

## Estonians in the World

### An Overview of Number and Localization 1850–1990



In Finland the problems connected with emigration have been dealt with for quite a long time. A scientific research center, Siirtolaisuusinstituutti – Institute of Migration, has been founded to deal with these topics and their magazine, *Siirtolaisuus – Migration*, is published.

In Estonia it has been almost impossible to deal with problems connected with emigration during the previous half century due to the political situation. Only with the process of re-establishment of independence has this become possible. During the last two-three years the connections have grown between Estonians living in Estonia and those living abroad. Thus the interest in the history and life of Estonians in different countries and in problems connected with emigration and remigration has also grown.

Before the middle of the 19th century few Estonians lived outside their ethnic territory. Older settlements founded mainly by Estonians who emigrated during Livonian and Great Northern Wars were situated in the immediate proximity of Estonian ethnic territory — in the provinces of Pskov (Kraasna maarahvas), St. Petersburg (Luuküla eestlased) and Vitebsk (Lutsi maarahvas). People have also emigrated to the capital of the Russian Empire, St.

Petersburg, and some people related to Estonians (leivu rahvas) lived in the northern part of South Livonia. Before the 1850s a few Estonians also lived in Siberia where some peasants had been deported to in the first half of the 19th century.

At the end of the 1850s a massive emigration to scarcely-populated regions of the Russian Empire began and lasted altogether for more than half a century. Many settlements were founded in North-West Russia, St. Petersburg, Siberia, the Caucasus, the Crimea, the provinces of Tver, Samara, Simbirsk, Vologda and elsewhere. At the end of the second decade of the 20th century about one sixth of the Estonians lived in the Russian Empire outside Estonia. The people who emigrated to other parts of the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and their successors are known as Russian Estonians.

Another bigger wave of Estonians emigrating from their homeland took place during World War II, when many Estonians escaped mainly to Germany and Sweden. After the war many people were resettled in other countries so that larger communes were established also in the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain. The people who emigrated to the West during World War II and their successors are known as Western Estonians. Russian Estonians and

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Western Estonians form the main part of the Estonians living outside their homeland nowadays.

### **The theoretical background of emigration to Russia**

During the 19th century important changes took place in the demographic development of European countries. In several countries mortality had started to decrease already in the first half of the century. Fertility remained stable for some time yet and only then followed the course of mortality. Due to the uneven trends of development a great and quick growth in population occurred, and in rural areas, where most of the people (80–90%) lived at that time, social and economic relations became aggravated because of "overpopulation". Thus a situation was created in which one part of the population started to seek opportunities for moving from "overpopulated" areas to places where space and means of living seemed to suffice.

The changes in employment caused by the industrial revolution favored the growth of urban population: quickly developing industry which needed a lot of workers was concentrated in bigger centers and was able to support many people with work and means of living. So rural-urban migration became one way of relieving stresses prevailing in the rural areas. But the growth of industry could not keep up with the growth of population at that time and thus part of rural population could not go to urban areas, and had to leave their ethnic territory. Usually the destination was some scarcely-populated (neighboring) country (Zelinsky 1971).

Moving outside their ethnic territory became very widespread among Estonians. It seemed that besides the abo-

ve-mentioned reasons Estonian towns were not very attractive as destination points due to their psychological environment, — too great number of Germans and Russians living there (Katus 1989). However the internal policy of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century favored Estonian emigration: 1) the peasant laws of 1856 in Estonia and of 1861 in Livonia removed the principal obstacles to peasants' massive-scale resettling; 2) resettlers had the possibility of obtaining land from the state in scarcely-populated areas. This land was obtained free or for relatively small sums of money.

Another explanation for widespread rural-urban migration and emigration in Europe in the 19th century is based on Marx's theory of capitalist society. According to Marxist explanation changes in the economic system caused "overpopulation" in rural areas and thus created preconditions for large-scale emigration of rural population (Marx 1974). A.Vassar (1975) and V.Maamägi have analyzed the resettling of Estonians at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries according to this theory.

### **The establishment of Estonian settlements in the scarcely-populated areas of the Russian Empire**

Before the large-scale emigration, there were relatively few Estonians living in other regions of the Russian Empire, ie. about 3–4% of the total number of Estonians at that time. Most of them were living in immediate proximity to Estonia. Large scale emigration of Estonians began at the end of 1850s and the first Estonian settlements were established in 1858–1865 in the provinces of Samara and Tauride (the Crimea).

Subsequently the colonization of the provinces of St. Petersburg, Pskov and Novgorod began. Occupation of new areas there continued up to the turn of the century. New settlers went to North-Western Russia also in the first two decades of the 20th century. At the beginning of 1870s settlers went to the Stavropol and Kuban provinces in Northern Caucasus where several settlements were founded in 1872–1873. A bit later, in 1884–1886, Estonian settlements were founded in several regions — on the coast of the Black Sea, in the Karsi region, in the provinces of Simbirsk, Mogilev and Tver. Siberia was also "discovered" in the last decade of the 19th century. People then settled in the western part of Siberia and the Far East. The most important wave of settlers went to Siberia at the beginning of this century, most of the settlements being founded in 1907–1910. At the same time settlements rose also in the northern part of European Russia, mainly in the province of Vologda (Pallo 1897, Meomuttel 1900, Nigol 1918, Pullat 1981).

The approximate number of Estonians who emigrated to the East in the second half of the 19th century can be estimated on the basis of the 1897 census of the Russian Empire. At that time 113,813 Estonians (about 11% of the total) lived outside the provinces of Estonia and Livonia in Russian Empire. Taking into account the fact that in the 1850s the number of Estonians outside Estonia was 28,142, the number of Estonians in the other regions of the Russian Empire had grown by about 86,000 people or 304%. During the first two decades of the 20th century, the number of Russian Estonians grew by 86,000 people, so that at the end of World War I, before the establishment of the independent Estonian Republic, about

200,000 Estonians lived in the Russian Empire outside Estonia (Nigol 1918, Vasar 1975, Maamägi 1980, Raun 1986). Thus great changes had occurred in 60–70 years in the localization of Estonians: while in 1850 Estonians mainly lived on their historical territory, by 1920 almost every sixth Estonian had found a living-place in Russia. Because of lack of information it is still difficult to say what portion of these 200,000 Estonians in Russia was due to emigration and what portion was due to natural increase.

### **Estonian settlements flourishing**

By the end of the second decade of the 20th century the emigration potential of Estonians caused by the demographic transition had exhausted itself and the number of Russian Estonians was greatly increased. This may be called the flourishing age of Russian Estonians. It is known that at the end of the Russian Empire there were at least 318 Estonian settlements outside the Estonian ethnic territory (Nigol 1918). Some general information about the regional distribution and linguistic assimilation of Russian Estonians at that time can be found from the data of the 1926 census of the Soviet Union. Then 154,666 Estonians lived in the Soviet Union (during 1920–1923 37,578 Estonians had returned to the Estonian Republic from the Soviet Russia/Union), 136,688 of them used Estonian as their mother tongue (88%). Altogether there were 139,486 people speaking Estonian as their mother tongue.

The main part (97%) of the Estonians in the Soviet Union lived in Russia, so the number of Estonians in other republics was very small. The majority (77%) of Estonians lived in the rural areas. When considering the Estonian language as an important component of Estonians'

ethnic identity (Laar 1990) we have to admit that 94% of the Estonians living in the rural areas of the Soviet Union used Estonian as their mother tongue, whereas only 68% of the Estonians living in urban areas regarded it as their mother tongue. The relatively large amount of Estonians living in the rural areas was an important prerequisite for the continuation of this ethnic group.

Considering the distribution of Estonians on the regional level, we see (Figure 2) that most of the Russian Estonians lived in the North-Western part of Russia (124 settlements, altogether 86,500 people). There were also a large number of Estonians in Siberia (90 settlements, 30,000 people). The number of Estonians in other regions was considerably smaller.

### **Estonian settlements on the decline**

Since the second half of the 1920s the number of Russian Estonians began to decrease. Collectivization and repressions, World War II and prohibition of education in their mother tongue — all added to the decay of the Estonian settlements in the Soviet Union. After World War II, especially at the beginning of 1950s, many successors of the Estonians who once went to Russia came back to the homeland of their predecessors.

Looking at the number of Estonians on the territory covered by the census of the Soviet Union (except the Baltic states) we see (Figure 3) that in a 60 year period the number of Russian Estonians was considerably reduced. When in 1926 154,666 Estonians lived in the Soviet Union, only 59,458 Estonians lived on the territory covered by the census of the Soviet Union (except the Baltic states) in 1989. Thus the number of Russian Estonians had diminished by 62%,

most of this falling into the years 1939–1959. During World War II many of the Estonian settlements in the North-West part of Russia were destroyed and a part of the Estonians living there were brought back to Estonia. According to the 1989 census of the Soviet Union at least 38,538 Estonians lived in Estonia who had been born in Russia. The majority (3/4) of these were the successors of the former Estonian settlers (Tepp 1991). So, adding this number to the total number of Russian Estonians in 1989 we reach a potential figure of 90,000 Russian Estonians and we can conclude that the number of Russian Estonians diminished by about 40% in the years 1926–1989 (This last statement is not absolutely correct because some Estonians have also emigrated to Russia after the war).

The most important changes can be followed by studying the usage of Estonian language of Russian Estonians. When in 1926 88% of the Estonians living in the Soviet Union spoke Estonian as their mother tongue, only 43% of the Estonians on the territory covered by the census of the Soviet Union (except the Baltic states) used Estonian as their mother tongue in 1989 (for Russian Estonians living in Estonia this figure was considerably higher: more than 90%). These numbers show very vividly that due to linguistic assimilation the number of Russian Estonians has been reduced even more in the course of time.

It is appropriate at this stage to have a look at the urbanization of Russian Estonians that has been related to linguistic assimilation (for example in 1979 39% living in urban areas and 62% of Russian Estonians living in rural areas spoke Estonian as their mother tongue). In the second decade of this century Estonian settlers lived mostly (77%) in rural areas,

but in 1979 most of Russian Estonians (65%) lived in urban areas. Urbanization among Russian Estonians has been especially quick after World War II.

There have also been changes in the distribution of Estonians between different republics. In 1926 most of Russian Estonians (94%) lived in Russia (present-day territory), by 1989 Russia's role had diminished to 78%. This clearly shows that Estonian settlements in Russia are dying out. During last decades relatively more Estonians have moved to other republics of the former Soviet Union.

### **Estonians in the Western countries before World War II**

Emigration to the scarcely-populated areas of the Russian Empire in connection with Estonian demographic transition formed about 95% of the people emigrating from Estonia. Even the majority of people who settled in other countries were those who in the last years of the 19th and first years of the 20th centuries went to North America from Russia, from the Estonian settlements in the provinces of Samara, Simbirsk, Saratov, Novgorod, Tver and the Crimea. At the turn of the century Estonian settlements were established in the states of Wisconsin and North and South Dakota in the United States, and in Alberta province in Canada (Laaman 1971, Pennar 1975). After the Revolution of 1905 some political refugees went to North America from Estonia, but most of them came back to their homeland later. According to the newspaper "Uus Ilm" about 3,000 Estonians lived in the United States in 1909, while there were fewer Estonians in Canada (Pennar 1975). There was a small Estonian community in Finland, which consisted mostly of political refugees. There was also a community in Australia (Meie

Tee 1956).

The first summary of the number of Estonians outside the Russian Empire was made at the end of the second decade of this century. According to A. Nigol (1918) more than 5,000 Estonians then lived outside the Baltic provinces and Russia, 3,000 of them in North America, 2,000 in Finland and 200 in Australia. Evidently the number of Estonians in the West was larger, about 10,000–15,000, but still small when compared to the 200,000 in Russia.

During the independence of the Estonian Republic (1918–1940) up to 15,000 Estonians left their homeland, mostly in the second half of the 1920s when the political and economical situation in Estonia was quite unstable. Many people then went to North and South America, Australia and the Soviet Union. This time marks the beginning of Estonian communes in Brazil, Argentina etc. In the 1930s there were very few emigrants, but some of the people, who had left in the 1920s, come back to Estonia.

While in 1918 about 10,000–15,000 Estonians lived to the west of Estonia, the number had grown to 25,000–30,000 by the eve of World War II. Still the number of Western Estonians before World War II formed a relatively small portion (only a few percent) of the total number of Estonians in the world.

### **World War II and the beginning of contemporary communities of Western Estonians**

World War II and the events connected with it changed the localization of Estonians on the world map to a great extent. While before the war there was only a relatively large Estonian commune on the territory of the Soviet Union (besides the Baltic states), the situation had comp-

pletely changed by the end of World War II. In 1939–1945 up to 65,000 people who had previously lived in Estonia, arrived as refugees to the Western countries, and at the end of the war most of them were in Germany and Sweden. There were fewer Estonian refugees in Austria, Belgium, Denmark and France (PCIRO 1948). In 1947 the International Refugee Organization (IRO) started their activity for resettling these refugees who did not want to repatriate to their previous homeland. Due to this larger Estonian communities besides Germany and Sweden were formed in the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain during postwar years.

Thus the second-largest wave of emigration of Estonians had occurred during World War II. In a quite short time an Estonian community had sprung up to the west of Estonia which together with the earlier emigrants and their successors included about 85,000–90,000 people. While Western Estonians had formed only a few percent of the total number of Estonians before the war, they comprised about 8–9% of the total after the war.

Up to recent years there has been no migratory connection between Western Estonians and Estonians in Estonia. So the Estonian population in the West nowadays consist mainly of the war-time refugees (who are mostly nearing the age of 70 by now) and their successors.

### **How many Estonians are there in the world?**

It is difficult to answer this question, because the data on the number of Estonians in different countries is based on different ways of defining Estonian. The following generalizations are based on three different concepts of Estonian: 1) in the case of Estonians in the United States, Canada

and Australia the decisive factor has been a question of the person's origin in the census of these countries (i.e. to which ethnic group the person belonged his own mind). The number of Swedish Estonians I have also tried to determine according to this definition; 2) in many other Western countries (e.g. Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, France etc.) the Estonian community has been defined by the local Estonian organizations, who have given data about the number of Estonians in these countries; 3) on the territory covered by the census of the former Soviet Union the basis of defining Estonian has been the question of nationality (i.e. ethnic origin) of the person. Although one can always be skeptical about the exactness of the data, I still believe that, in the absence of a better way of acquiring data, the data obtained on the basis of these three somewhat different conceptions of Estonian can be matched to arrive at a more general picture of the number of Estonians at present both outside their homeland and in the world as a whole.

In the second half of the 1980s the number of Estonians who had emigrated to the West (mainly) during the World War II, as well as their successors, was more than 86,000 people. On the territory covered by the census of the Soviet Union (except Estonia) there lived over 63,000 Estonians (see Table).

Thus we can say that today about 13% of the Estonians live outside their homeland. At the end of the 1910s the number of Estonians living outside Estonia formed about 18% of the total, before World War II it was 15%, and by the end of the war it had grown up to 17%. Thus, while a large number of Estonians live outside their homeland, they are relatively fewer in number than before.

**Table:** The main countries of location of Estonians outside**Western Estonians 1986–91**

State	Number
United States	26760
Sweden	25500
Canada	20530
Australia	6330
Great Britain	2730
West Germany	2400
Finland	640
Brazil	350
Argentina	200
Venezuela	150
New Zealand	130
France	110
South Africa	100
Belgium	100
Switzerland	60
Denmark	50
Norway	50
Netherlands	40
Others	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>86330</b>

**Russian Estonians 1989\***

State	Number
Russia	46390
Ukraine	4208
Kazakhstan	3397
Latvia	3312
Georgia	2316
Uzbekistan	854
Byelorussia	804
Lithuania	598
Kirghizia	430
Azerbaijan	324
Moldavia	282
Turkmenistan	217
Tajikistan	147
Armenia	89
<b>Total</b>	<b>63368</b>

\*- here I mean all the Estonians on the territory covered by the 1989 census of the Soviet Union (except Estonia).

Sources: Census of Canada in 1986. Ottawa; Estonians in the World. Questionnaire 1991; Haas, Ö. ja Siska, V.: Eestlased Austraalias. Adelaide 1988; Reinans, A.: Eestlaskond Rootsis — mõned arvud. METROO teine raamat. Stockholm 1979; United States Census of Population in 1990. Washington; Vsesojuznaja perepis' naselenija 1989 goda. Moskva.

The biggest Estonian commune today is situated in Russia. In 1989 more than 46,000 people of Estonian origin were counted. There are also big communities in the United States, Sweden and Canada, with more than 20,000 in each. In these four countries were situated almost 80% of the Estonians living outside their homeland. Communities larger than a thousand Estonians were located in 11 countries, formed 96% of the Estonians outside Estonia. There were 100–1,000 people communities in 16 other countries, so that, including Estonia, there should be communities of over 100 Estonians in 28 different countries of the world.

Something can also be said about the number of Estonian-speaking people in the world. At the end of the 1980s, 27,001 Estonians using Estonian as their mother tongue were living on the territory covered by the census of the former Soviet Union (except Estonia). Elsewhere the number of Estonian-speaking Estonians might have been about 50,000. Adding these two figures we see that about half of the 150,000 Estonians outside Estonia used Estonian as their mother tongue. Together with Estonia the number of Estonians speaking Estonian as their mother tongue was 1,030,000.

We can here add about 20,000 non-Estonians in Estonia who used Estonian as

their mother tongue and the number will be 1,050,000. We still know that on the territory covered by the census of the Soviet Union (including Estonia) at the end of the 1980s there lived nearly 75,000 people who used Estonian as the second language. This will raise the number of Estonian-speaking people up to 1,125,000. So the number of people using Estonian language would be larger than the number of people of Estonian origin, partly due to the knowledge of Estonian of non-Estonians living in Estonia. The number of people using Estonian could be even larger because we do not know how many of the people elsewhere (e.g. in Finland) know Estonian even though it may not be their mother tongue.

In history, the times the number of Estonians was the highest before World War II, when they numbered about 1,175,000. World War II reduced this number by 8–9%. During the last decades the number of people of Estonian origin has gradually grown, forming now almost 95% of the pre-war number. The picture is not so good in case of Estonians speaking Estonian as their mother tongue, who are now about 10% fewer than before World War II. This is due to linguistic assimilation among both the Russian and Western Estonians.

### **What will happen in the future?**

This question arises when we think of the future of the people who have left their homeland. Usually a little ethnic group in a strange environment is able to reproduce itself for some generations before it assimilates with the environment. Only a bigger group can affect its surroundings. Although quite a large number of Estonians have emigrated during the last

hundred years as compared to their total number, they have still remained a drop in the sea of nations due to their small number. So remigration to their homeland seems to be the only way for emigrated Estonians and their successors to preserve their ethnic origin but the use of this opportunity should not be overestimated.

Now I shall have a look at the possible demographic development of both Russian and Western Estonians if the development trends remain the same as they are now.

### **Western Estonians**

As Western Estonians live in many different countries and in most of those there is no detailed overview of Estonians, the only way of drawing any general conclusions from their demographic development is to take the Estonians of one country as an example. This seems to be quite suitable as the Western Estonians form a quite homogenous group of people on the basis of their demographic history and structure. Due to the availability of data we could take Canadian Estonians as an example. Almost one fourth of Western Estonians is now living in Canada, so the generalizations could be relatively representative.

On the basis of the Canadian census in 1986 we (together with Kalev Katus) drew up a demographic projection of Canadian Estonians up to 2031. According to the projection the number of people of Estonian origin in Canada will diminish by 20% during the next fifty years and the number of people of un-mixed Estonian origin (both parents are Estonians) will be more than 60% less than in 1986. As to the future of the Estonians using Estonian as their mother tongue the picture is a lot sadder: in 2031



they will form only one third of the Estonian-speaking Estonians in Canada in 1986. If the demographic development follows the same course there will be some people of Estonian origin in Canada in 2031, but only a very small amount of them will be entirely of Estonian origin and speaking Estonian as their mother tongue.

On the basis of the demographic development of Canadian Estonians we can say that if the demographic development follows the same course as today's community of Western Estonians (i.e. those who emigrated during World War II and their successors) will rapidly grow fewer in numbers during the next half century. Thus in 2030s some people would be living outside Estonia who officially still belong to the Estonian ethnic group, but there would be very few people of unmixed Estonian origin and people who use Estonian as their mother tongue among them.

Western Estonians are gradually assimilating with their surrounding environment and in a couple of decades they will be only a memory if the present trend continues. Hopes for their continuing as an ethnic group may depend on the future development of Estonia — if all goes well we can attract some of the Estonians who have forgotten the language and the way it feels to be Estonian.

### **Russian Estonians**

This part of the Estonian nation which has suffered so much during the last century is still alive, although the number of Russian Estonians has decreased several times during the last half century. But their survival as a clearly detachable ethnic group is questionable.

We obtain quite a good picture of the

future possible demographic development when we have a look at the age specific structure of the Russian Estonians from the year 1979. It is clear that most of the Estonians there are from the older generation, born before 1930, and most of them are women, due to the war and the repressions. During the last half century every generation has been smaller than the one before (with the exception of the one born in the 1950s). This trend has brought with it a fall in the number of Russian Estonians. When the quite numerous older generation dies, the number will diminish very rapidly because very few children are born.

The number of Estonian speaking people is also falling together with the number of Estonians. Evidently this will happen especially quickly in the very near future because in case of Russian Estonians it is also the older generation which is the main carrier of the "Estonian" environment although the differences in the usage of language are not so big in their case as in the case of Western Estonians. Linguistic assimilation has been conducted by growing urbanization of Russian Estonians: many young people have moved to urban areas where they quickly became assimilated with the surrounding environment, older people mostly stay in the rural areas.

Thus we can say that the future of Russian Estonians from the Estonian ethnic point of view is not very happy — should the trends continue in the same way, in fifty years they may cease.

"Tüvi ja oksad, nad on loodud koos elama, olema, muidu ei pääse juurte rammu okstele ligi ja kasutatavast kevadisest mahlast nad jäävad ilma. Veel mõni aeg toidab ennast mahalõigatud oksendisest tagavarast, kuid siis ta kuu- vab, kaob." (O.Kallas.)

*The present article is a short summary of my diploma thesis "Estonians in the World. An Overview of Number and Localization" where I dealt with changes that have taken place in the number and localization of Estonians living abroad during the last one and a half centuries. I also tried to determine the number of Estonians in the world today and predict the changes in the number of Estonians living abroad in the nearest future, mainly on the basis of development up to now. The research paper is descriptive in essence and is based on a questionnaire carried out in the 1990–1991 to gather information about Estonians living abroad from statistic centers and Estonian organizations in different countries.*

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