

How song brought down an empire

John Dear | Jul. 14, 2009 | On the Road to Peace

The past few weeks, hundreds of thousands have marched nonviolently in Iran protesting an election purloined by fraud. Battalions of police attacked, but the campaign continues. In Honduras the military staged a coup, and the streets brimmed with those who refuse, nonviolently, to cooperate with the unelected regime.

Campaigns of nonviolent resistance are happening now all over the world. People everywhere are struggling for human rights, social justice and peace. And still, many ask, does nonviolent resistance work? How do you wage such campaigns? Is it worth it? And how does one sort it out from violent campaigns? As in China, for instance, where the Uighur and Han Chinese have their hands at each others' throats.

The differences, apart from the obvious ones, are vast. Violent campaigns go along on a current of rage. Brawls, feuds, vendettas -- they take root and poison the well. And embittered memories don't easily fade. Nonviolent campaigns run on something far nobler: hope, creativity, respect for the adversary. Nonviolent campaigns draw on the best of our humanity. And, according to Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., they have every chance of working. Whoever the tyrant, however cruel the oppression, whatever the empire. Nonviolent resistant, they insist, will in some measure temper cruelty and injustice.

There are many documentaries chronicling the successes of nonviolent campaigns. The latest: "The Singing Revolution," released just last year, is the moving tale of the people of Estonia.

Estonia's trouble began in 1939, the Soviets, eager for hegemony, set their eyes westward and invaded Estonia. Two years later, the Third Reich on the rise, Germany looked eastward and followed suit, then purged the land of those who had staffed Soviet bureaucracies. Three years later the Soviets returned in force and executed a purge of their own. Soldiers put bullets into the condemned, and they crumpled into anonymous communal graves. Battered from east and west, the Estonians bore a terrible weight of strife and grief. All told, many thousands died; 70,000 fled -- this in a tiny nation of less than a million.

The survivors for decades thereafter struggled just to survive. Their identity was in tatters. The Soviets systematically dismantled Estonian culture and erased its history. The hammer and cycle was raised, the Estonian flag outlawed.

But the people retained one characteristic unique to Estonia -- their love of song. Yearly they gathered at the song festival known as "Laulupidu," held in a massive amphitheater, and sang the traditional songs. Some 30,000 attended each year, and as thousands of voices rose in crisp, rich harmonies, ancient memories and sentiments resurged.

Here was a force the Soviets couldn't conquer. So they tried co-opting it, drafting a repertoire of approved songs -- most in praise of Soviet might. But in 1947, a song slipped past Soviet censors, a song with ancient resonances proclaiming the beauty of the Estonian countryside. Every year thereafter the people slogged through the official program, eagerly waiting until the end of the evening when they could sing of their own erstwhile glories. The song filled hearts and inspired tears. It had become Estonia's unofficial national anthem.

Occupiers are forever wary of holy days of the subjugated people. In Jesus' day, for instance, at every Passover -- the commemoration of Israel's release from bondage -- the Romans marched in extra contingents of troops. The Soviets did something similar. In 1969, with the centennial of the song festival approaching, the Soviets banned the people's beloved song. Too risky to be sung on such a momentous day.

The festival went on, the Soviet functionaries sitting at their place of honor. The authorized program proceeded apace, and at the concluding moment, the maestro exited the stage, the evening all but ended. But then, in fits and starts, unlawful strains took to the air. Voices converged and the competing keys found a center. The prohibited song had been raised, "Land that I Love."

They kept at it, thousands singing spontaneously, until at last the maestro strode back to the stage and, in an act of defiance, conducted it officially, his spine a bit straighter, a smile of pride on his face. As I watched the footage, it dawned on me -- here was a sacramental moment, the moment the empire fell.

And so there was a shift in the stars. Organizers began working clandestinely, behind the scenes, and in 1987 they grew bold enough to call for a rally. Word spread through the grapevine and to everyone's surprise, thousands showed up. Bravely, people spoke out, putting to the test Gorbachev's new policy of perestroika ("relative freedom") and glasnost ("free speech").

Later that year, at a planned summer concert, some 100,000 came. And by now distinctions were blurring between songfest and political rally. Free speech, to the Estonians, means freedom to sing. And singing unleashes yearning for independence. The people joined hands and, each day for a week, sang of hope and pride. Emboldened, a motorcyclist roared by the edge of the crowd and unfurled the Estonian flag. It was an illicit gesture, and it evoked a long raucous cheer.

As the winds of independence quickened, so did opposition. In occupied Estonia lived thousands of Russians. And just before the occupation came undone, the Russians took countermeasures. They organized a pro-Soviet rally and stormed the government building. Inside the illegally formed Estonian Congress had taken refuge. Now they were trapped inside, the mob outside in a restive mood.

Word made its way around, and Estonians converged on the scene and surrounded the building. Now it was the Russians who found themselves trapped.

Here was another sacramental moment. The people broke into song. Hymns and anthems, they rose on the air. And after a space of time, the crowd parted and made a narrow aisle. Here was no bloody or bruising "running the gauntlet." The Estonians hurt not a soul. The Russians passed through receiving only the harmonious strains of the people's resolve. Such magnanimity stirs the blood. Where did it come from? I believe from the discipline of singing. The songs enlivened imaginations and in the matrix of imagination, hope and faith were born.

The next festival drew some 300,000, one out of every three Estonians. And the sight of it snatches the breath. "It was an ocean of people," one said, "waving back and forth." As for the Soviets, they stood by paralyzed. How justify tear-gassing people for singing?

By now, upheavals plagued much of the U.S.S.R. Unrest erupted in Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia. And with every crack in the Soviet system the Estonians creatively filled the void. Tanks rolled in eventually, their first destination: the Estonian television tower. The empire wanted control of the news.

Again, out surged the people, and around the tower they formed a human shield. Another stand-off, another tense moment. As the people held their ground, soldiers milled about awaiting directions from on high. And then word came down. Russia had seceded from the union -- the USSR had finally unraveled.

The tanks rolled out of town. Estonia was free. The revolution was televised.

And the people broke out in song.

Said one citizen: "We started our revolution with a smile and a song."

Another said, "We are small, and we have no weapons. But being together and singing together, this is our power."

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"The Singing Revolution" DVD is available from www.amazon.com. To receive bi-weekly

updates about nonviolent movements happening among nations right now, visit www.nonviolent-conflict.org. This weekend, John will speak at the Pax Christi National Assembly in Chicago (see: www.paxchristiusa.org). He will host two Nobel Peace Prize winners at the Santa Fe Convention Center, July 31st, and join them for the annual Hiroshima Day peace vigil at Los Alamos on Aug. 1st (see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org). St. Anthony Messenger's Press recently published *John Dear On Peace*, by Patricia Normile. John's two new books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). For information on his books or to invite him to speak at your church or school, see: www.johndear.org.

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A Message from John Dear about his *NCR* Columns

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading and supporting my weekly column. I've been writing these reflections every week for three years now, and am blessed to share my reflections, journeys, concerns and hopes.

I write now to ask your help with these writing projects. Each week about 2,500 people read these columns. *NCR* and I would like to reach a regular audience of 5,000 people by the end of the year. Would you please send an email to ten friends and ask them to sign up and receive my weekly column for free when it is published every Tuesday morning at NCRonline.org. Any other outreach you can give to promote this column would be greatly appreciated. Here's a page [direct link to the e-mail sign up](#) [1].

Thanks, too, for sharing your responses to my reflections. And thank you for all you do for justice, disarmament and peace, for teaching and practicing Gospel nonviolence.

God bless you,

Fr. John Dear, S.J.

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