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NATO's Hymn Ain't Finished Yet



Raising the Finnish flag at NATO headquarter on April 4th (Photo: NATO).

In an April 4th ceremony in the vast and bleak plaza in front of NATO's \$1 billion, 250 square meter Brussels headquarters conducted in the presence of Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U. S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken alongside other heads-of-state, diplomats, military commanders, and reporters, the Finnish flag was raised to take its place with the colors of the alliance's other thirty member nations.

As the SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) band played the Finnish national anthem in Brussels, the country's flag was hoisted simultaneously at the ACT ("Allied Command Transformation: NATO's Warfare Development Command," according to the alliance's website) centers in Mons, Belgium an hour south of Brussels and, across the ocean from which the bloc takes its name, in Norfolk, Virginia.

The blue Nordic-Christian-cross-on-a-white-background luffed in the north Atlantic breeze. The band was a crisp as the Finnish colors.

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With all the flags atop their poles, it was time for the NATO hymn.

This curious piece of music was composed way back in 1989, by a few stubborn souls still thought of as the year when the Cold War was won by the West. The NATO anthem's music was penned by Lieutenant Colonel André Reichling, longtime director of the Luxembourg Military Band. This vaunted ensemble was for decades largely funded by American money, but suffered withering budget cuts when that music-and-NATO-hating fiend, Donald Trump, occupied the White House. Reichling did not live long enough to see the tide of musical battle turn, dying at the age of sixty-four, two months before the American election of 2020 that toppled Trump from the presidential podium.

Reichling's hymn and was only elevated to its current status as official anthem of NATO five years ago in the midst of Trump's war on NATO. These strains tried, if limply, to call in the calvary to save the alliance from Trump's attacks.

Reichling's composition cleaves to the proven qualities of many a righteous anthem: fully-scored contingent of winds haloed with piccolos; stately and unwavering progress through its musical mission launched with a descending bass line that proclaims past deeds and future glory; and just the right number of canny harmonic feints that suggest originality and moral backbone without straying from the path of sanctioned musical strategy.

But this badge of honor brings with it a conundrum: if the West was victorious in 1989, wasn't Reichling's tune to be heard as an elegy not just for the Evil Empire but also for NATO itself?

Reichling's self-nullifying NATO hymn (then still unofficial) was preceded twenty years earlier by a NATO song that had been disseminated to school children and otherwise hawked for propaganda purposes. That multi-lateral shanty deployed a folk-like melody concocted by a German captain and fitted with doggerel—sometimes prayerful, sometimes saber-rattling—that was, appropriately enough, the joint effort of a pair of Dutch and American officers. The song begins by establishing NATO's territorial reach: “From Nova Scotia to Istanbul, from Bergen to Key West, / Standing together as beloved Free West.” Leave it to army poets to rhyme West with West and call it poetry.

Soon after that the arsenal of freedom is inventoried: “Airplanes and missiles, and ships, too, / Guarding our boundaries to defend our rights.”

Yet another unofficial NATO hymn of the nearly-hot Cold War 1950s had “poetry” by the ardent British anti-communist Godfrey Lias, a soldier and later a journalist:

May God who rules o'er earth and sky
Cleanse our fair world from fear.

Let freedom's banner rise on high

And violence disappear.

Build up the power of right;

Bid all the free unite.

Let NATO grow in might

And put its foes to flight.

Reichling's heavenly strains, solemn and seemingly timeless, stem from the same traditions of Christian nineteenth-century hymnody that inspired Lias's might-makes-right rhymes.

Since its composition Reichling's hymn has been performed at countless NATO events, the Finland's accession to the alliance the most recent one of note.

The nations' flags are arrayed in a semi-circle that, with each new member grows, closer together. There is still plenty of room in the configuration for new additions.

As the band SHAPE played the traffic of the A201 motorway whizzed at the far end of the lifeless plain, oblivious to the proceedings at NATO headquarters, Stoltenberg and all the rest trying their best to raise the event to the status of historic moment. On the far end lifeless stone plain between the behemoth of glass and steel that is the plaza the

His country officially a member state, Finnish prime minister Pekka Haavisto immediately approved of his application of his neighbor Sweden, which will soon become the 32nd member of the alliance. Somewhere in the heavens far, far above the North Atlantic, Reichling stands to attention, salutes, and raises his baton.

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