

ESTONIAN HISTORY

IN PICTURES





8000 BC

People have lived in this part of the world for more than 10 000 years. The reindeer hunting ancestors of present day Estonians were probably the first humans to move to the virgin land exposed by the retreating ice. Arguably, it is hard to find another nation in Europe who has stayed this long in one place.

	8000 BC
1000 BC to 1000 AD	1154
1100s	1200s
1219	13th–16th c
14th–15th c	1500s
1523–24	late 1500s
1600s	1700s
early 1800s	1857–69
late 1800s	1905–18
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1000 BC to 1000 AD

— Standing next to the crater made by the only meteorite to fall on a densely settled region in the historical era – during the Bronze Age of the Mediterranean – it is hard not to contemplate how the people of the past might have sought spiritual guidance at this very spot for hundreds of years.

— *The Holy Lake in the Kaali meteorite crater in Saaremaa: a major place of worship for the ancients of Northern Europe?*



— *Estonia on the map by an Arab geographer al-Idrisi who worked in the court of the Norman kings of Sicily.*



1154

— In 1154, Estonia was depicted on a world map for the first time. However, as early as 98 AD, the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus mentions the *Aesti*: a group of tribes that quite probably included the forebears of the Estonians.

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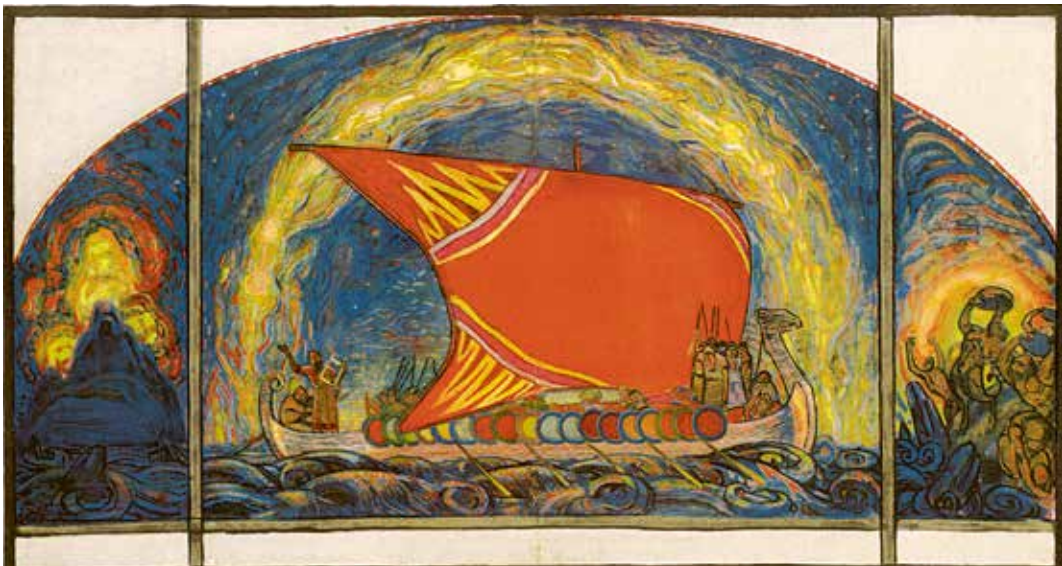
1100s

From the start of seafaring on the Baltic, Estonia has been en route between East and West. In the early 1200s, traders from Gotland and northern German towns, members of the newly formed merchant league – *Hanse* – strove to take over the lucrative trade with Russia and beyond from the pagan peoples of the Eastern Baltic littoral.

Nikolai Triik. Lennuk. 1910. National Romanticist portrayal of ancient Estonian seafaring.



Silver penannular brooch from the Kostivere hoard, 13th century.



1200s

Interest in trade was soon followed by the desire to control the lands adjacent to the emporia where the goods originated. Bringing the Christian faith to the heathens served as a handy justification for this mercantile conquest.

Ott Kangilaski. The storming of Muhu stronghold. 1941.



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An expression of the miracle on the small coat of arms of Tallinn. 1650s.



1219

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The crusade to Estonia also left its mark on the history of others. According to legend, the only thing that saved the forces of the Danish King Valdemar II from defeat by the Estonians at their strong hold Lyndanise (Toompea castle in modern Tallinn) on 15 June 1219 was a red banner with a white cross, the Dannebrog, which fell from the sky as a revelation.



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Kræsten Iversen. The Battle of Lyndanise. 1937.

13th–16th c

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Estonia, conquered by the mid-1200s, was divided between several powers, the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order being the mightiest among them. Although the lands seized were associated with the Virgin Mary, there was not much Christian love to be found. Struggles among the newcomers and revolts by the indigenous people left the outcome of the crusade open for many years. At least until the misfired uprising of St George’s Night in 1343–44 and the inclusion of the northern provinces of Estonia into the realm of the Order two years later.



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Teutonic knight from Sebastian Münster’s Cosmographia, 1550.

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Richard Sagrits. Signal of the St George’s Night. 1943. Pseudo-heroic depictions of the uprising were utilised for the purposes of Soviet anti-German propaganda during WWII.



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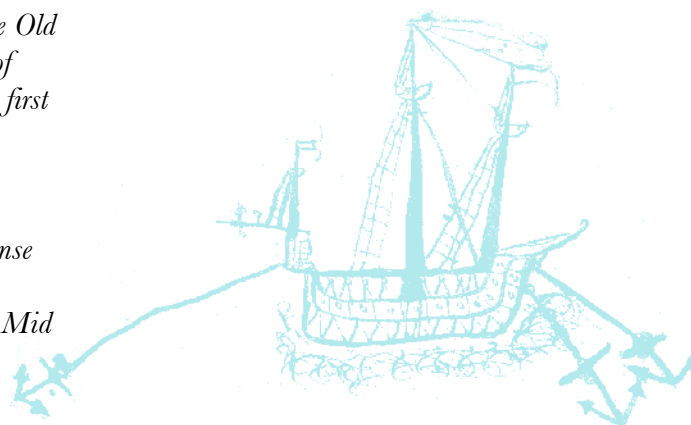
14th–15th c

In spite of the perpetual feuding among local petty rulers, as well as frequent threats of foreign invasion and piracy, commerce prospered and agriculture flourished. Old Livonia came to be known as the granary of Northern Europe, trading corn for cloth from Flanders, herring from Scotland and salt from Poitou.



Terracotta sculptures from the redbrick St. John's church and Venetian glass found in the Old Town display the wealth of the citizenry of Tartu, the first Estonian Hanse-town.

An ink drawing of a Hanse holk from a document of Tallinn's Town Council. Mid 16th century.



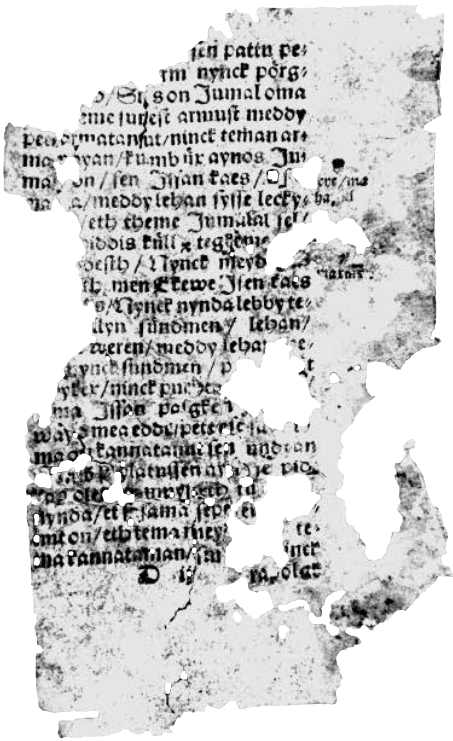
The castles of Narva in Estonia, and Ivangorod in Russia facing each other across the River Narva.



1500s

With their economic and military strength starting to wane in the era of centralised nation states, the German rulers of Estonia became ever more worried about their new neighbour, Muscovy, whose attention gradually shifted westwards. Compared with the merchant democracies of Novgorod and Pskov, the despotism of the Grand Duchy of Moscow posed an unprecedented threat.

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1523–24

The Reformation, arriving in Estonia in 1523–24, shook the country to its foundations. Apart from political upheavals and occasions of iconoclastic pillage, it encouraged the spread of the new art of printing, which, in turn, led to the publication of the first books in Estonian. The earliest notion of printed Estonian text, referring to a Lutheran compendium issued in Lübeck, dates from 1525.

A Fragment of the Wanradt-Koell catechism (1535), the earliest extant example of printed Estonian text.

The austere interior of many an Estonian parish church stems from the time of the sermon-friendly and effigy-hostile Lutheran Reformation.



late 1500s

From 1558 to 1581 the devastating Livonian War was fought between Russia, Sweden, Denmark and Poland-Lithuania, the main prize being Estonia. All castles and fortified towns apart from Tallinn were sacked and several settlements wiped out altogether.



Monumental tablet by the burghers of Tallinn to mark the inclusion of their town into the Kingdom of Sweden in 1561.

The rural population was hit the hardest – more than half perished, and with the demise of ancient peasant lineages many of the olden privileges enjoyed by Estonians were lost. Warfare between the two most committed combatants – Catholic Poland-Lithuania and Lutheran Sweden – continued into the 1620s, the latter emerging as the winner.

Viljandi Castle was a key stronghold of the Order in Estonia and one of the mightiest fortifications in Northern Europe at the time.



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1600s

Although the living standards of the Estonian peasantry did not improve much under Swedish rule, progress in the spheres of education and land tenancy and, most especially, the harshness of the times that followed, ensured that this period became imprinted as ‘the good old Swedish era’ in Estonian collective memory.

Trading on the Baltic – the source of wealth for Estonia – rapidly recovered from a war time low, Narva and Tallinn (Reval) gaining prominence as centres of Sweden’s lucrative eastern trade.



In 1632, the second university of the Kingdom of Sweden was founded in Tartu. King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden at the reopening of the monument to Gustaf II Adolf, founder of the University.

Adam Olearius. Revalia in Livonia. 1651.



1700s

Despite a promising start for the Swedes, the result of the Great Northern War (1700–21) was predictable. Left alone to fight against all the great powers around the Baltic, Sweden could not defend its overseas provinces against their combined onslaught. With plageridden Pärnu and Tallinn capitulating in 1710, Estonia was devastated to the extent that the Russian Field Marshal Sheremetev could declare bluntly to Peter the Great: “My Lord, there is nothing left to lay waste.”



Anonymous artist. The Battle of Narva. Early 18th century.

The country, however, recuperated quickly and witnessed a boom in the construction of grand palaces in the late 18th century. The Golden Age of the local landlords whose privileges were even broadened by the Tsars, meant the aggravation of corvée and institution of serfdom for the Estonian peasants.



Johann Wilhelm Krause. Rogosi manor. 1795.

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early 1800s

Although most of the Estonian peasants were literate by the early 1800s, they were still virtually excluded from political decision making – for any upward mobility in society one had to be, or become, German. In 1818, the poet Kristjan Jaak Peterson, one of the first university-educated Estonians, could only sigh: “Shall our tongue ever be equal to other languages...” Yet, with the spread of the Enlightenment – the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity – the local Baltic German version of the *Ancient Régime* also started to crumble. From 1816 through 1819, Estonians were freed from serfdom, given family names and limited autonomy – steps that provided the native people with an incentive to get involved in what is nowadays called nation-building.

To mark a vowel that occurs neither in Latin nor in German, Masing added a novel letter to the Estonian alphabet and popularised its use in his primers.

Elgi Reemets. Jaak Peterson. 1978.



Rev. Otto Wilhelm Masing, father of the Estonian letter õ.



Kristjan Raud. The coronation of Kalevipoeg. 1927–33.

1857–69

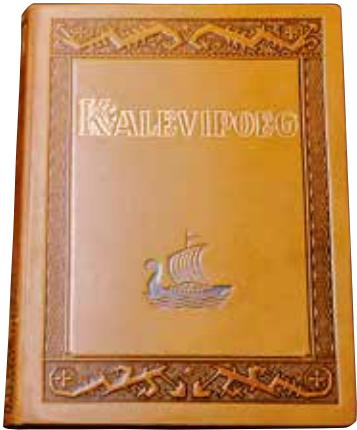
Inspired by the publication of the Finnish epic Kalevala, another prop for the nascent national identity was set in 1857 with the Estonians’ own epic Kalevipoeg by physicist Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald.

With the improved economic conditions and the consequent rise in self-esteem, the hitherto peasant nation – *maarahvas* (people of the land) – became Estonians. The sense of unity was further reinforced by the foundation of various societies and the tradition of nation-wide song festivals in 1869.

Eduard Taska. Kalevipoeg. Bookbinding. 1935.



Climbers’ detachment of the Viljandi Voluntary Fire Fighting Brigade.



early 1800s

1857–69

late 1800s

1905–18

1918

1919–20

1920s

1930s

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1944

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1940s–50s

1956–68

1970s

late 1980s

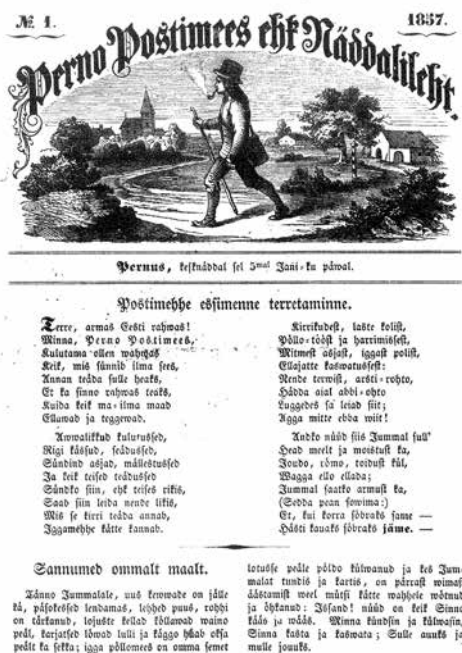
1991

1991

1992

1994

2004–18



1884

Founded by Johann Voldemar Jannsen in 1857, the first Estonian-language newspaper *Perno Postimees* heralded a novel form of action that remained central to Estonian national awakening until the beginning of the 20th century. Most future statesmen acquired their initial skills from the press and by the turn of the century the editorial staffs of newspapers had become the main focus of party politics.



The 50th and 120th jubilees of the Estonian national colours in Otepää.

Several Estonian state symbols date from the late 1800s – e.g. the national tricolour, introduced as the banner of the Society of Estonian Students in 1884. The original flag itself has survived the turmoil of the 20th century, and is again displayed on festive occasions.



A picket by proindependence actors in front of the Estonia theatre in Tallinn, 1917.

24 February 1918

The 1905 revolution in Estonia involved bloody clashes in towns between demonstrators and the military, as well as the destruction of landlords' property in the countryside. The inept reaction by the Tsarist government – harsh repression and heightened Russification – resulted in the growing radicalisation of Estonian nationalism. Military losses in the Great War caused social unrest in the whole Russian Empire. For Estonians of whom about 100 000 fought and over 10 000 fell in the WWI, the final impetus towards full independence was the Bolshevik establishment of a dictatorship in late 1917.

Seizing the opportunity offered by the withdrawal of the red militia ahead of the advancing German troops, the National Salvation Committee proclaimed Estonian independence on 24 February 1918.

Recruits departing from Viljandi for WWI.

Maximilian Maksolly. The Proclamation of the Republic of Estonia. 1926–27.



late 1800s

1905–18

1918

1919–20

1920s

1930s

1940

1941

1941

1944

1949

1940s–50s

1956–68

1970s

late 1980s

1991

1991

1992

1994

2004–18



1918–20

Estonia had to defend its independence against both the Red Army and the *Landeswehr*, a militia formed by Baltic German reactionaries.



Nationalist troops loyal to the Estonian government were joined by volunteers from Finland and Denmark, as well as a number of local Germans who supported the Republic. Essential military aid was provided by the British fleet, which arrived in Tallinn at the most crucial moment of the war, the end of December 1918.



Livestock of a newly established farm.

1919

In parallel with the fighting on several fronts, the newly established Republic was preparing one of the most radical land reforms in post-WW I Europe. A total of 874 baronial estates were expropriated and re-allotted to volunteers fighting on the front. Severely criticised in the West, this measure proved quite crucial in terms of uniting the nation for the defence of its independence.

The Tartu Peace Treaty was signed on 2 February 1920.

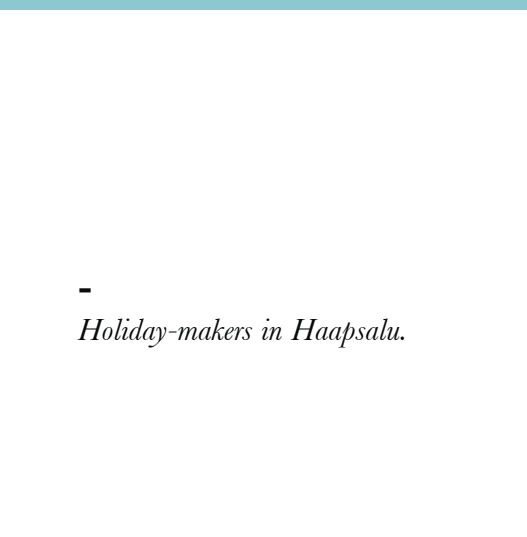
2 February 1920

Having failed to subdue its neighbour by force, Soviet Russia finally recognised the independence of the Republic of Estonia, and renounced all rights of sovereignty formerly held over its people and territory.



- 1918
- 1920s
- 1940
- 1941
- 1949
- 1956–68
- late 1980s
- 1991
- 1994

- 1919–20
- 1930s
- 1941
- 1944
- 1940s–50s
- 1970s
- 1991
- 1992
- 2004–18



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Holiday-makers in Haapsalu.



1920s–30s



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Ski-jump competition in Viljandi.



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Students in the psychology lab at the University of Tartu.

1920s–30s

Many were surprised by the rapid developments in the young republic’s economy. The re-orientation of the economy from the Russian to the European markets was successfully accomplished and despite the Depression of 1929–32, the standard of living in Estonia in late 1930s was comparable to that of the Scandinavia.



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Modern buses in Tallinn, 1930s.



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State elder Konstantin Päts with the girls of Muhu island.

The political system, typical of the time, showed less stability; its vulnerability becoming apparent in the 1934 bloodless *coup d’etat* by the ‘Founding Fathers’ of the young democracy, president Konstantin Päts and general Johan Laidoner. The following six years were dubbed the ‘Era of Silence’ by a critical public opinion.

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1940

The non-involvement policy of the democratic West in the 1930s left Estonia between the devil and the deep blue sea. The aggressors wasted no time: the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 made Estonia one of many nations the Nazis and Soviets ‘shared’ between themselves. A couple of weeks later, openly threatened with invasion by the USSR, Estonia had to accept the establishment of Red Army and Navy bases on its territory.



The Soviets did not even bother to hide the role of their military in the ‘democratic decision-making’ processes of the Estonian people.

In June 1940, a de facto military take-over ensued. At a time when the bewildered eyes of the world were focused on the Nazis taking Paris, few took any notice of the beginning of Soviet occupation in the Baltic countries.

Local and immigrant communists (in spring 1940 the Estonian CP had but 133 members), installed in power by overtly farcical elections, promptly ‘requested’ Estonia be attached to the Soviet Union.



Execution of leading Estonian columnist Eduard Laamann, in a Russian prison following a ‘verdict’ by a three-member NKVD kangaroo court, serves as an example of Stalinist terror tactics.



1941

The Communists envisaged the destruction of Estonian civic society along with the Estonian state. Repression targeted a large part of the intelligentsia, and nearly all civil servants, from heads of state to office clerks.

On 14 June 1941 it was the turn of the families and relatives of ‘elements hostile to Soviet power’: without discrimination according to gender or age, over 10 000 Estonians were deported without trial to prison camps and exile. Many perished.



A covert image of livestock carriages that were ‘provided’ for several weeks’ journey.

Cornflowers, Estonia’s national flowers, laid in remembrance of the deportees.

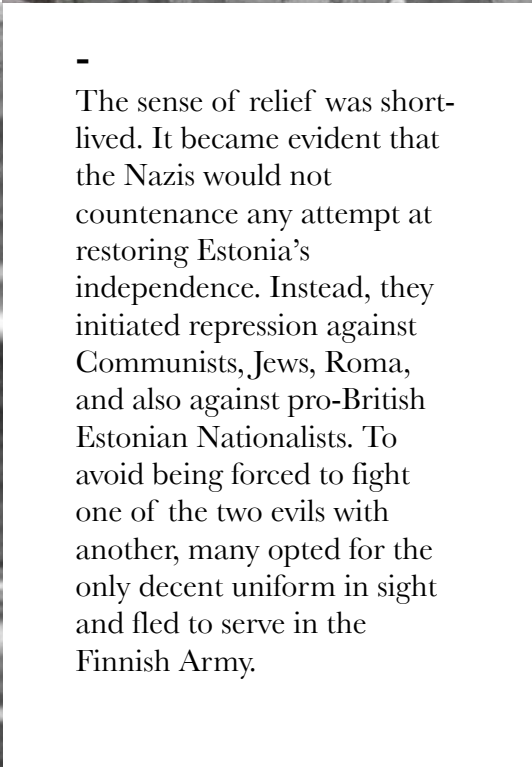


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Members of the Mõniste squad of the Estonian Home Guard, 1941.

Estonian volunteers in the Finnish Army on the Karelian front and upon their return to Estonia.



1944

In early 1944, war returned to Estonia. The Battle of the Tannenberg Line in the North-East, the heaviest of the whole Soviet-German front at the time, raged on until August.



Refugees leaving for Sweden, 1944.

The Estonian nationalist government, formed amidst the chaos of the collapsing German defence, declared the restoration of independence and proclaimed neutrality in the war. However, the desperate efforts to organise Estonian military units (and obtain recognition from the Western Allies) were not sufficient to repeat the miracle of the War of Independence, and by late autumn, the Red Army had re-occupied the whole of Estonia. Ahead of the returning Bolsheviks tens of thousands of Estonians, who were fortunate enough to get to the coast and find any kind of vessel, escaped overseas.

The baroque old town of Narva was among the most intact architectural ensembles in pre-war Estonia.

The heart of town after the Red Army bombing raids and artillery bombardments in March 1944.



1941

1949

1956–68

late 1980s

1991

1994

1944

1940s–50s

1970s

1991

1992

2004–18

1944–53

Thousands resisted the second Soviet occupation: the guerrilla war waged by the Forest Brothers lasted until the mid-1950s.



The resistance fighters from Arnold Leetsaar's group, 1948.

1949

To eradicate the main supply base for the resistance, peasant smallholders, the staunchest pillar of Estonian national identity still intact, became the prime target of another mass deportation in 1949. Estonia lost almost one fifth of its population through execution, deportation, war and exile between 1940 and 1949.

Again, people who had often been given only one hour to pack found themselves in Siberia with virtually none of the items essential for everyday life. Many did not make it through the first winter.



Commemorating the deportations at Ülemiste railway station.



1950s

For those lucky enough to escape the repressions, joining the kolkhozes under the watchful eye of omnipresent Stalin became imperative.



Construction of the Baltic Power Station near Narva, 1959.

The quality of the Soviet way of life and its 'remarkable progress' was demonstrated at every occasion.

Members of the first Estonian collective farm, the Red Meadow, in Petseri County.



The main instrument for maintaining Soviet power was the re-population of Estonia, which took place under the guise of industrial development. Thousands of labourers were moved from the Soviet Union to work in the factories and mines of Northern Estonia; as a result, the proportion of Estonians fell from the pre-war 88% to 61% in 1990.

1949

1940s–50s

1956–68

1970s

late 1980s

1991

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1994

2004–18



The launching of the passenger boat Vanemuine in 1965 reopened the traffic between Estonia and Finland that had been disrupted by WW II.



Covers of Eurovision songs presented on the popular TV programme Horoskoop escaped the eyes of the censors.

1956–68

The era following Stalin’s death – which marked the end of the brutal terror and the beginning of Nikita Khrushchev’s reforms – gave many the hope of building a ‘humane socialism’.

Along with the return of the rehabilitated deportees, some communication with abroad was resumed. Personal contacts with the Finns – linguistic relatives from across the Gulf of Finland – had a special role. Smuggled jeans and Western pop music, the ability to watch Finnish TV and the ideas that permeated across the border turned Estonia into the ‘Soviet West’.

1970s

With the suppression of the 1968 popular revolt in Czechoslovakia, the regime’s ideological pressure strengthened once again, as the Soviet regime strove to create a uniform *Homo sovieticus*. Publically, routine parades and elections were staged in support of the Communist Party, while the covert campaign involved forced industrial development and residential building for new immigrants.



Culture became a refuge: people perfected their protest by interpreting what was squeezed between the lines. Hidden allusions were sought in theatre and art, and meaningful verses were quoted by the entire nation.

One of the best-loved young poets of the time, Paul-Erik Rummo.



1956–68

1970s

late 1980s

1991

1991

1992

1994

2004–18



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The Soviet establishment increasingly resembled a cumbersome giant – feared for its strength, but ridiculed for its apparent incapacity.



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Long queues and empty shops became inevitable features of everyday life in the Soviet Union, which lagged ever further behind the Western world. This, of course, only added to the frustration and resentment felt towards ‘the most progressive country in the world’ and made a mockery of the rhetoric employed by the local puppet leaders.



1987

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“Phosphorite – thanks, but no thanks!” “R.I.P. Brachiopoda of Kabala!” Slogans at the student protest marches in Tartu.

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The campaign that rose up in 1987 against the planned massive phosphorite quarrying, and the movement of heritage societies that started at the end of the same year, grew into an open critique of the Soviet system and ever more overt demands for the Estonian's right of self-determination.



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A demonstration by the pro-Soviet Interfront in Tallinn.

1989

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The crowning achievement of the popular movements in the Baltic states came on 23 August 1989 in the form of the Baltic Way – a 600 km human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius. This action of around two million people brought the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian push for independence to TV-screens around the world.



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Some communist die-hards kept fighting back despite the inevitable collapse of the USSR...

1991

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... but their zeal was curbed, along with the failure of plans by hardliners in Moscow. Following the attempted reactionary *coup d'état*, Estonia declared the restoration of its sovereignty on 20 August 1991.

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Soviet special forces leaving Tallinn after the failed coup d'état in August 1991.



late 1980s

1991

1994

1991

1992

2004–18



1991

A few days later, the new reality was acknowledged by the international community – with Iceland leading the way, one country after another recognised Estonia’s regained independence.

The rapid recognition of the restored Republic and pre-WWII member of the League of Nations was concluded with the admission of Estonia into the United Nations.



State borders and legislation, as well as the institution of Estonian citizenry awaited urgent restoration. Hitherto Moscow-controlled or practically non-existent areas of life – from national defence to real estate development, from the postal service to banking – required organisation.



However, first things first – parliamentary and presidential elections were organised in 1992. The writer and ethnographer Lennart Meri was elected President. The constitution, a successor to the former Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, was adopted by a referendum.



As early as June 1992 Estonia became the first of the post-communist nations to carry through a currency reform. The Estonian kroon was much loved; it was valid until the adoption of the euro in 2011.

1992

Due to its small size and support that arrived from across the Gulf of Finland, Estonia made a flying start in rearranging its economy – regardless of political background, the subsequent governments of the early 1990s pursued a neo-liberal ‘shock therapy’ approach which brought rapid privatisation, liberalisation of prices, and the establishment of a free foreign trade regime whilst maintaining the stability of the currency.



The freedom of movement and action that characterise a free society gradually returned to the Estonian landscape and to people’s minds. After half a century of rigidly guarded borders, bathers no longer have to fear being dragged to the border guard headquarters in their swim suits. Coastal fishermen and devotees of all kinds of water sports could now set out to sea without a special permit.



Direct links with the outside world were restored: during the Soviet times these connections had mainly taken place through Moscow. In 1991, the national airline Estonian Air was established (Estonian Air was in operation until 2015). The ferry company Tallink, which was founded in 1989, has become the largest carrier on the Baltic Sea.



1994

In 1994, after three years of arduous talks, the last Russian troops were withdrawn from Estonia leaving behind a range of ecological booby-traps, such as extensively polluted ground water around military airfields or nuclear waste in naval bases.



After 1991, Estonia stayed on a steady course to join The European Union and NATO. The almost idolatrous admiration for all things Western has given way to a more critical approach, not least because the domestic bureaucracy has tended to cite ‘EU norms’ as justification for various imprudent decisions. Nevertheless, this has meant quick development for the economy and society.

The young country adopted the newest technology. The Estonian banking industry moved to the internet in 1996; tax declarations and other communications with the state followed immediately after. In 2002, the country created a state ID card, the digital signature of which has the same legal weight as the traditional hand signature. Today, almost all public services are available online; one can also participate in elections electronically.



2004

Having once learned the hard way about the dangers of international isolation, the majority of Estonians view international co-operation as offering the best guarantees of national security. However, not even the greatest optimists of the early 1990s could have predicted that in April 2004, even before joining the European Union, Estonia would become a member of NATO.



In May 2008 more than 50 000 Estonians volunteered to remove illegally dumped waste from the countryside. *Teeme ära!* (*Let's Do It!*) has since proven the greatest public initiative of Estonian origin that has brought together over 15 million volunteers in more than 100 countries. The initiative has generated popularity and success by bringing together crowd-sourcing and advanced technical solutions. In 2018, the global day of cleaning Let's Do It World will be organised.

2014

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Estonia is the first country to offer e-Residency. Anyone in the world can apply for a government-backed digital identity that makes it possible to digitally sign documents, establish a company online, and access other Estonian e-services.

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The ID card of the first Estonian e-resident, Edward Lucas, senior editor at The Economist.



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The vitality of Estonian culture in the world is embodied by Arvo Pärt, whose works have been the most performed of any living composer on the world's concert stages for several years.

2017

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Estonia will assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time.

2018

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Estonia celebrates the 100th anniversary of its independence.

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The Republic of Estonia is like a child among the old European states. The works of the street artist Edward von Lõngus symbolise Estonians who have quite suddenly moved from peasant status to the modern day, re-oriented themselves to the future, but maintained their common sense.

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