

Port entries of Finnish nationals to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1886–1940

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Thanks to the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA) electronic database of Buenos Aires, we have a better understanding of how many Finns migrated to Argentina during 1886–1940. Port entries to Buenos Aires by Finnish nationals during 1886–1940 totalled 916 (the total includes everyone on the lists irrespective if they have been mentioned twice in a few cases), with the lion's share (482) arriving in 1920–1929. Argentina started to be noticed by Finnish immigrants from 1906, when Arthur Thesleff founded with a group of 112 Finns and 6 Swedes a colony in the northeast province of Misiones. Despite greater immigration from Finland during the 1920s, the highest number of Finns arriving to the Port of Buenos Aires in a single year was in 1906, totalling 139 people. A more precise figure, however, would be about 145 (Tessieri 2008, 25, and Tessieri 2009, 13). I would also like to thank and show my appreciation to the Kaarle Hjalmar Lehtinen Foundation of the Institute of Migration for a grant that made this study possible.

While the CEMLA database offers us a wealth of hitherto-unknown information, the data should not be considered as the final say on the number of Finns that migrated to Argentina. CEMLA offers at best ballpark figures but does not reveal how many moved to Misiones directly by land from Brazil (Tessieri 2008, 26). Other ports of entry in Argentina at the time for immigrants were Bahía Blanca and Rosario. The CEMLA lists begin from 1882. The first Finnish national registered to enter Buenos Aires by sea was a

day labourer called George D'Ofthan, aged 30, who arrived on November 27, 1886 on the Uruguay from Le Harve, France.

The typical Finnish immigrant that travelled to Buenos Aires during 1886–1940 was a single male aged 20–29 years, he was Protestant (363 persons) or Lutheran (168), a farmer (93), and was born in Helsinki (126). His port of departure was Bremen (169) in Germany, he arrived on the Hamburg Süd-operated Cap Verde (88) and was literate. In order to complement the CEMLA data, it would be important to check as well lists of border crossings by immigrants to Misiones from Brazil. A large number of Finns that settled Colonia Finlandesa from the 1910s came by land from Brazil (Tessieri 1986, 35–41).

The CEMLA lists provide the following data: date of arrival, name of ship, port of departure, surname and first name(s), age, marital status, profession, religion, literacy, previous visits to Argentina and personal observations by the immigration official. Place of birth are registered from 1923.

Apart from showing the names of Finnish nationals that immigrated to Villa Alborada in Paraguay, the CEMLA lists reveal as well the first large group of colonists, numbering a fourteen persons, that settled Colonia Finlandesa from Kitee in 1924. One important characteristic of the settlers that moved to Misiones in the 1920s was that they were from this parish in eastern Finland.

As my field notes show, Colonia Finlandesa saw its greatest growth in the 1920s and not in the 1930s, when there was a sharp fall in new settlers to the colony. This can be confirmed by the CEMLA lists, which show the number of Finnish nationals arriving to the Port of Buenos Aires in the 1930s dropping by 61.4% to 186 from 482 in the previous decade. The Great Depression of the 1930s had not only undermined emigration from Finland, it forced people in

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Table 1. Finnish passenger arrivals according to marital status and sex during 1886–1940

| | Male | | Female | | Widow | Widower | Unknown |
|-----------|---------|--------|---------|--------|-------|---------|---------|
| | Married | Single | Married | Single | | | |
| 0-9 yrs | 0 | 37 | 0 | 25 | 0 | 0 | – |
| 10-19 yrs | 1 | 47 | 5 | 11 | 0 | 0 | – |
| 20-29 yrs | 30 | 297 | 36 | 21 | 0 | 1 | – |
| 30-39 yrs | 73 | 97 | 37 | 16 | 1 | 0 | – |
| 40-49 yrs | 44 | 27 | 17 | 6 | 2 | 0 | – |
| 50-59 yrs | 14 | 9 | 10 | 1 | 1 | 1 | – |
| 60-69 yrs | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | – |
| 70- | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | – |
| Total 916 | 165 | 515 | 107 | 80 | 5 | 2 | 42 |

Note: There were a total of 42 from the 1886–1940 lists whose sex, marital status and/or age were unknown. All of them have been therefore excluded from the table. Source: CEMLA.

Table 2. Finnish passengers arrivals registered in the Port of Buenos Aires during 1882–1940

| Period | Males | Females | Unknown | Widow/ widower | Total |
|-----------|-------|---------|---------|-------------------|-------|
| 1882-1899 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| 1900-1909 | 123 | 25 | 1 | 0 | 149 |
| 1910-1919 | 57 | 6 | 19 | 0 | 82 |
| 1920-1929 | 365 | 112 | 1 | 4 | 482 |
| 1930-1939 | 142 | 41 | 1 | 2 | 186 |
| 1940 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 14 |
| Total | 700 | 187 | 22 | 7 | 916 |

Source: CEMLA.

rural Argentina to migrate to cities such as Buenos Aires. In 1947 there were 3.316 million Argentines that lived as internal migrants, with 50% of them moving to Greater Buenos Aires (INDEC 1973, 84, and Romero 1987, 180–81). In 1914, the corresponding figure was 765,789 persons.

Finnish immigration to Argentina

Even though Finnish immigration to Argentina has been small when compared with the United States and Canada, it represents the biggest number of Finns that migrated to a Latin American country. Other Finnish colonies founded in the previous century in Latin America were in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Brazil,

Paraguay and Bolivia, in the 1980s (*see* Koivukangas 1998, 233–340).

Thanks to one of Latin America's greatest social thinkers of the nineteenth century, Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810–1884), immigration from Europe played an important role in shaping Argentina's present population. The role of immigration and immigrant rights placed high in the 1853 Constitution thanks to Alberdi's most famous work, *Bases*. Even so, groups like the Amerindians did not hold a prominent place in his future vision of Argentina. Alberdi believed that Argentineans were nothing more than Europeans born in The Americas (Alberdi 1974, 82). In *Bases* he studied the different

constitutions of Latin America up to California and which of these Argentina should not imitate. Alberdi was highly critical of those constitutions that placed obstacles on immigration and citizenship.

The strong input of European immigration to Argentina came from Italy and Spain. Prior to the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, and excluding Amerindians that lived in the country prior to these periods, blacks were estimated on the eve of independence in 1810 to have totalled 32% of the country's population of about 400,000 (Lynch 1973, 37–38). While such a demographic fact may surprise some Argentineans, the country was prior to the second half of the nineteenth century characterised by a hierarchical society dominated by whites or near-whites (38% of the whole population), which "monopolized offices, property and



The RMSP Company's Avon brought on April 25, 1924 fourteen Finns from Kitee to Buenos Aires. It was after the Cap Verde the second-biggest group of Finns to travel in group to Argentina. Finnish liners such as Bore and Bore VIII started services to Argentina from Finland from the late 1920s. Photo courtesy of Lahja Malinen.

privilege, and carefully preserved their position against the encroachment of other races" (Lynch 1973, 38).

Alberdi, who coined the famous phrase "to govern is to populate", believed that Argentina would never realize its full potential as a nation with a population of one million in a country that could comfortably house 50 million people (Alberdi 1974, 91). Some of the special rights granted to immigrants in the 1853 Constitution were similar rights that natives had (Article 20). The federal government was required to promote European immigration and could not restrict, neither limit nor levy taxes on anyone that moved to the country (Article 25) (Alberdi 1974, 312). Despite Argentina's liberal immigration policy, which was quite exceptional in the context of the mid-nineteenth century, the 1853 Constitution had many critics. Some argued that it was based on a US federal model that was not applicable to Argentina and had never been enforced effectively. Argentina's democratic system left a lot to be desired until the passage of the Sáenz Peña Law of 1912, which granted secret, mandatory voting rights to Argentinean adult males. Prior to the 1916 presidential elections, only 2–3% of the population had voting rights (Statistical Abstract of Latin America, chapter 34). Despite the ever-growing number of immigrants

that came to the country from the second half of the nineteenth century, Argentina was ruled by a clique of wealthy landowners that controlled the country economically and politically with the help of fraudulent elections (Spalding Jr. 1972, 32).

In order to put the CEMLA data into context, it would be necessary to see it through three Argentinean historical periods: Conservative Republic (1880–1916), Radical Civic Union (1916–1930), and the so-called Decade of Infamy, or Second Conservative Republic (1930–1943) (Tessieri 2009, 6–11).

Argentina saw the greatest amount of immigration during the Conservative Republic, with over 4.3 million people moving to the country during 1881–1914. After the United States, Argentina was the second-biggest recipient of immigrants during this period (Devoto 2004, 247). Setting aside the handful of Finns that founded Colonia Finlandesa, most of the newcomers that came to Argentina were Italians (2 million), followed by Spaniards (1.4 million), French (170,000) and Russian (160,000) nationals. Most of them migrated to Buenos Aires. In the 1914 census, for example, 49.4% of the population of Argentina's capital was foreign-born compared with 30.3% for the whole country (INDEC 1973, 82–83).

As the CEMLA lists show, the greatest number of Finns that moved to the country was during the Radical Civic Union period, when Argentina experienced robust economic growth especially after the end of World War I. Another important characteristic of the 1916–1930 period was that Argentina had begun building democratic institutions thanks to the Sáenz Peña Law. This period, however, came to an abrupt end in September 1930, when General José Félix Uriburu overthrew the civilian government of President Hipólito Yrigoyen. While the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Germany had an adverse impact on Argentinean politics, the last time a civilian government had been overthrown by force was in 1852, when strongman Juan Manuel de Rosas was obliged to flee the country. The Decade of Infamy was characterized by direct government intervention in the economy through the regulation of agricultural crops such as yerba mate (*Ilex paraguayensis*), which became an important source of income from about 1930 alongside tobacco for the Finnish colonists (Tessieri 2009, 15–17). The Decade of Infamy era derives its name from the numerous government corruption scandals, fraudulent elections, and economic depression that characterised that period as well as the overthrow of the Radical Civic Union government from power.

Historically speaking, the 1920s was the most important decade concerning Finnish immigration to Argentina in general and to Colonia Finlandesa in particular. After the population of the Finnish colony had shrunk in 1907 to 79 and in 1909 to 50–60 persons (Lähteenmäki 1989, 205–206), its population reached its zenith in the 1920s with about 400 colonists at the most (Tessieri 2009, 14–15). Apart from new settlers moving to Colonia Finlandesa and surroundings, there are some important, albeit humble, watersheds in the history of the former Finnish colony. Its first elementary school (No. 73) was built in 1922 and in 1924 the Seurantalo hall, the most important collective achievement of the colony (Paavolainen 1937, 312), opened its doors. All types of important events such as marriages, masses and dances were held at the new hall.

What do the CEMLA files reveal?

While the lists give us a lot of information of the Finns that travelled to Buenos Aires by sea, one of the big-

gest disappointments one encounters is that there are many listed as “unlisted,” or “unknown” under port of departure, religion, and especially place of birth. Even though place of birth was listed from 1923, there are over 200 Finns that were registered as unlisted or unknown in this group. Misspelled names are another problem that one commonly encounters.

Even though it is difficult to get precise figures on places of birth of Finnish immigrants that sailed to Buenos Aires, the top five are: Helsinki (126), Kitee (29), Tampere (12), Turku (12), Viipuri (8) and Inkoo (8). Taking into account the high number of unlisted and unknown places of birth, and that the top five add up to 195, the lists reveal that Finnish immigrants that travelled to Buenos Aires came from many cities, towns and dispersed throughout Finland.

Despite these shortcomings, the CEMLA lists do give us information of important Finns that travelled through the Port of Buenos Aires up to 1940. Some worth mentioning are the son of Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Jorma, listed as “Joanne Gallen Kalleta,” in 1915, businessman Gustav Paulig’s son Eduard, in 1927, geographer Väinö Auer, in 1928 and 1929, the son of shipping company owner Suomen Höyrylaiva Lars Kroguis, Birger, in 1939, and others like meteorologist Vilho Vaisala in 1939.

For me personally, one of the most interesting discoveries I stumbled on was Aleksander Hiiri’s name, who is listed as “Alexander Huri.” Ever since I started researching Colonia Finlandesa from 1977, I have kept a record of most of the settlers that lived at the former colony and surroundings. In August 1984, however, I stumbled upon a cross at a cemetery next to colony that had inscribed, “Aleksander Hiiri, 21.6.1871–22.1.1930”. Despite the small size of Colonia Finlandesa, I was surprised that there were still names of colonists I had never heard of. Another important settler at Colonia Finlandesa found on the CEMLA lists was Eino Bartolovich, one of the photographers of the colony. His name and place of birth are listed as “Enok Bartelevitz” from “Lappee” (Lappeenranta). He arrived in 1928 to Buenos Aires on the Demerara from Liverpool. His age, marital status and profession are, however, unlisted.

Thanks to the CEMLA database, I was able to confirm the first names, ages and professions of colonists that were in the folktales of Colonia Finlandesa. One of these, told in 1984 by Greta Holmberg, was about

two bachelors that lived together but after encountering great difficulties abandoned the colony (Tessieri 1986, 24). The two men, which are mentioned in the folktale as “Markkanen and Luukkonen,” are listed by CEMLA as “Nicolo Lunkkoner” and “Johannes Mawkhanen”. Both arrived to Buenos Aires on November 14, 1906 on the Weimar. They were 20 and 24 years old, respectively.

The CEMLA lists are a good source to study Finnish immigration to Villa Alborada in Paraguay as well. The small Finnish colony, which is located on the other side of the Paraná River from Misiones province, had nine families living there in 1929, according to Jean Holopainen (Koivukangas 1998, 274).

What estimates can we make about the population of Villa Alborada with the help of the CEMLA database and my field notes? According to CEMLA, there was a 50-year-old-single male that was “in transit to Paraguay” as late as in 1935 after nine settlers had moved there in 1932. These comprised of two families, the Janhunens and Alavas, as well as three single persons, Kirsti von Hellens, Olof Tammisto, and Niklas Salonen. All in all, CEMLA lists 29 people that moved to Paraguay during 1927–35. To this list we can add from my field notes Matti Sakkinen and his wife Saima Ruotinen, who may have been one of the first settlers to inhabit Villa Alborada from about 1926. Another colonist that moved to Villa Alborada from Colonia Finlandesa in 1931 was a sailor called Lauri Järvinen. Armas Nikkinen, who was Tyyne Nikkinen's husband, first came to Argentina in 1923, according to CEMLA. His wife and two daughters are listed to have arrived to Buenos Aires in 1928. If all these on the CEMLA lists as well as those in my field notes would have remained at Villa Alborada in 1935, the population of the colony would have numbered about 35 Finns including their Paraguayan-born children.

Even though we do not know from the CEMLA lists how many of the Finns that sailed to Buenos Aires settled Colonia Finlandesa, the data does give us some indication who they may have been since they travelled in groups. The 88 men that sailed in 1906 from Bremen on the Cap Verde to found Colonia Finlandesa is the biggest group. If we exclude crew members, firemen and sailors from our sample, the biggest groups to travel by ship to the Port of Buenos Aires were in 1924 (14 persons), followed by 10 in 1922, 1925, 1926 and 1932.

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