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Visualizing Cultural Opposition: Folklore Movement in Late Soviet Latvia

Vizualizējot kultūras opozīciju: folkloras kustība vēlinajā Padomju Latvijā

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Summary

The folklore movement, synonymous with 'folk revival', is both an emic and etic term describing the increased interest in folklore across large parts of Latvian society from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Aimed against stylized folklore performances promoted by the Soviet cultural policy, the folklore movement became a powerful expression of countercultural creativity and an alternative lifestyle. As a form of cultural opposition, it was part of the Singing Revolution (1987–1991). The aim of the article is to explore folklore movement-related expressions of cultural opposition that were carried out in the visual realm. Based on interviews, analysis of visual materials, and published sources, the article examines three cases of visual opposition and self-representation within the folklore movement in Latvia. First, folk costume and self-fashioning trends reveal a curious connection between the folklore movement and hippie imagery. Second, the Soviet-banned carmine red-white-carmine red flag of the independent Republic of Latvia is considered in the context of the International Folklore Festival *Baltica '88*, marking the point at which the folklore movement gained clear political outlines. Third, the uses of folk ornament, which extended beyond the circles of the folklore movement, functioned as a culturally grounded tool for expressing dissent, and provided a shared repertoire of visual symbols.

Kopsavilkums

Folkloras kustība ir gan emisks, gan etisks jēdziens, kas raksturo izteikto interesi par folkloru plašā Latvijas sabiedrības daļā no 20. gs. 70. gadu beigām līdz 20. gs. 90. gadiem. Vēršoties pret stilizētiem folkloras priekšnesumiem, ko veicināja padomju amatiermākslas kultūrpolitika, folkloras kustība kļuva par spēcīgu kontrkultūras un alternatīva dzīvesveida izpausmi. Kā kultūras opozīcija tā bija daļa no Dziesmotās revolūcijas (1987–1991). Raksta mērķis ir analizēt ar folkloras kustību saistītās vizuālās kultūras opozīcijas izpausmes. Balstoties intervijās, vizuālo materiālu un publicēto avotu analīzē, raksts pievēršas trīs vizuālās opozīcijas un folkloras kustības pašreprezentācijas gadījumiem. Pirmkārt, individuālā tēla un tautas tērpa lietošanas tendencēm, kas atklāj interesantu saikni starp folkloras kustību un ar hipijiem saistīto vizualitāti. Otrkārt, rakstā analizēts padomju okupācijas laikā aizliegtā neatkarīgās Latvijas Republikas sarkanbaltsarkanā kāroga publiska eksponēšana folkloras festivāla *Baltica '88* atklāšanas koncertā 1988. gada 13. jūlijā, kas iezīmē politisku pavērsienu kustības attīstībā. Treškārt, rakstā aplūkota plašākas sabiedrības interese par latvisko tautas ornamentu un tā mitoloģisko interpretāciju, kas veidoja kultūras opozīcijas vizuālo simbolu repertuāru.

Introduction

Andris took photographs at that summer's Latvian Song and Dance Festival, which he called 'Padomju uzvaras svētki' ('Soviet Victory Fest'). He came home fully disgusted, telling me I hadn't missed anything. The Latvian song festival tradition had been turned into a perverse display of Soviet military might sprinkled with liberal doses of Russian language and culture. Of course, 1985 marked the 40th anniversary of the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic States. In fact, the 1985 Latvian SSR Song and Dance Festival was more like a Soviet military lovefest, with red communist flags, men in military uniforms, mass dancer formations [...] The real Latvian Song and Dance Festival of '85 took place on Folklore Day at the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum, which was dedicated to Latvian folk music, folk traditions, crafts, and, of course, to the 150th birthday of Krišjānis Barons (b. 1835), "Father of the (Latvian) Daina." No Russian military tunes or communist propaganda there! Latvian folk music ensembles from all over Latvia had gathered together in their beautiful traditional folk costumes to sing old Latvian folk songs and perform folk dances. Artisans demonstrated their skills while selling beautiful handmade baskets, wooden toys, wool blankets, linen towels, jewelry, and ceramics, which attracted crowds of happy people (Laima 2017: 363).

This emotionally colored account is authored by Rita Laima (b. 1960), an American-born Latvian artist and writer. Her autobiographical book *Skylarks and Rebels: A Memoir about the Soviet Russian Occupation of Latvia, Life in a Totalitarian State, and Freedom* (2017) tells the story of her move to late socialist Latvia after her marriage to photographer Andris Krieviņš. Laima's comparison between the Soviet amateur art system's and Russification policy-controlled Latvian Song and Dance Festival and the Folklore Day at the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum – though expressed in extreme binaries, which in reality were more multilayered than this black-and-white account (see Herzog 2010) – sets the scene for introducing the ideas fueling the folklore movement in Latvia. Some of these binaries are folklore as a spectacle vs. folklore as lifestyle, mass-scale parades vs. intimate community gatherings, and institutionalized and Soviet ideology-driven uses of folklore vs. vernacular ones. Laima's partial outsider's gaze, however, is close to how these questions have been voiced in publications, with the folklore movement characterized by such keywords as "true, real, natural, national, and spontaneous", whereas Sovietized forms of folklorism were described as "false, mendacious, artificial, and manipulated" (Boiko 2001: 115). In more elaborate analyses, folklore is seen as a hybrid field that allowed "the cultivation of national resistance and ethnic self-expression under the banners of folklore studies, folk art, and traditional culture", while at the same time it easily "accommodated communist propaganda and socialist internationalism" (Kencis 2024b: 34; see also Herzog 2010). Despite this ambiguous position, this

article is grounded in the premise that certain folklore-related activities were a form of cultural opposition and counterculture during socialism in Eastern Europe (Csurgó et al. 2018).

The folklore movement, also synonymous with 'folklore revival' (*folkloras kustība*), is both an emic and etic term describing the increased interest in folklore and traditional culture in large parts of Latvian society from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The mushrooming of folklore groups was at the core of the process, but it was interwoven with other fields such as folk art, crafts, and an interest in history and regional studies. Aimed against the stylized folklore performances promoted by the Soviet cultural policy of amateur art, the folklore movement became a powerful expression of countercultural creativity and an alternative lifestyle. As a form of cultural opposition, it became part of the Singing Revolution (1987–1991) leading to the independence of the Baltic States. The folklore movement was a continuation of much earlier processes (Lielbārdis 2025, this issue) and also a global phenomena (Bithell, Hill 2014; Stavělová, Buckland 2018), with the cultural opposition particularly expressed in the Baltic States (Davoliūtė, Rudling 2023 for Lithuania; Kuutma 1998 for Estonia).

Cultural opposition is understood here as "unarmed opposition, i.e., non-violent resistance to the Soviet regime's political, ideological and cultural pressure" (Grybkauskas, Sirutavičius 2018: 53). Discussions on resistance, autonomous, and non-conformist activities show that two forms of resistance can be distinguished: first, deliberate dissent expressed in open political claims, and second, autonomous exercises of cultural freedom, meaning cultural groups with no explicit political program, such as hippies, punks, avant-garde artists, youth cultures, and alternative religious communities (Apor et al. 2018: 10–11). The folk revivalists used the state-supported amateur art system, which nonetheless allowed nurturing anti-Soviet attitudes without expressing overt dissent. However, as will be discussed in the article, in the second half of the 1980s the movement took on the outlines of open political resistance. The social and political changes covering the years from 1985 to 1991 became possible after the USSR's general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated the political reforms of perestroika and glasnost. The emergence of grassroots movements, such as folklore and environmental movements, facilitated the consolidation of popular dissent, thus contributing to the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Karklins 1994; Schwartz 2006; Šmidchens 2014).

In its initial stages, the folklore movement was one example of the "socialist escapes" – an alternative to the permeated and dull reality of Soviet ideology (Giustino et al. 2013). In everyday life under communist regimes, where physical escape was nearly impossible, "socialist escapes" as leisure activities and counter-

cultural ways of life “allowed people to ‘escape’ socialism ‘without leaving it’” (Vari 2013: 3). Building autonomous spaces and alternative identities free of official constraints and dogmas was the motivation behind many of the socialist escapes. Representing a softer form of dissent, or cultural opposition, these activities – from tourism, hitchhiking, and sports to music festivals – were various expressions directed at “people’s attempts to acquire their own agency in the field of culture, leisure, and entertainment” (Vari 2013: 4). Drawing from personal experience, Balázs Balogh and Ágnes Fülemile have aptly described the agency that these informal networks provided for the urban folk dance and music revival, or *Táncház*, in socialist Hungary:

These grassroots circles of voluntary groups of sociable young people sharing similar ideas, tastes and world-views provided a real alternative in the period of socialism, when participation in the communist youth movement, school events, commemorations and political demonstrations were all mandated and ideologically manipulated. It was a real shift from the disfavored compulsory passive presence to a voluntary, emotionally supported active participation, which also created a strong feeling of commonality and solidarity (Balogh, Fülemile 2008: 51).

Many of the socialist escapes were facilitated by the Soviet regime and only later “embraced and turned into escape venues by the masses living under socialism” (Vari 2013: 4). Sometimes there were more twists and turns between nonconformist claims and state-supported activities. For example, the International Folklore Festival *Baltica*,¹ organized annually between Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, was initiated by the USSR Ministry of Culture. A year after a conference in Tallinn in 1985, where Soviet representatives met with the International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts (*Conseil international des organisations de festivals de folklore et d'arts traditionnelles*, CIOFF), an official decree was passed by the USSR Ministry of Culture, formally initiating the festival *Baltica* (Šmidchens 1996). Seeing this decision as an attempt to control the growing grassroots appeal for the authentic folklore which allowed folk revivalists to build autonomous spaces and alternative identities, Guntis Šmidchens has argued that “Moscow hoped to organize a mass propaganda event which would declare Soviet support for international friendship and ethnic harmony while keeping the Baltic folklore ensembles and their form of performance under strict control” (Šmidchens 1996: 145). This shows that, even though binaries are good for the consolidation of identity, the situation on the ground almost always is more complex than black-and-white accounts of it. From

1 Since 1987, when *Baltica* took place in Vilnius, Lithuania, it has been a continuing event organized annually in each of the three Baltic States. For more on *Baltica*, see Bertran 2025 and Ābelkina 2025, both in this issue.

the Soviet-initiated and supported festival – the first of which, in Vilnius in 1987, was heavily criticized for resembling Soviet mass-scale propaganda events (Šmidchens 1996: 146–148) – a year later *Baltica* turned into a mass demonstration of anti-Soviet attitudes.

The aim of the article is to explore the folklore movement-related expressions of cultural opposition that were carried out in the visual realm. Representation in visual terms functioned both as a tool for consolidating self-representational expressions of identity (Doerr et al. 2013) and as a means of visualizing discontent against the Soviet regime. Based on interviews with participants of the folklore movement in Latvia,² analysis of visual materials (photos and video recordings), and published sources, the article examines both the expressions of visual opposition and the self-representation of the folklore movement in Latvia.

The audial aspects of the folklore movement (Šmidchens 1996; Muktupāvels 2011; Klotiņš 2002; Boiko 2001; Weaver et al. 2023) have been covered extensively, as has the soundscape of the Singing Revolution (Kudriņš 2019; Šmidchens 2014; Martinelli 2019; Ryynanen, Talviste 2023), whereas the visual aspects have received far less scholarly attention. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring three cases of visuality: first, folk costume and self-fashioning trends that reveal a curious connection between the folklore movement and hippie imagery; second, the Soviet-banned carmine red-white-carmine red flag of the independent Republic of Latvia in the context of the International Folklore Festival *Baltica '88*, marking the point at which the folklore movement gained clear political outlines; and third, the use of folk ornament, which reached beyond the circles of the folklore movement and witnessed a wave of new appreciation and application.

Folklore in Soviet Aesthetics

Folklore-related themes had a distinct role in Soviet aesthetics and visual propaganda. As argued by Odeta Rudling, "the visual encodings of the folklore field started to emerge in the Soviet Union by the second half of the 1930s" when the meaning of folklore was reformulated as "an oral poetic creation of the broad masses" (Rudling 2018: 210–211). In this line of thought, folklore became "a controversial mix of revolutionary ideas of contemporary folklore, Socialist Realist clichés, and Soviet propaganda, laced

² The interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024 within the research project *Folklore Revival in Latvia: Resources, Ideologies and Practices*, funded by the Latvian Council of Science (project No. Izp-2021/1-0243), and are stored at the Archives of Latvian Folklore, LFK Fkk1 *Folklore Movement Collections: Interviews with participants of the folklore movement*, which currently contains 47 interviews.

with Stalin's cult of personality" (Kencis 2024a: 9). Folk art was declared as "the basis of all Soviet culture" (Herzog 2010: 118). Folklore-related visuality became part of the aesthetic canon of Socialist Realism. After the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, these ideas were transferred to illegally annexed territories and later to Soviet Bloc countries as well.

Folklore-related visuality was part of the complex web of meanings and attitudes under the *national form and socialist content* slogan. In her study on the visual representations of Soviet-era Song and Dance Festivals in Estonia, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa states that ethnic cultural forms were used as "temporary vehicles for spreading socialist ideology on the way to communism" (Seljamaa 2017: 276). Moreover, as "forms tend to outlive contents", relying on familiar forms meant establishing trust by means of continuity of form, reaching beyond simple subordination (Seljamaa 2017: 287). In a similar way, Sirje Helme sees the use of familiar visual forms as a part of the Soviet ideological manipulation that drew on national sentiment:

Under the guise of preserving national uniqueness, the use of the decorative aspects of folk traditions was permitted – national folk costumes were allowed on festive occasions, mass choral songs were sung in Estonia and Latvia [...] It was undoubtedly politically significant to create for the rest of the world a picture of a peaceful melting pot of national and international culture. Allowing such minimal nationalistic activity was also a way to control opposition movements (Helme 2002: 7).

The importance of the continuity of familiar, folklore-related visual forms is also revealed in the attempts to establish the new 'Socialist traditions' or 'Soviet traditions'. As part of the anti-religious campaign in Latvia, it was intended to eradicate religious rituals from everyday life (Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2017, 2019; Ozoliņš 2025). It was aimed at baptisms, weddings, and funerals, as well as calendric celebrations. The implementation of these traditions relied on the familiar forms of folklore and folk art. To make the new Soviet traditions accepted by society, "the presence of codes and symbols provided by the traditional culture in terms of the content and the visual arrangement of festivities" was a pivotal resource (Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2017: 139).

Folklore was a visual medium of both socialism and national identity (Rudling 2018). This meant that similar or sometimes even identical visual forms could carry oppositional messages. One such medium was the folk costume. In socialist ideology, folk costumes were the most iconic part of Soviet folklore-related visuality: from the Friendship of the Peoples Fountain in Moscow, with statues in folk costume representing the republics of the Soviet Union, to staged folk dance performances under the banners of Lenin and Stalin during the Song and Dance Festivals in the

Baltic Soviet Republics. In their Sovietized form, folk costumes became a "national uniform" (Seljamaa 2017: 285). In Latvia, since the national awakening (1850s–1890s), the folk costume had been one of the most recognized cornerstones of ethnic identity, deeply tied to representations of national sentiment (Karlsone 2015). For most of the Soviet period, in official contexts, the folk costume was used as "a poster-like cliché, asserting the national form of socialist internationalism" (Karlsone 2019: 65). Despite this, alongside the official, Soviet ideology-driven connotation attached to the folk costume, its previously accumulated symbolic meanings remained active. Besides the officially sanctioned uses of folk costume as a kitsch-like decorative element, there existed "a deeply personal connection with the folk costume as a symbol of national identity and as a tradition rooted in the folk culture" (Karlsone 2019: 66). Therefore, the folk costume, especially outside Soviet-authorized performances, was one of the means of expressing cultural opposition.

This was not just a question about the altered content of a national form. There were changes made to folk costumes to adapt them to the needs of the Soviet amateur art system. This was most visible in the folk costumes designed for staged folk dances, with "a new look with stylized costumes and a unified visual image" – skirts were made shorter and lighter, details from different ethnographic regions were mixed, and long artificial braids were used (Gailīte 2024: 204) to fit the dance choreographies with "faster tempos, higher jumps, brilliant, never-fading smiles on the dancers' lips" (Klotiņš 2002: 112). Even though large parts of these Soviet layers have become an integral part of the stage folk dance tradition (Kapper 2016), Sovietized folk dance was one of the most criticized visual and performative expressions of folk art, drawing folk revivalists toward what was perceived as more authentic ways of expression and performance. This is also the reason I have taken this rather lengthy introduction to outline the backdrop against which the ideas of the folklore movement consolidated.

Individualized Visuality, Self-Fashioning and Hippie Imagery

Objection to Sovietized and kitschy forms of folk costume led folk revivalists to develop an interest in what was perceived as a more authentic and individualized look. On the one hand, there was a deep fascination with traditional items of clothing that represented the authentic way of dressing, so historical material was replicated with detailed precision; on the other hand, more playful attitudes existed, with just some elements of the folk costume used in combination with the fashion style of the time. The homogenized uses of folk costume as a national uniform were opposed to by

wearing handmade items of clothing created using traditional techniques and materials. Regional differences of textile traditions were taken into consideration; where possible, inherited parts of clothing were used. Any unnecessary decoration was avoided, and a simple look was preferred, often leading to “partially completed outfit, where the girl only needed a white linen shirt and traditional skirt, which were at best complemented by a woven belt” (Karlsone 2019: 67) (see Figure 1). Some excellent examples of this clothing style can be seen in the film *Latvian Folklore* (*Latviešu folklora*, 1983),³ which was made with the participation of the folklore group *Savieši*. However, this went beyond the use of folk costume, as anything considered artificial was discarded. The decorative pomposity of stage folk dance was especially rejected. As remembered by Ērika Māldere, folklore group *Savieši* had been invited to sing alongside the stage folk dancers at a TV program: “We were aghast that they [stage folk dancers] had to put on makeup before the concert. The makeup artists also tried to glue fake mustaches on some of our guys. We all said that we didn’t need makeup artists; we resisted it” (interview, Māldere 2023).

Considerable efforts were directed at self-education. One of the liveliest hubs for making folk costumes was the Riga Secondary School of Applied Arts, which also housed the folklore group *Savieši*.⁴ There was an explicit feeling of authenticity related to crafting one’s own folk costume: “We had to sew folk blouses during needlework lessons. I went to the Valmiera Museum, did research there, and embroidered it. I made my folk costume when I was 18 years old. We dyed the yarn ourselves, weaved skirts, sewed blouses” (interview, Māldere 2023). Besides self-education, folklore groups sought advice from leading specialists in the field. As remembered by Helmī Stalte (1949–2023), the leader of the folklore group *Skandinieki*, they went to the Ethnography Department of the History Museum of the Latvian SSR and consulted with its head, Velta Rozenberga: “We studied the costumes from different regions. We were able to look at all the funds. It was an extremely valuable thing to really see how many variants there are for that one costume in one region” (interview, Stalte 2022). Attention was also paid to the archeological clothing of the Baltic ethnic groups, which temporally drew links to the pre-Christian period. This aligned well with the folklore movement’s broader interest in the most archaic layers of the ethnic culture.

There were also objections to the unifying character of the folk costume as

3 Directed by Andris Slapiņš, available online: <https://www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv/lv/search/movie/163867>.

4 The school was also an important place for making traditional folk music instruments (see Muktupāvels 2025, this issue).

such. Refusing to treat folk costumes as "stage props", folk revivalists often chose simple clothing. They opposed "adornments in folk art, which they equated, not without reason, to falsifications of both past and present folklife. Frequently they preferred a coarse shirt and a short sheepskin coat, or even the common clothes of the lower classes of medieval times, rather than emphatic magnificence" (Klotiņš 2002: 116–117). This approach was more open to influences from other cultural currents. The global character of the folklore movement has been highlighted by Mark Slobin (1996: 5). Regarding the Baltic States, Mats Lindqvist links it to the international wave of protest "which originated primarily in the younger generation and which was directed against the modern project in its various guises" (Lindqvist 2003: 198). Musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš – one of the most influential theorists of the folklore movement in Latvia (Weaver et al. 2023) – has argued that, among global cultural processes, parts of the folklore movement were inspired by the rebellious youth movements of the late 1960s, hippies included. According to Klotiņš, one of the elements adopted from hippies was a "freer cultural behavior" (interview, Klotiņš 2022). This could mean tearing down the boundary between the stage and the audience (Boiko 2001: 114–115) to create an idyllic vision of the countryside where everyone is a part of festivities. Rejecting folklore as a staged performance and treating it instead as a lifestyle, folk revivalists "addressed their audience not primarily as artists, but as fellow human beings" (Klotiņš 2002: 118). In visual terms, hippie-inspired elements appeared in the ornamented woven belts – originally part of the traditional folk costume – which some of leading members of the folklore movement wore as headbands (see Figures 1 and 2).⁵

Both the folklore movement and the hippie movement have been characterized as cultural currents whose reaction to social problems and alienation from the Soviet regime turned into rejection of modernization (Lane et al. 2013: 39). As recalled by ethnologist Anete Karlsone, herself an active member of the folklore movement, not everyone was fascinated by hippie ideas; however, she notes that both shared a common ethos:

The same feeling of freedom which was present in the hippie movement, was also there for the folklore movement. Children of nature, bare-footed, with hair let down and in linen skirts. It was this ideal of the children of nature which was common both for the non-politicized hippies who turned away from Soviet politics and us. At that moment we, at least in the beginning, isolated ourselves from politics as politics equaled the Soviet regime. We went to nature and to traditional culture because it was free of Soviet politics (interview, Karlsone 2022).

5 For more images see the online exhibition *The Folklore Movement in Latvia*, available at: <https://lfk.lv/the-folklore-movement-in-latvia/>.

The idea of a socialist escape – carving out spaces for alternative existence – was shared by both the folklore movement and the hippies. Although the hippie movement in the Soviet Union developed under the influence of global countercultural trends that had originated in the West in the 1960s, it adapted to the specific conditions of life in a totalitarian regime. In socialist states, hippies were among the underground and nonconformist youth of the cultural opposition “who developed their own autonomous spheres of cultural activism and criticism of the regimes” (Apor et al. 2018: 19). Oppositional visuality was one of the distinctive characteristics of the hippies. The visual attributes of the hippie movement served as a means “to manifest the wearer’s subject position, to resist societal norms through symbolic expression, and also to converge emotionally with young people in the West” (Toomistu 2016: 51). Soviet hippie visuality reflected internationally recognizable imagery through creative self-fashioning, colorful clothing, bell-bottom trousers, long hair, bracelets, necklaces, and headbands. The latter – headband – was one of the distinctive visual features that some members of the folklore movement adopted from the hippie visual repertoire.

Although intended to embody the global, hippie material culture was inherently rooted in the realities of the local, as it was intertwined with the materiality of late socialism: “Soviet hippie things, despite being designed to counter ‘Sovietness’, were part and parcel of how late socialist society and its system worked: material imperfections created opportunities; absences sponsored underground businesses; and deficits shaped identities” (Fürst 2021: 293). Thus, the scarcity of the state-planned economy led to a “high degree of originality”, and self-fashioning went beyond mere replication (Svede 2000: 190). In his detailed study of the materiality of the hippie movement in Soviet Latvia, Mark Allen Svede highlights an aspect of the cross-pollination of ideas, describing Latvian hippies as having a “complex layering of many garments and accessories,” with elements from traditional folk costume included (Svede 2000: 198). Similar to the way American hippies used elements of ethnic traditional dress of racial minorities and native peoples, Latvian hippies “revived elements of indigenous folk attire” by wearing outfits analogous to folk costumes (Svede 2000: 198; see also images in Stinkuls 2020; Valpēters 2010: 127).

Direct connection between hippies and folk revivalists was established through artisan, hippie, and writer Alfrēds Stinkuls (b. 1950). Well acquainted with leading revivalists Valdis Muktupāvels and Ilga Reizniece, Stinkuls bridged both movements. As recalled by Ilga Reizniece (Ozoliņa 2021: 88), Stinkuls was the one who inspired the use of ornamented woven bands as headbands among the members of the folklore movement. A certain hippie vibe was also present in Reizniece’s choice to wear her long hair down when performing in traditional folk costume as the



Figure 1. Folklore performance at the crafts fair, Ethnographic Open-Air Museum of Latvia, Riga, 1980s. Archives of Latvian Folklore, LFK 2264, 258. Photo by Alfrēds Stinkuls.

traditional way is to wear the hair in a braid with the folk costume (Ozoliņa 2021: 88). There are also testimonies about how the looks of the folk revivalists left lasting impressions and created the desire to belong to the community. As recalled by Janta Meža, at one of the festivities in Dole in the first half of the 1980s, she saw a vision-like image that sparked her interest:

In the park, under a large oak tree, two ethereal beings with long hair, headbands around their heads, sitting and playing *kokles* – Ilga Reizniece and Zane Šmite. In a word, this sincere image touched me so much that I realized that this is the real kind of Latvianess, and I want to be a part of it in some way (interview, Meža 2022).

A significant contribution by Stinkuls to the history of the folklore movement is his photographic documentation of events related to it. His collection of color photo slides depicting the folklore movement (LFK 2264) has been deposited in the Digital Archives of Latvian Folklore.⁶ In 2020, his extraordinary life story was published in the autobiography *Mati sarkanā vējā* (Hair in the Red Wind). Besides capturing his hippie experience, Stinkuls provides detailed accounts of some of the early events involving folk revivalists. These include in-depth analyses of concert

6 LFK 2264. Alfrēds Stinkuls Collection. Archives of Latvian Folklore. Available at: <https://garamantas.lv/en/collection/1753523/Alfreda-Stinkula-kolekcija>.



Figure 2. Folklore group *Bizīteri*, 1981 or 1982. Archives of Latvian Folklore, LFK 2248, 5. Second from right – Ilga Reizniece. Photographer unknown.

repertoires and performance styles, as well as his account of an exchange with Saulvedis Cimmermanis (1929–2022), a prominent historian who had publicly criticized the activities of the folk revivalists (Stinkuls 2020: 250–252). Together with the photo slides, this forms a powerful testimony to the countercultural movements of late socialist Latvia. Even though both movements were socialist escapes, they went in different directions: for hippies, it was the “dropping out of socialism” (Fürst, McLellan 2017), whereas for much of the folklore movement, the escape mode of existence evolved into a stance of active political opposition.

The Flag: From Folklore

Fieldwork to Political Dissent

Based on the historical context of the reinstitution of independence in the Baltic States, the process has been described as non-violent resistance (Šmidchens 2014; Škapars 2005; Dreifelds 1996). In non-democratic regimes, where open protest would be violently repressed, opposition movements become “skilled at mounting unobtrusive, symbolic, and peaceful forms of disruption that avoid repression while symbolizing contention” (Tarrow 2011: 103). Cultural opposition against the Soviet regime characterizes the Baltic States, especially in the second half of the 1980s:

Symbolic reclamation of the nation was a centrepiece of collective action in the early opposition period. Although overt political demands were still risky, and few in the opposition were prepared to ask for full national independence, symbolic demands, like those related to environmental protection, or symbolic deeds, such as commemorating the Stalinist mass deportations of Balts, were important because they laid bare problems widely believed to be symptomatic of a larger problem, the Soviet regime itself (Eglitis 2002: 37).

Therefore, symbols as "a subtle form of communication with tremendous suggestive and emotional power" had the potency to mobilize for collective action during the Singing Revolution (Karklins 1994: 67). Of special importance were symbols of the interwar state, such as the national flag, anthem, and other attributes. With the argument that small acts of dissent, often of symbolic nature, led to actual political resistance, this part of the article analyzes one of the most pronounced visual symbols of the independence movement – the Soviet-banned carmine red-white-carmine red flag of the independent Republic of Latvia – and the ways in which the events surrounding its reinstitution coincided with the activities of the folklore movement. I argue that the use of the banned flag marks a clear point when the folklore movement shifted from a "socialist escape" as an alternative lifestyle choice into a deliberate dissent expressed as openly visible political resistance. Even though there had been activities that could be labeled as political before that, especially on behalf of the Stalts family, the leaders of *Skandinieki* (more in Weaver 2025, this issue), and even altercations with the Soviet authorities and KGB campaigns against individual members of folklore groups,⁷ in the public display of the still-banned flag at the opening concert of the *Baltica* festival on July 13, 1988, the folklore movement as a whole demonstrated a clear political position.

In terms of intensity and emotional impact, the Festival *Baltica '88* was the peak of the folklore movement in Latvia, and for many of the participants, the display of the banned flag was the most memorable moment. However, the story of the carmine red-white-carmine red flag of the independent Republic of Latvia cannot be fully understood without historical context, particularly regarding the flag's status and the consequences of displaying it during the Soviet occupation. The use of the carmine red and white colors as a symbol of Latvian ethnic identity dates back to the 1870s and the ideas consolidated during the national awakening (1850s–1890s). The particular colors were mentioned in the 13th-century *Livonian*

⁷ The home of the Stalts family were searched by the KGB for illegal literature (interview, Stalte 2022), and a campaign to influence Valdis Mukupāvels, the leader of the *Savieši* folklore group, was carried out (more in online exhibition *The Folklore Movement in Latvia*, available at: <https://lfk.lv/the-folklore-movement-in-latvia>).

Rhymed Chronicle (Älteste Livländische Reimchronik) as the flag of the Latgallian ethnic group (Pumpuriņš 2024). When the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918, the carmine red and white colors had already been established as a national symbol. Soon after the first Soviet occupation in 1940, the use of the flag was banned. During the Nazi German occupation (1941–1945), it could only be used with permission and alongside the Nazi flag (Pumpuriņš 2024).

Despite the risks, for most of the Soviet occupation (1944/1945–1991), there were people who took the chance and displayed the flag as a symbol of lost independence and self-determination. Such daring acts were often part of youth resistance groups (Rimšāns 2007). If caught, this could result in arrest, torture, imprisonment, or deportation to forced settlement camps in Siberia. The book *Mūsu karoga stāsti: 1940–1991 (The Stories of Our Flag: 1940–1991)* (Bergmane 2015) has collected many of these testimonies. One of the most well-known cases is that of Bruno Javoīš (1941–2025). In 1963, when the events took place, he was a student at the Riga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute. In protest against Russification policies, and as a reminder of Latvia's forced annexation into the Soviet Union, he decided to raise the banned flag on the radio tower directly opposite the main Soviet police department of Riga. Javoīš chose the night of December 5, Constitution Day of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It took serious preparation to sew the flag and to train for the climb up the 76-metre-high tower. Aware of the possible consequences, he wrote a farewell letter to his relatives with instructions for his burial place. Javoīš managed to raise the flag but was caught immediately and sentenced for "anti-Soviet agitation" to seven years' imprisonment in Mordovia (Bergmane 2015: 75–104). Later on with the loosening of the Soviet regime during the Singing Revolution, the flags of the Baltic countries were reinstated even before full independence was achieved. Consequently, some of the first occasions when the flags were publicly displayed have gained special significance in the collective memory of the Baltic States.

Besides analyzing how the events involving the flag manifested political attitudes of the folklore movement, in this part of the article my aim is to shed light on some misconceptions concerning the first displays of the then still-banned flag. First, in several accounts by members of the folklore movement, as well as in other sources, it is emphasized that *Baltica '88* was the first time the flag was displayed publicly (Muktupāvels 2011: 89; Klotiņš 2002: 123; Stradiņš 1992: 153). However, there had already been earlier displays. Second, the accounts of the opening concert of *Baltica '88* have given the impression that there was just one flag and that it was displayed by Dainis Stalts (1939–2014), one of the leaders of the folklore group *Skandinieki* (Šmidchens 2014: 275). However, interviews and video recordings

show that this was not the case, as there were many flags on display, carried by several folklore groups.⁸

Before the opening concert of the *Baltica '88* festival on July 13, there had already been two public displays of the banned flag at mass gatherings that year. The first was the funeral of the dissident and political prisoner Gunārs Astra (1931–1988). On April 19, despite the opposition of the authorities, several thousand people attended Astra's funeral, filling his grave with handfuls of sand (Zelmenis 2024). Astra's coffin was covered with the banned flag.⁹ The second occurred a month before *Baltica '88*, on June 14, when Konstantīns Pupurs (1964–2017), a member of the human rights defense group Helsinki-86, carried the flag all through Riga – from the Monument of Freedom to the Cemetery of the Brethren – after the group's demonstration commemorating the victims of the Stalinist terror. Despite the loosening of the Soviet regime, displaying the flag in 1988 was still associated with great personal risks. Following the events, Pupurs was forced to leave Soviet Latvia.

In the paragraphs that follow, I have chosen to give insights into the memories of one of the members of the folklore movement – Iveta Tāle (b. 1962), who at that time was the leader of the folklore group *Klinči* and continues to play an important role in the traditional folk music scene in Latvia. Her story is particularly insightful as it demonstrates how an interest in folklore turned into political activism. Tāle's engagement with political topics developed alongside her passion for traditional singing. As was common for folk revivalists, both individuals and newly established folklore groups carried out fieldwork by visiting the elderly in the countryside, documenting folklore, and learning traditional singing styles and repertoires. Alongside folklore, Tāle documented the life stories of those she met during fieldwork. These revealed a different history from that propagated by the Soviet regime. Tāle recalls: "Political things appeared inevitably, as it became clear that we had been taught nothing of history in schools. I started going to people and listening to what they were saying. We each had our own family stories" (interview, Tāle 2024).

What Tāle experienced during her fieldwork – the silenced memories of the Soviet regime – was not only what fueled her personal engagement, but also an important driving force for the independence movement as such. Towards the end

8 A video recording of the *Baltica '88* festival's opening shows that at least seven flags were brought in by different folklore groups during the opening concert. Video recording available at: <https://arhiiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/baltica-88-avakontsert-1-osa>.

9 Images available in: Zelmenis, Gints (2021). *Cilvēks vai simbols? Piecas Gunāra Astras portretas skices*, LSM. <https://tinyurl.com/Zelmenis-Astra>

of the Soviet occupation, both individual and collective memory emerged as spheres where Soviet dominance was challenged. The reclaiming of historical memory and the public voicing of individual memories suppressed during the Soviet years contributed immensely to the mobilization of dissent during the Singing Revolution (Zelčē 2009). The first public demonstrations in the second half of the 1980s centered on important dates commemorating painful historical events.¹⁰ The first of these “calendar demonstrations” was organized by the human rights watch group Helsinki-86, the first openly political grassroots organization. Tāle attended the Helsinki-86 demonstration in Riga on August 23, 1987, which resulted in threats from the KGB. She also engaged in environmental protection activities, protesting against the construction of the River Daugava hydroelectric dam (interview, Tāle 2024).

In Tāle’s account, the *Baltica ‘88* festival was closely tied to opposition to the Soviet regime, and the public display of the carmine red-white-carmine red flag was “the mission of the *Baltica* festival. The flag had to be legalized, that much was clear” (interview, Tāle 2024). Planning took place within a smaller circle of people who gathered informally to discuss the question of the flag. The material side of the matter also had to be resolved. Tāle remembers that the flag was made shortly before the event:

We sent two people to the store to find some suitable fabric. Someone brought a sewing machine to the dormitories where we stayed. My father was the ultimate expert on what the color proportions of the flag should be. Then we sewed. There on the spot (interview, Tāle 2024).

There are also similar accounts from other folklore groups sewing their flags just before the *Baltica* event, for example folklore group *Grodi* (interview, Rancāne 2023). Similar do-it-yourself activities took place in the regions. In Cēsis, where one of the *Baltica ‘88* concerts took place, Daumants Kalniņš – a jeweler and, at that time, a member of the *Dzieti* and *Spurguļi* folklore groups – recalls that it was not possible to get the right kind of fabric, so it had to be dyed to achieve the carmine red color (Kalniņš 2018: 108).

On the day of the opening concert, shortly before going into the hall of the event, the final push for Tāle and others from folklore group *Klinči* was given by the Estonian revivalists who had arrived with the Estonian flag:

¹⁰ For example, the public demonstrations at the second half of the 1980s commemorated such events as August 23, marking the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) with its secret protocol establishing Soviet and Nazi German spheres of influence in Europe and thus deciding the fate of the Baltic States; or June 14 and March 25, the dates of the mass deportations to Siberia in 1941 and 1949.

They unfolded their flag in the audience stands. But we just stood like fools at the entrance with our flag folded. The Ordelovskis orchestra was playing, and we were just standing there, and the Estonians were getting on our nerves. Then I said – well, that's it, what are we afraid of? Let's just unfold it! (interview, Tāle 2024).

The importance of the banned interwar flags as symbols of resistance to the Soviet regime was shared among all three Baltic countries. The first displays of the flags had already taken place in Estonia and Lithuania earlier that year.¹¹

The display of the flags left a remarkable emotional effect, Tāle remembers:

As it all happened there, it was insanely emotional, insanely [...] It was, I think, the first moment in my life when the so-called slowed-down time set in. I've experienced it twice, and the first time was when we displayed the flag [...] all those people were there on their feet [audience] and what happened in that hall is indescribable (interview, Tāle 2024).

According to eyewitness accounts, several high Soviet Latvian officials stood up and left the hall afterward (Šmidchens 2014: 283). Following the opening concert, the festival's procession through the streets of Riga took place, most notably passing the Monument of Freedom, giving an even broader public a chance to see the banned flags out in the open (see Figure 3).

After some of these first, still officially unsanctioned displays of the flags, events evolved quickly. On September 29, 1988, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR passed a decree *On the Culturally Historical Symbolism of the Latvian Nation*, relegalizing the flag as a culturally historical symbol. The decree acknowledged the carmine red-white-carmine red flag as legitimate and permitted its use also as a pennant, emblem, badge, etc., as well as its display on national holidays, work and family celebrations, commemorative days, and cultural and mass events (Stradiņš 1992: 174–175). In 1990, the carmine red-white-carmine red flag became the official flag of the Latvian SSR; in 1991 – the flag of the independent Republic of Latvia (Pumpuriņš 2024).

11 For Estonia, it was April 17 during a Heritage Protection Society's procession in Tartu, and May 14, 1988, at the Tartu Music Days; in Lithuania, at a commemoration of the June 14 deportations and on July 1–3, 1988, when all three Baltic flags were displayed during the *Gaudeamus* Baltic students' choral festival in Vilnius. The events of the latter are described in detail by Guntis Šmidchens: "Soviet officials rushed to confiscate the flags, which at that moment were still illegal in Lithuania, but they were not able to push through the choir of seven thousand singers, clustered together tightly, singing, and so those who had revealed the festival's true colors remained unpunished. Baltic flags then emerged at every festival event, unmindful of the scores of policemen who looked on. Choirs in the festival procession carried at least four Lithuanian, seven Latvian, and many more Estonian flags, with all singers carrying lapel ribbons of their national colors. From this moment on, public singing events in Lithuania would always include the flags that marked them as being non-Soviet" (Šmidchens 2014: 160).



Figure 3. Folklore group *Klinči* at the procession after the opening concert of the folklore festival *Baltica '88*. July 13, 1988, Riga.
Personal archives of Iveta Tāle. Photo by Kārlis Roberts Freibergs.

Addressing the dense layer of events that took place within just a few years, Mark Beissinger describes the glasnost era as a time of “thickened history”, a period in which events unfolded at great speed and began to generate “a significant causative role of their own” (Beissinger 2002: 42). With the start of mobilization of dissent around 1987, within the short period of “thickened history” between open dissent and the restitution of independence, “new identity frames moved from the fringes of politics to its mainstream in a way previously unimaginable” (Beissinger 2002: 176). The events surrounding the flag indeed demonstrate the idea of thickened history, as there was a rapid move within one year from something previously forbidden and punished to something openly displayed and acknowledged. The flags, in this context, were culturally resonant tools of resistance to the Soviet regime, and as emphasized by Guntis Šmidchens, they were part of the non-violent resistance repertoire as “[t]hey gave the Singing Revolution the visual symbol of self-recognition that is critical to nonviolent mass movements” (Šmidchens 2014: 311).

For the folklore movement, the display of the flags has become one of the most cherished memories of *Baltica '88*, marking the symbolic milestone that turned the folklore movement from cultural opposition towards political self-recognition. As shown with the example of Iveta Tāle, this was a process that took place gradually.



Figure 4. Folklore groups *Skandinieki* and *Grodi* participating at the Baltic Days in Bonn, Germany, August 23 1989 – a demonstration against the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Photo by Uldis Grasis. Latvian State Archive, LNA_LVA F2191_1v_5_12.

There had been activities before July 1988 that confronted Soviet power; however, the public use of the banned flags was a clear visual display of anti-Soviet attitudes and political engagement on behalf of the folk revivalists. In the years that followed, the folklore movement was part of mass gatherings, political demonstrations, and the barricades of January 1991, with their repertoire and symbols used as elements of both cultural opposition and political activism. Some activities were carried out abroad as well – for example, in 1989 folklore groups *Skandinieki* and *Grodi* participated in a political demonstration against the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in Bonn, Germany with the carmine red-white-carmine red flags displayed in large numbers (see Figure 4).

Folk Ornament: A Repertoire of Culturally Resonant Symbols

One of the core narratives of the folklore movement frames it as one of the first harbingers of anti-Soviet attitudes that ultimately led to political change and the restoration of independence (Šmidchens 1996, 2014; Dreifelds 1996: 53–54; Mukutupāvels 2011). This is particularly explicit in emic narratives of folk revivalists themselves. As stated

by Valdis Muktupāvels, one of the key figures of the movement, the folklore movement in Latvia “positioned itself clearly at the centre of political activities that finally led to liberation from the Soviets and the reestablishment of national statehood in 1991” (Muktupāvels 2011: 90). This was also the case in other Baltic States.¹² However, did the ideas initiated by the folklore movement reach different interest groups and wider society, or did they remain confined to the inner circle of the folklore groups? When looking at visual aspects, an example that demonstrates that the ideas did indeed reach wider audiences is the use of the folk ornament. With this seemingly minor cultural expression, I aim to show how the ideas spread beyond the close circles of the folklore movement and became part of the publicly available repertoire of cultural resistance. Folk ornament was culturally resonant because it had already held an established place in the visual language of expressing ethnic belonging and national sentiment. It provided links with the interwar period in Latvia, which was an important reference point for the independence movement, because what was sought was not “a radical break with the past, but rather a return to the (pre-Soviet) past”, meaning the time of the independent Republic of Latvia (1918–1940) (Eglitis 2002: 11).

For the folklore movement, one particular folk ornament of significance was the Tree of Austra (*Austras koks*), the official emblem of the International Folklore Festival *Baltica '88*. In 1988, when the first *Baltica* took place in Latvia, a visual motif that had been introduced a year earlier in Lithuania was continued (see Figure 5). The motif of a symmetrical tree or plant is known almost universally as the Tree of Life (Gombrich 1984: 244). In Latvia, the name ‘Austra’ is derived from folklore. Although her presence in classical folklore genres is relatively rare, Austra is the mythological personification of dawn (Kursīte 2020: 61). In geometric ornament, the Tree of Austra represents the idea of a three-part world model, with the roots as the underground, trunk as the earth, and the branches as the heavens (Kokare 1999: 40). In Latvian folk art, it may have developed from the motif of the herringbone; later it reached its most spectacular forms in folk costumes from the 18th to the first half of the 19th century (Zemītis, Rozenberga 1991: 44). The *Baltica '88* emblem was designed by artist Vitolds Kucins, who drew inspiration from folk art.

In order to move beyond the purely visual perception of folk ornament and grasp the semantic content behind its forms, a particular cultural competence was required. The Tree of Austra was only one among a set of culturally resonant visual motifs, derived from folk art, that circulated during the Singing Revolution.

12 See Ramonaitė (2025, this issue) for a detailed analysis of the connection between Lithuanian folk revivalists and the independence movement.

The symbolic interpretation of folk ornament, including the names of specific elements and their semantic meanings, had roots in Latvian traditions and broader Baltic heritage. The interwar period saw a widespread interest in folk ornament, accompanied by interpretations of its semantic meanings; it was in this context that the specific, mythology-related names of folk ornaments emerged. The geometric patterns characteristic of Latvian folk art were paired with mythological entities, forming an interpretative system of folk art that connected ornament and mythology.¹³

Even though interest in folk art was heightened also during socialist era, "several aspects of traditional folk culture, including its religious, ethnic, and conservative characteristics, were incompatible with the goal of creating a unified socialist folk culture" (Csurgó et al. 2018: 574). Because of its closeness to religion, mythology-related themes did not align with Soviet ideology, and for most of the Soviet period the mythological dimension was silenced. In line with the slogan *national in form, socialist in content*, the Soviet regime promoted imagery that borrowed the outward form of traditional folk art, but only through appropriation and with socialist content embedded (Castillo 1997). In practice, this meant that the forms of folk ornament were frequently used in Soviet architecture, in festive occasions such as the new socialist traditions mentioned earlier, and in design. However, with the renewed interest in folklore and traditional culture sparked by the folklore movement, the folk ornament-mythology nexus gained new relevance – particularly because the idea of semantic meaning in folk ornament resonated with the folk revivalists' search for what was perceived as authentic and ancient layers of folklore.

Reaching beyond the circles of the folklore movement, folk ornament imagery experienced a wave of renewed appreciation, interest, and use. The restoration of Latvian independence – declared on May 4, 1990, and finalized on August 21, 1991 – was driven by a diverse constellation of grassroots movements, cultural currents, and political forces, with the folklore movement among them. Evidence that the ideas of the folklore movement transcended the closed circles of folklore groups can be seen in the incorporation of folk ornament into the official emblems of environmental and political branches of the independence movement.

Environmental concerns were behind much of the popular dissent in all three Baltic countries. In Estonia, it was the concern for oil-shale pollution and

13 The originator of the ornament-mythology nexus was artist Ernests Brastiņš (1892–1942). In 1923, he published *Latviešu ornamentika* (Latvian Ornaments), a work in which several elements of folk ornament were interpreted as symbols of Latvian deities. Following Brastiņš's approach, this mode of interpreting folk ornament has, in contemporary contexts, become an almost universally accepted framework. See more: Ūdre-Lielbārde 2024.

phosphate mining; in Lithuania, nuclear risk due to the Ignalina power plant; and in Latvia, it was the planned construction of the River Daugava hydroelectric dam. The environmental movement started out as a small group of enthusiasts interested both in cultural heritage, like the neglected churches, and care for nature. From informal gatherings, this grew into mobilization of masses, which in the case of the protests against the River Daugava hydroelectric dam was “the first success story of Latvian collective action against Soviet authorities” (Lane et al. 2013: 52). The official organization – the Environment Protection Club (*Vides aizsardzības klubs*, VAK) – was founded in 1987. Their emblem was the folk ornament-derived eight-pointed star or the Morning Star (*Auseklis, Auseklītis*) (see Figures 6 and 7). Auseklis in Latvian mythology is one of the celestial deities: a male figure, one of the sons of the God, and a male personification of the Morning star or the planet Venus. In folk ornament, according to the ornament-mythology nexus, Auseklis is depicted as an eight-pointed star. However, the meaning and importance of the eight-pointed star reached beyond the environmentalists, as alongside the carmine red-white-carmine red flag, it became a widely used symbol of the whole independence movement (Ūdre 2019). Besides the eight-pointed star, VAK adopted a green-white-green flag with proportions identical to those of the banned flag of the Republic of Latvia. This was a cleverly intended move, as in the black-and-white photos and television footage it was indistinguishable from the prohibited flag.

The Popular Front of Latvia (*Latvijas Tautas fronte*, LTF), founded in October 1988, analogous to *Sqjūdis* in Lithuania and *Rahvarinne*, the Popular Front in Estonia, was a political organization with a decisive role in the reinstitution of Latvia’s independence. A year after it was established, its membership was about 250,000, uniting more than 10 percent of the population (Lane et al. 2013: 54). The emblem of LTF was a folk ornament-derived image – ‘Jumis’ (see Figure 6). In Latvian mythology, Jumis is one of the spirits and deities connected to harvest and fertility. This partially anthropomorphized deity, according to folk beliefs, resided in the last unharvested sheaf of grain and was connected with the rituals of harvest (Kokare 1999: 170).¹⁴ The symbolism of the deity is derived from nature, where ‘jumis’ denotes twinning fruits or plants. In geometric ornament, Jumis takes the shape of what could best be described as an upside-down letter W, symbolizing the double-pronged grain ear. In archeology, the motif is present already in the Neolithic period (Zemītis, Rozenberga 1991: 32). For the LFT, the emblem of Jumis was chosen in a two-round competition

14 The aforementioned film *Latvian Folklore* (1983) depicts a reconstruction of such a ritual, with the chasing of Jumis in the last unharvested sheaf of grain.

with nearly 400 proposals,¹⁵ both from professional artists and amateurs. The final version of the emblem in carmine red and white colors, matching the recently reinstated flag, was created by artist Laimonis Šēnbergs (Kalniete 2015).

Besides the emblems of different organizations, another example that illustrates the argument about the popularity of folklore-related themes and folk ornament was the nationwide poll *On the Question of National Symbols* and the representation of folk ornament in it. As part of the opportunities provided by the glasnost era, on July 28, 1988, a Working Group of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR for the Improvement of the Constitution of Latvia and Other Legislative Acts of the Republic was established. Subsequently, a subcommittee was formed to work on questions of "national symbolism" (Stradiņš 1992: 128). In order to gauge public opinion, the subcommittee released a poll *On the Question of National Symbols*. While the status of the flag and people's opinions about it were at the forefront of the poll, it also invited comments on other symbols, such as the coat of arms of cities, and, interestingly enough, folk ornament. The invitation published in the press stated:

We have a very rich folk ornament, from which you can easily choose what to elevate to the level of national symbolism and what not. Tree of Austra? Sun? Eight-pointed star? Three stars? An oak leaf wreath? Maybe a flower or bird characteristic of our land? (Stradiņš 1988: 4).

When the poll concluded, most of the votes concerning folk ornament went to the eight-pointed star: 21% or 25 787 responders voted for it (Stradiņš 1992: 165). The results of the poll, as well as the work of the subcommittee, culminated in the passing of the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR on the Culturally Historical Symbolism of the Latvian Nation on September 29, 1988. The decree consisted of four points. The first two addressed the flag, but the third was directly aimed at folk ornament, stating that the LSSR Supreme Council decided to "support the proposal to use traditional Latvian culturally historic symbols, ornament motives, and compositions (the eight-pointed star, the sun, etc.)" (Stradiņš 1992: 174).

This rather peculiar example of folk ornament becoming part of state legislation not only shows the attitudes that existed in society, but also the seriousness and importance attributed to these seemingly minor expressions of culture. It also supports the argument that the 1980s, especially the second half, was indeed characterized by an increased interest in folklore and traditional culture – an interest

15 Images of the proposals are available at the digital exhibition *Competition Throws for the Symbolics of the Popular Front* by the Popular Front Museum.

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnQWnrpbjuw>.



Figure 5. Emblems of the International Folklore Festival *Baltica* for 1987 (Lithuania), 1988 (Latvia), and 1989 (Estonia), all featuring Tree of Life motifs.

that did not exclusively belong to the folklore movement and the participants of newly established folklore groups, but was much broader, reaching across many fields. The specific attention to folk ornament-mythology nexus aligned with the folklore movement's interest in the most archaic layers of the folklore. With the emergence of grassroots movements, folk ornament became a convenient tool of cultural resistance, both because it could be used to establish links with the interwar period and earlier stages of Baltic history, and because it had the capacity to convey emotional messages rooted in the historical imaginations attached to it.

Conclusions

Folklore movement-related visual expressions were born in distinct non-democratic contexts, most of them functioning as expressions of cultural opposition – a form of non-violent resistance to the Soviet regime's political, ideological, and cultural pressure. The underlying premise forming the main argument of this article is that folklore provided a powerful source for creating alternative cultural spaces, or “socialist escapes” (Giustino et al. 2013; Vari 2013). Without flattening the specific historical and cultural nuances of the Baltic States, which have been discussed in this article, this phenomenon also characterizes many former socialist countries, where folklore “created the sense of a unified community and alternative modes of thought in the period of socialism, even if the application of folklore was multifaceted in the socialist period and ethnographic studies and folk culture activities were mobilized to service the ideological needs of the state” (Csurgó et al. 2018: 573).

The article has analyzed three case studies of visuality. Inquiry into each case has allowed me to go beyond surface-level descriptions of how things looked, leading to nuanced conclusions regarding the folklore movement in Latvia. First, the focus on clothing and self-fashioning has enabled me to contextualize the revival processes



Figure 6. Cover of *Literatūra un Māksla*, No 42, October 14, 1989, displaying the official symbol of the Popular Front of Latvia – Jumis – at the centre of the page, and eight-pointed star by the title of the newspaper and on the sweater of the leader of the Popular Front of Latvia, Dainis Īvāns (left).

with global cultural currents. The folklore movement, in large part, originated as a critical response to the stylized folklore performances promoted by the Soviet cultural policy of amateur art. One of the particular means of visually expressing cultural opposition was the folklore movements' engagement with individualized folk costumes, in opposition to the Sovietized folk costume as a national uniform.

Following my interest in why some members of the folklore movement presented a hippie-like imagery in combination with traditional folk costumes, I have explored the connection between the two movements, revealing that it was personal connections that bridged folk revivalists and hippies. When it came to self-fashioning, for hippies it was Western cultural forms that sparked their desire, whereas for the folklore movement the visual ideal lay in the archaic peasant past and rural idyll. Both movements shared a wish for individualized looks, which – despite, and also in collaboration with, the constraints of Soviet material insufficiencies – was brought to life through various do-it-yourself practices. Through a shared appreciation of hand-crafted and individualized items of clothing and decoration, both movements mastered their material worlds and carved out their spaces of socialist escapes in terms of individualized looks. However, further research would be needed to draw more substantial conclusions about the structural connections between both movements.

Second, the attention to one of the most evident visual symbols of the Singing Revolution – the flag of the Republic of Latvia – has allowed me to argue that its



Figure 7. Demonstration of the Environment Protection Club, October 22, 1988, Liepāja.

People at the front carrying a figure of the eight-pointed star.

Photo by Andris Krampus. Museum of Liepāja, LMON 1305.

display at the Folklore Festival *Baltica '88* marked a clear turn towards expressing political, anti-Soviet attitudes. By focusing on individual memories of the events of those days, my aim was to show how political engagement developed gradually: beginning with folklore fieldwork, which initiated the processes of recovering Soviet-silenced narratives, and continuing with participation in mass protests. Mats Lindqvist has aptly described the correlation between folk revivals as a global phenomenon and the political sympathies of the Baltic folk revivalists:

In the capitalist world the rebellion was articulated within the framework of the visions of the radical left. The idealized, humane and natural world – the world of folk music – was often given a socialist coloring. In the Baltic states, people had lived within a type of socialist system for several decades. Here, Soviet rule came to represent the modernist violation of those ways of life that respected human dignity. For obvious reasons, the Baltic states youth rebellion did not form political and ideological ties with the left. Opposition was, instead, gradually woven into an ideology of ethno-nationalist independence. Folk music appealed to those with classic nationalist ideas (Lindqvist 2003: 198).

Folklore-related activities thus became a field of cultural opposition during the Soviet occupation, with the folklore movement as one of the first harbingers of the independence movement and the Singing Revolution in Latvia.

Third, a distinct visual feature that characterized the period was the wave of new appreciation, interest, and use of folk ornament, extending beyond spheres directly connected to folklore to include the environmental movement and the Popular Front of Latvia. Folk ornament functioned as a culturally grounded tool for expressing dissent and provided a shared repertoire of visual symbols. Attention to the spread of these symbols reveals that the ideas fueling the folklore movement reached broader strata of society beyond those directly involved in the activities of the folk revivalists.

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