



Eastern Europe

GEOGRAPHY

The Estonian Way

Long dominated by Russia and a part of the former Soviet Union, Estonia became an independent nation in 1991. This reading describes the Estonian culture and the challenges this small nation faces in reestablishing it.

Estonia is a multicultural country. . . . The ethnic mixture of people in Estonia has changed drastically over the last 50 years, as a result of the Baltic country's incorporation into the Soviet Union and consequent Soviet migration policies. In the last five decades, Estonia has become the home of more than 100 different ethnic groups, mainly from other parts of the Soviet Union. In 1934 a census showed that 88% of the people in Estonia were ethnic Estonians. In the 1990s that figure had fallen by a quarter, while the number of Russians dramatically increased. . . . Between 1945 and 1990, approximately 1.4 million mostly Russian-speaking peoples passed through Estonia. Such a dense flow of people has had a corrosive [wearing down] effect on traditional Estonian society and has led to domestic tensions. Today, it has been estimated that a quarter of the country's residents were born outside of the country.

The population of Estonia has dropped through the 1990s. . . . This decrease is mainly the result of a halt in migration from the former Soviet Union and a drop in the birth rate. . . . Estonia has a low population density. Despite being a bigger country than, for example, Switzerland, Estonia has only one quarter of the population.

Estonians are a Finno-Ugric people, one among an ethno-linguistic group that includes the Finns, Lapps, and Hungarians. They first arrived in Estonia around 6000 B.C., having journeyed across the Asian landmass from the marshes of Siberia. Estonians are not related to their Baltic neighbors, the Latvians and Lithuanians, who are Indo-European peoples. Ethnically and culturally, Estonians are close cousins to Finns and have more in common with them than with the other Baltic peoples. Estonians feel themselves to be Scandinavian and not at all linked to Slavic peoples.

Estonians are traditionally a rural people. In Estonia today, the rural areas are totally dominated by native Estonians, many of whom still pursue the traditional vocations of farming, forestry, and fishing. . . . The ethnic minorities tend to predominate in the industrial towns and cities. . . .

Estonians are typical northern Europeans in that they are extremely individualistic and love solitude. . . . This explains the popularity of country homes: in the summer, most Estonians like to retreat to their country homes for as long as possible. . . . Visitors find Estonians cool and reserved . . . and say they have mastered the art of being polite without being friendly. The Slavic peoples, especially the Russians, tend to be more expansive and openly affectionate, offering hugs to each other when meeting.

Estonians shy away from open displays of affection. . . . Friendship is highly prized and not easily proffered [extended].

. . . For Estonians, ethnic identity is the essence of their nationhood. Domination by foreign powers is most apparent in the architecture of the country, which is mainly German, Swedish, and Russian in character. Many Estonian institutions were also introduced by these conquerors. Consequently, Estonians have retained a sense of themselves through their traditions, language, and lifestyle. As a part of the Soviet Union, Estonians were not allowed to express their separateness or celebrate their culture and were instead encouraged to adhere [follow] to the Communist Party ideal of the Soviet citizen. . . . As a result of nationalistic feeling, Estonians have turned resolutely toward the West to find a new lifestyle and sense of purpose; one not dominated by Russia and communist ideology [beliefs].

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How are Estonians different from their Baltic neighbors, the Latvians and Lithuanians?

2. What factors in its history have made Estonia a multicultural nation? What effect do you think this might have on Estonian nationalism?

3. How does nationality and ethnicity affect settlement patterns in Estonia? What Estonian character traits contribute to this division?

Activity

Create a poster that celebrates either Estonia’s multiculturalism or Estonian nationalism.