

SUMMARY

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*Song Festivals in the Russian Baltic Provinces  
before 1914: Symbolic Orders Between  
Cultural Entanglements and Delimitations*

Song festivals in Estonia and Latvia have been of some fascination for the historiography of the Baltic region with the context of the “singing revolution” from 1978 to 1991. With regard to the emergence of the phenomenon of choral singing as mass events during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national perspectives still dominate historical and cultural research, not to speak of popular publications. A closer look at the various festivals in the Baltic provinces during the Tsarist period, however, reveals various transcultural and transnational connections in addition to national trajectories. Such connections refer not only to the import and exchange with German choral singing and its social and political notions, but also to the many interfaces within the Baltic region between German, Estonian, Latvian and Russian singing cultures and song festivals. Apart from cultural transfers, one may notice cultural delimitations and political divergences as well. Their analysis requires a transnational perspective, which is outlined in this article. It focuses on such song festivals in the Baltic provinces that intended to comprise participants not only from one town, district or province, but also from all provinces or one of their major ethnic groups. The article looks not only at the music performed, but in particular at the symbolic forms connected to these festivals. Aspects examined in the article are urban spaces included during the parades and performances, the composition of the programmes, the role of women during the festivals, references to national identity and alterity.

The analysis shows first that the often addressed cultural influences from Germany lost their momentum already during the 1860s, when their political implications became contested not only from the emerging nations and the politics of Russification, but also by the intention to build a Baltic (German) identity. Second, the emerging trajectories of Estonian and Latvian festivals since the late 1860s involved disputes about autochthon cultural features and foreign influences, which also comprised political implications. Third, despite these diverging national developments, transnational connections neither disappeared immediately nor fully, and still require further scholarly attention.