

ENLIGHTENMENT AND RULERS IN  
GERMAN AND ESTONIAN LANGUAGE  
HYMNBOOKS

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The Lutheran hymnal was the most widely used book in the Baltic countries in the 18th century, passed down from generation to generation. The hymns were akin to public creeds, expressing both the church affiliation and theological profile of the singers. Although the repertoire was relatively conservative and generally changed little and slowly, it was occasionally subject to significant changes.

The Enlightenment reform of sacred song, which aimed to modernise and harmonise religious music, brought about the greatest change in hymnology to date. Enlightenment ideals such as tolerance, freedom of conscience, cosmopolitanism, happiness through virtue and duty, natural theology, and the rational ordering of life found their way into hymnody, which was seen as an effective means of promoting religion, humanity, and ethics.

In this article, we examine the Enlightenment hymnbooks in German and Estonian that were published in the Baltic countries in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The question explored is to what extent developments in Germany influenced Lutheran hymnbooks in the Baltic countries. Attention is given to the aims of the compilers of the Baltic hymnbooks (mostly expressed in the prefaces), the structure of the hymnbooks, and their thematic distribution. Particular attention is paid to the so-called ‘rulers’ songs’ – clerical hymns dedicated to, or intended for, the upper classes – as the message of these songs became more nuanced during the Enlightenment than before.

In the Baltic provinces, four German-language Enlightenment hymnbooks were published along with two in Estonian, in addition to their reprints. German-language hymnals appeared in the various provinces at relatively long intervals: for the parishes of Courland in 1771, for Livonia in 1782, for Estonia in 1787, and again for Livonia in 1810.

All of the songbook compilers studied drew inspiration from Enlightenment songbooks published in Germany, borrowing repertoire from them and writing new sacred song texts themselves. Traditional Lutheran hymns were reformulated according to an Enlightenment theological model.

There was no so-called official, Enlightenment-oriented hymnal published by the consistory for congregations in North Estonia. As an

alternative, in 1793 the clergyman Peter Heinrich von Frey privately published an Enlightenment hymnal based on the new German-language hymnal for Livonia (1782). Frey's translations reproduce the content and language of the German hymns closely, with only a few conceptual exceptions. In 1802, on the initiative of Johann Philipp von Roth and with the approval of the Livonian Consistory, a rationalistically revised hymnal was published in South Estonian. It is noteworthy that both Estonian-language hymnals were supported by clergymen with noble titles, indicating that the nobility played a significant role in advancing popular enlightenment.

As in the German tradition, caste differences are rationalised in the rulers' songs in Estonian. Despite the divine legitimacy of the rulers, human weaknesses and fallibility are acknowledged. The list of their virtues and duties is extensive, but above all they are seen as the guarantors of the well-being of their country and people, for which their subjects must repay them with respect and tribute. An innovative feature of the South Estonian hymnbook is a song that allowed the peasantry to identify themselves with those in power.

In general, Enlightenment hymnbooks did not seek to disrupt the existing caste system, but instead justified and confirmed its necessity with rational arguments. The hymnbooks studied promoted popular enlightenment, but it would be inaccurate to equate this with secularisation. Enlightenment hymnbooks did not encourage people to turn away from religion or the church; on the contrary, they sought to promote and modernise religiosity in their own way.

This study does not permit far-reaching socio-historical conclusions, but the similarity in content between the German and Estonian songs suggests that the rural population was not underestimated. The publishers and translators of the hymnals considered the intellectual capacity of the Estonians to be comparable to that of the German population. The similarity between the German and Estonian Enlightenment hymnals, particularly in the rulers' songs, confirms that the popular enlightenment of both Germans and non-Germans took place simultaneously in the Baltic region, reaching its peak around 1800.