die methodische Beschränkung der Studie auf das Konzept des „Spiels“ lässt manche andere Kunstgattung, die gleichfalls auf die Veränderungen der 1960er Jahre reagierte, außen vor. Trotzdem bietet Allas' Studie eine willkommene Bereicherung unserer Kenntnisse über diese so wichtige Phase des allgemeinen sich Einrichtens im Sowjetsystem.

Dass dieser Band zudem auf einer immerhin etwas weitere Kreise erreichenden Sprache erschienen ist und sich mit dem Bielefelder transcript-Verlag auch ein für die Kulturwissenschaften wichtiger Publikationsort hat finden lassen, ist nur zu begrüßen. Ein geflissentliches Lektorat hätte jedoch die unzähligen kleinen sprachlichen Fehler und Umständlichkeiten im Ausdruck eliminieren müssen. Sie trüben die Lesefreude dann doch (und als deutscher Muttersprachler fühlt man so direkt einmal nach, was *English speaker* in vielen englischsprachigen Publikationen über sich ergehen lassen müssen).

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GUNTIS ŠMIDCHENS: *The Power of Song. Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution*. University of Washington Press 2014. X, 446 pp. ISBN 9780295994529.

As the most broad and thorough narrative published so far about the Singing Revolution of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, "The Power of Song" lives in a category of its own. So does the author, Guntis Šmidchens with his scholarly research and participatory observation, as well as his knowledge of all relevant languages stretching back decades. Šmidchens' command of the subject matter is as elegant as it is obvious and he certainly does not shy

away from the difficult task of reviving “the words and melodies but also the feelings that accompanied each song and story” in order to create “a semantic field of native references in historical and cultural context” (p. 23).

Alas, the melodies of course are not able to reach the reader, nor is the book singularly engaged with emotional history. In fact, it puts great emphasis on delineating cause and effect, sequences of events and the infrastructure of relationships between people and organizations. Even though at times this makes the text resemble a report, the best word to describe the narrative is variety. Šmidchens fluctuates back and forth between prose and poetry (lyrics, mostly in his own translation) and finds space for the occasional oral history transcript, keeping the reader alert and entertained. The only disturbing factor is the editorial habit of frequently leaving key pieces of data in the endnotes, which along with the bibliography, discography and filmography prove to be a real treasure chest for anyone dealing with a similar topic. With regard to the melodies, a small gesture could have yielded tremendous results in making one of the main characters – music itself – accessible. If all of the individual songs mentioned had been equipped with their original titles, they would have become easily searchable for the reader and in many cases instantly ready for listening via the Internet, thus, indeed augmenting the books effect.

There would be a lot to listen to, because the author discusses Baltic nonviolent national singing traditions at length, going all the way back to Johann Gottfried Herder’s initial “discoveries”. Šmidchens reserves centre stage for the events taking place during the last years of Soviet rule and goes to great lengths in order to secure that all three Baltic States receive equal representation. He does manage to spread his attention evenly, but at times, certain events are omitted for the sake of avoiding repetition. Thus, the title of the book is rather telling – it is truly a story of the Baltic Singing Revolution not so much that of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania. Which is not to say that there is a deficiency of information – on the contrary. Šmidchens has the uncanny ability of lacing even his broadest strokes with specific detail as well as effortlessly weaving in gratifying allusions to related topics that have thus far remained untouched within the Baltic discourse (for example Nynorsk, Breton ethnicity etc). The author slides from analysis to grounded yet simple and memorable conclusions with ease and seems to enjoying the ride as he invokes the image of Google-translate in the discourse about Johann Voldemar Jannsen’s somewhat Germanesque cultural contribution (p. 72), compares free speech to “a fart that stank up Soviet space” (p. 231) and makes a point of noting every time it rained during a major Song Festival.

Comparing the three Song Festival traditions back to their origins is a very welcome exercise, but in addition to that, Šmidchens also dives into the rock and folk scenes separately, which proves to be a valid decision. The unifying feature in all the chapters is Šmidchens stripping the Baltic

singing culture to its core by accessing the most important lyrics from all three nations through (usually) his own easily singable translations, which nevertheless stay true to their character, yet are homogenous enough to potentially live a life of their own. Experiencing them is an intellectual as well as an emotional journey, which also serves as a strong witness to the nonviolent nature of the revolution and its cultural antecedents. Or – as the ethnomusicologist Zita Kelmickaitė at first glance paradoxically stated on July 4th, 1998 at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival: “Lithuania is a very peaceful nation. And truly even in the old historical war songs the singing is always only calm” (p. 17). Šmidchens’s decision to frame the entire tome around this relatively small-scale museum performance taking place outside of the Baltics a decade after the climax of the revolution raises perhaps the biggest question mark of the whole book. Even though the select people who were able to take part considered it to be an emotional as well as a historic event, Šmidchens himself admits that “little information was published” about it after the fact (p. 358). It seems that the 150 people strong Baltic spectacle at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1998 was more of a performative act than a significant historical fact and as such is perhaps undeserving as a reference point of such a vast process as the Baltic Singing Revolution obviously was.

Smaller questions include minor lapses, which could throw a less informed reader slightly off course. These occur for example when the rhetorically powerful artist Heinz Valk is tagged as a journalist, when Alo Mattiisen’s emotional fatigue before the peak of the Revolution is left undiscussed, and when no further explanation is given as to how exactly did being sent to Sweden during perestroika constitute a punishment. Also, a keener focus on space and place might have served better the needs of readers who have not been to the Song Festival grounds, especially with regard to the intertwining and very Soviet background for the construction of the gigantic bandshells. This reader would have also enjoyed more nuances with regard to several fascinating instances where the Baltic diaspora and their (sometimes self-proclaimed fifty years long Singing Revolution) was touched upon in the narrative.

None of the above takes away from the monumental contribution Šmidchens has made with this book to the discourse on the Singing Revolution and nonviolent political action. It might even have an enlightening effect for the people of the Baltic who, until now, have not been able to truly grasp that no single nation could or should lay claim to being the singing revolutionaries *par excellence*. “The Power of Song” has the moxie of an encyclopaedia and the charm of a novel – a truly compelling and modern take on the interplay of culture, politics and history suitable for students, scholars and the wider public.

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