

THE CONVERSATION

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Emsland Camps Archive

Peat Bog Soldiers: how an experimental Scottish band contributed to a concentration camp archive in Germany

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Can a rock band make history? Not in the sense of releasing bestselling records, being garlanded with awards, or achieving notoriety through more controversial means. But rather, can a rock band actually *make* “History” with a capital H?

Song has always been a medium through which popular tales of the past have been recounted. Scotland, for example, has a strong tradition of folk songs dealing with historical events and figures that have indelibly marked the country.

These range from Gaelic songs about the devastating injustices of the Highland Clearances, to songs about the life of Glasgow’s most famous Red Clydesider John Maclean, who fought for workers’ rights during and just after the first world war.

So songs might well be regarded as popular history. But what if we flipped the initial question around: can history be made by a rock band? If we gathered their songs, their videos, their own words about their music, their artwork, how would it measure up against the standard output of the professional academic historian? It would certainly look, sound and feel different. But what might be lost in shifting into this new terrain? And what, if anything, might be gained?

These are some of the questions being explored by The Tenementals, a Glasgow-based group of academics, artists, musicians and filmmakers, of which I am a founding member. As a professor of political cinemas with a longstanding interest in radical history and its expression in cultural form, my work looks at ways to recount radical pasts. The city of Glasgow, with its own radical past, offers a useful test case.

The Tenementals - Peat Bog Soldiers (Die Moorsoldaten)



We have been recording a series of songs that explore Glasgow's political history, from the Sighthill Martyrs of 1820, to the militant suffragettes of the early 20th century. This work spotlights the city's reputation for protest, interrogates its ongoing entanglements with empire and slavery, and speculates on where one might find hope in the city.

The Tenementals is a "wild" research project which has one foot in higher education, and one foot in the city's vibrant music scene. It is wild for a few reasons: it is largely unfunded, it moves to its own beat, and it operates outside higher education's regulatory frameworks.

Anti-fascist anthem

One aspect of this wildness is that it is free to go where it has to go. When The Tenementals played a strikers' benefit gig last year, we wanted to perform a song beyond our normal repertoire. We opted for the classic German anti-fascist anthem, Die Moorsoldaten (The Peat Bog Soldiers), which was written and first performed in Börgermoor concentration camp in north-west Germany, by left-wing political prisoners in August 1933.

Banned from singing traditional protest songs, the Börgermoor prisoners created a six-verse song that recounted their daily experiences.

*Up and down the sentries pacing
No one, no one can get past
Flight for freedom is sure death-dealing
Fenced-in castle holds us fast*

A simple chorus separates the verses.

*We are the Peat Bog Soldiers
marching with our spades to the moor*

A sense of defiance emerges as the verses build and it culminates in a new final chorus line:

*Then, the Peat Bog Soldiers
No more will march with our spades to the moor.*

The song is (seemingly) simple, rhythmic and memorable. It became well known in German opposition circles, and was taken up as an anthem by the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. It was also sung by the Free French Army during the second world war as a message of resistance in the darkest of times.

Although the song has been covered by many English-speaking artists, including Pete Seeger, Paul Robeson and Irish band-of-the-moment, Lankum, it remains relatively unknown in Britain.



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What an honour to read these words from the archivists in today's [@theheraldscotland](#) article - thanks to [@radiocassette](#).

Fietje Ausländer: "The Tenementals' versions, released 90 years after the song's premiere in

the Börgermoor concentration camp, surprised us in two ways: One might have expected a new interpretation of the three-verse English text version that has been known since the 1930s and used by singers such as Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger and bands from The Dubliners to Lankum.

"The Tenementals, however, decided to take a different route and recorded verses 1, 5 and 6 with new English-language lyrics sung alongside the German original. By integrating the original German verses and elements of the English original, an idiosyncratic connection between history and the present is created.

"The second surprise: One of the two recordings is sung by the band entirely in the original 6-verse German-language version. This is certainly unusual for a band from Scotland! For me, this also expresses great respect, respect for the men who courageously sang this song with these exact words on August 27, 1933 in the presence of the SS guards. Both recordings are wonderful additions to our extensive song archive." [#glasgow](#) [#tenementals](#) [#protest](#) [#Börgermoor](#) [#peatbogsoldiers](#) [#diemoorsoldaten](#)

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We asked a young Scots-German singer, Lily-Belle Mohaupt, to lead us on the night of our gig. She sang it so beautifully that we decided to record two versions: one in a new translation by ourselves, sung in English and German, and one completely in German, the full six-verse version which is rarely performed or recorded.

A new connection, another history

After we released the song, we were surprised to be contacted by Fietje Ausländer, former archivist at the Documentation and Information Centre of Emsland Camps (one of which was Börgermoor) in Germany, a few kilometres from the site where the song was first performed.

Ausländer explained the centre's purpose is to archive materials related to the history of 15 labour and punishment camps, and that due to its national and international fame, Die Moorsoldaten has become one of the archive's focal points.

Our version of the song – which includes a CD recording, a video and artwork from the promotional campaign – is now to be archived alongside other versions of the protest song which Emsland archivists have amassed over the years. One of our versions will also be included in a CD of the archive's favourite covers scheduled for release in 2025.

The CD seeks to introduce the song to new audiences, illustrating the philosopher Jacques Derrida's assertion that "archives are for the future". These archives of radical activity create a space for solidarity between generations to develop – a place in which artists, academics and activists in the present converse with the ghosts of the past and those yet to discover these histories in the future. It is a privilege to be part of the conversation.

Although we set out to create a history of radical Glasgow in song, we find ourselves a small part of another history, one which sought in similar ways to fight against injustice. Our interests, though, like the prisoners who sang *Die Moorsoldaten* on 27 August 1933, lie in carving out radical futures.