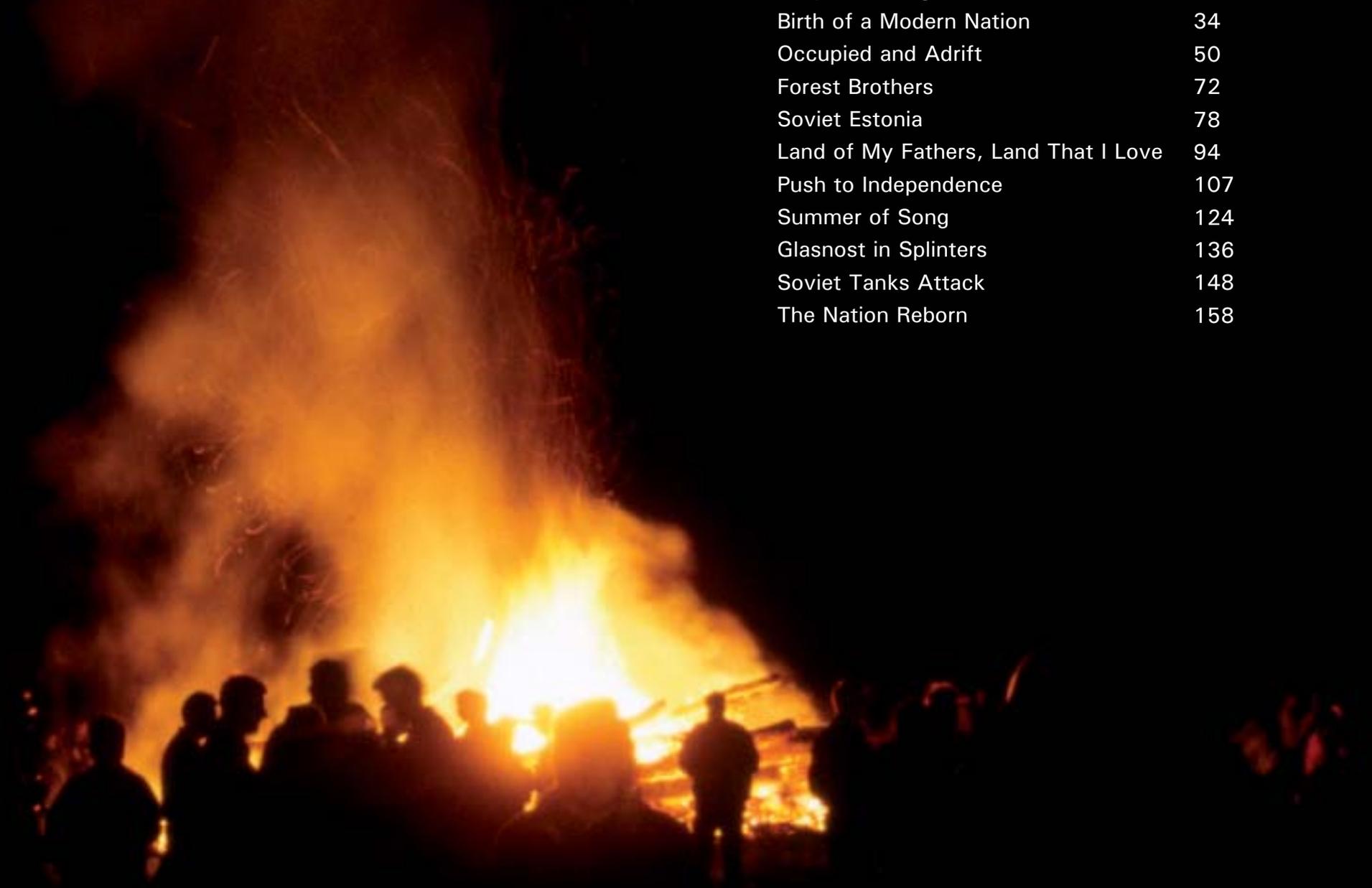


*Old Estonians believed that the souls of the dead
ascended into heaven through the smoke of burning
boats, then settled as stars in the Milky Way.*

*On Midsummer Nights they stood around the fire and sang
the souls on to the afterworld.*

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Chapter 1:

People of Song

“DANCE through life, sing your soul to heaven.”

– *Estonian proverb*

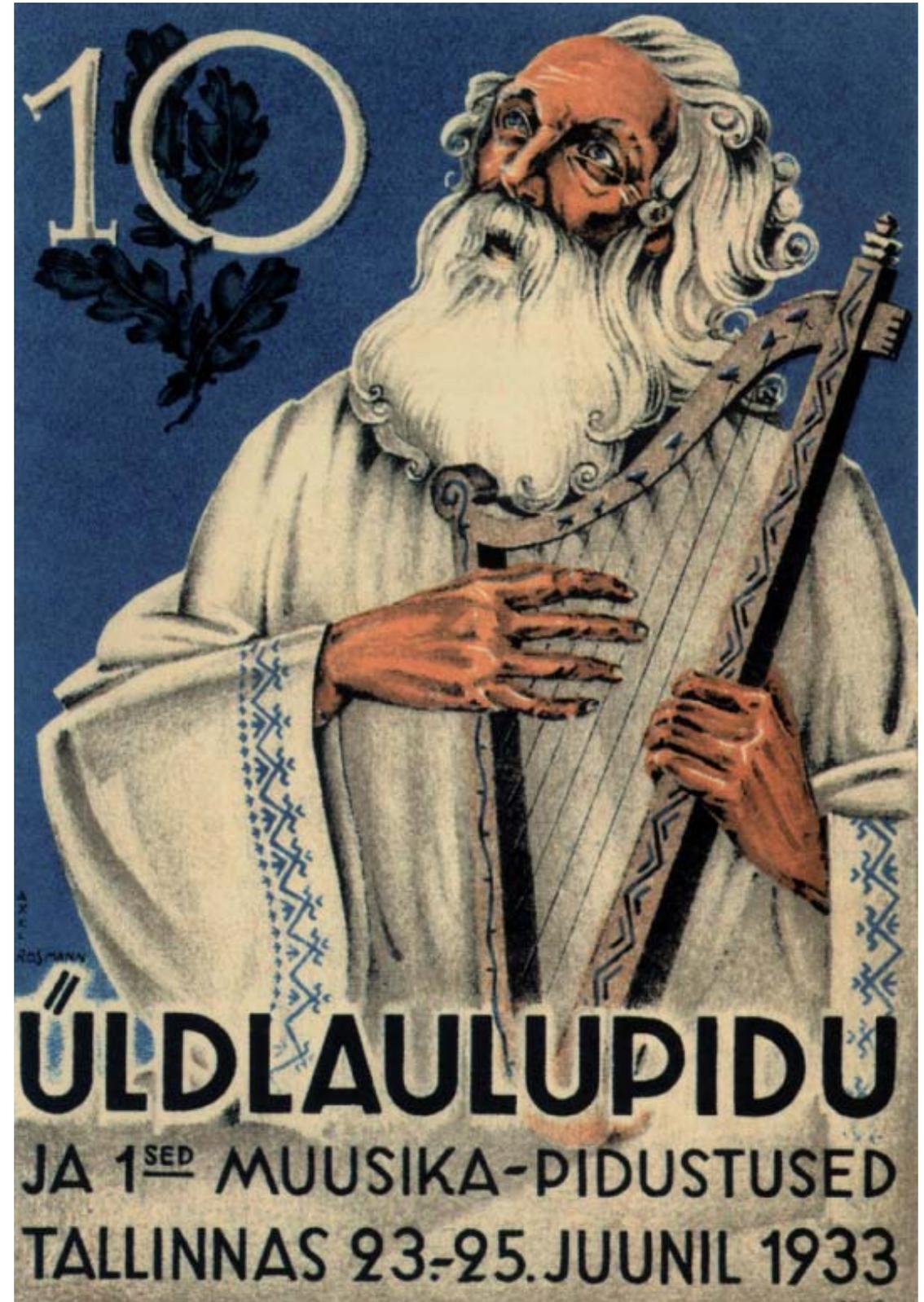
PERHAPS Estonians didn't have many good alternatives to singing. They had lived and suffered, after all, through more than 800 years of foreign occupation and slavery. As serfs, their lives and service belonged to German feudal landowners. Language and melody were about the only things they controlled.

Their forefathers had migrated to Estonia more than 5,000 years ago, probably arriving in small waves from the forested middle Volga River region of today's Russia. Their language was distinct from most of Europe's other languages. It was one of the Finno-Ugric language family shared by Finns, Hungarians, Saami, and a dozen other small nations scattered from the Ural Mountains to the Baltic. The Estonians, then known as Ests, lived for thousands of years as hunter-gatherers and eventually farmers, fishers, and keepers of bees. They raised no kings or potentates. They fended off incursions by Vikings and Russian principalities, and occasionally raided vulnerable Scandinavian settlements.

But their world changed dramatically in the 13th century, when the Danes attacked from the north, and German knights of the Teutonic and Livonian military orders, the “Knights of the Sword,” moved up the Baltic coast in a series of Northern Crusades determined to Christianize this last backwater of paganism in Europe. “The Land of Mary,” Pope Innocent III called the Baltics, in order to inspire his forces to punish the unbelievers.

For years the Estonian tribes put up a tenacious struggle against conversion by the sword; they managed to combine their forces and

Vanemuine, mythical Estonian god of song, graces the poster from the 10th “Laulupidu,” the All-Estonia Song Festival.





Free in the Roaring 20s

It was the time of adolescence for Estonians as well as for their nation, a time of heady nationalism and grand aspirations. Jazz, as played by the Murphy Band in 1926 (left bottom), competed with choir singing for many young Estonians, but they were all proud to put on national dress for the 1923 Song Festival (left). Choir Director Gustav Ernesaks (below) holds Aino Vesilind between his knees as he belts out a song in the park. Aino's husband-to-be, Paul, is left of Ernesaks in this summer snapshot.





Patriotic Estonian rock, partly based on old runic songs, moved the nation's young people to action. Especially potent were the *Five Patriotic Songs* of Alo Mattiisen (top left), often sung by veteran Ivo Linna (top right). Tõnis Mägi (below) was another rock star who wrote and sang his own songs of revolution. They as well as rock bands held marathon sessions for six straight nights at the Song Festival grounds in 1987. Mattiisen (facing page, left) was a serious musician who did not live comfortably with pop celebrity. He died young, but at the core of the Singing Revolution that brought freedom to his country.



had seen their old national flag in public.

From then on, through successive nights, the people began to arrive with flags, many of which had been hidden in attics and basements more than 50 years ago. Big flags, old flags, little flags, flags made from scraps that afternoon. All flying for Estonian freedom.

It was, said Ivo Linna, whose band was prominent in the marathon concerts, "as if the dam had broken."

And yet, Mart Mikik, soloist for the band Rodeo, had his moments of trepidation. "They were shoving flags up to us," he said, "but we were nervous. We were on the stage, after all, and there must have been dozens of KGB operatives among such a huge crowd. It would have been suicide."

But the authorities had no stomach for confronting such a huge, boisterous, and united group. "The powers in the Communist party were afraid," said Heinz Valk, "because these songs ignited the passions of the people."

Estonian Party Chairman Karl Vaino called Moscow to send troops to quell the "uprising." Moscow did nothing. The Western press had already published images of the remarkable Estonian rally, and the

