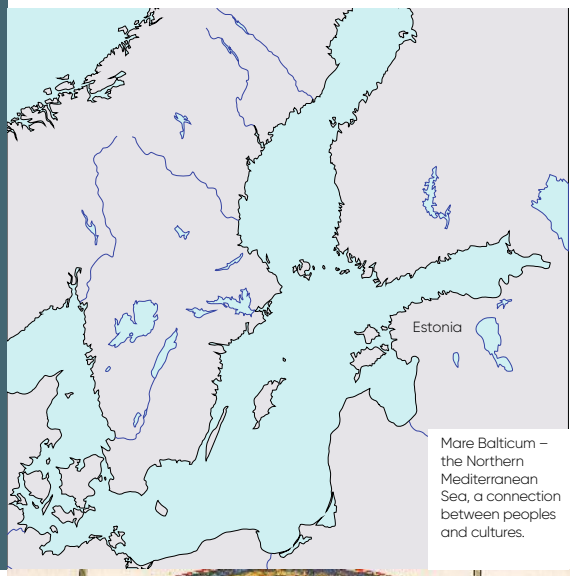
9000 BC–1500 AD

ESTONIAN HISTORY IN PICTURES



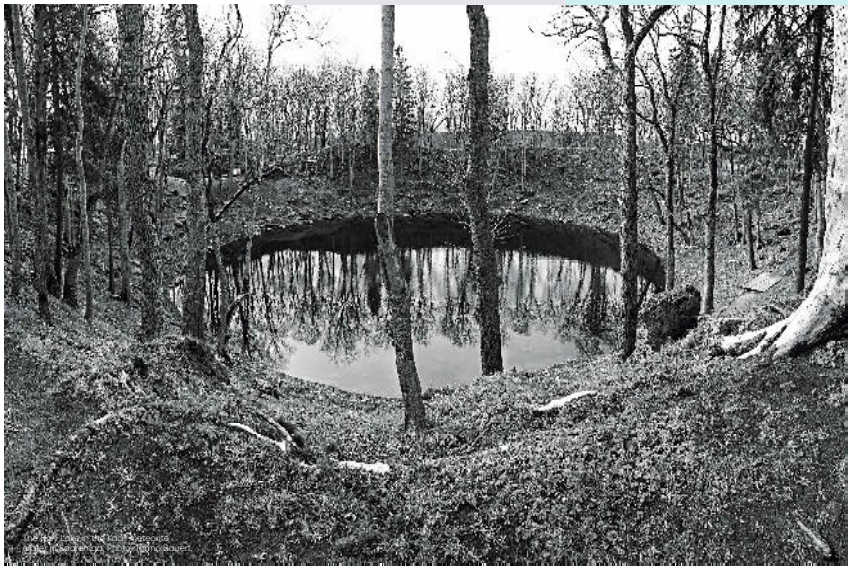
Mare Balticum – the Northern Mediterranean Sea, a connection between peoples and cultures.

Estonia is a maritime country. The ancestors of present day Estonians were probably the first humans to move to the virgin land exposed by the retreating ice. It is hard to find another nation in Europe who has stayed in one place for this long.

Nikolai Triik "Lembit" 1913. Art Museum of Estonia

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.

It is likely that in about 325 BC Pytheas of Massalia, a Greek geographer and explorer, during his voyage of exploration to Northwestern Europe, visited the Kaali meteorite crater in the island of Saaremaa, where the locals showed him "a place where the sun goes to rest". Pytheas knew this island under the name of Thule.



Crusaders attacking the stronghold.

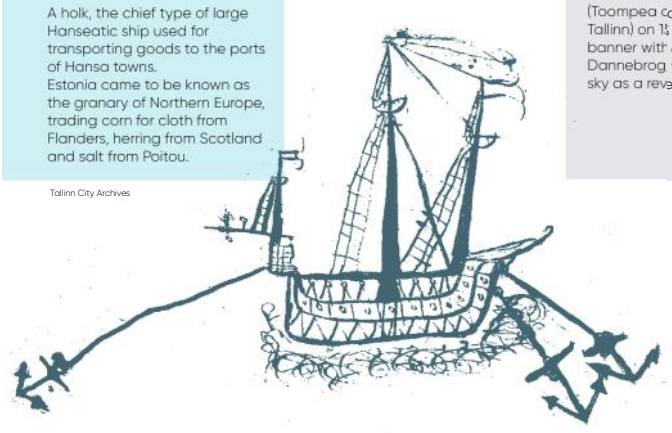
Ott Kangilaski. The Storming of Muhu Stronghold, 1941. Estonian History Museum.

Estonia, conquered by the mid-1200s, was divided between several powers. 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.

Christian August Lorentzen. Dannebrog falling from the sky during the Battle of Lyndanisse. 1809. National Gallery of Denmark.

According to legend, the only thing that saved the forces of the Danish King Valdemar II from defeat by the Estonians at their stronghold 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.

A holk, the chief type of large Hanseatic ship used for transporting goods to the ports of Hansa towns.
Estonia came to be known as the granary of Northern Europe, trading corn for cloth from Flanders, herring from Scotland and salt from Poitou.



Tallinn City Archives

1500–1900

Revalia in Livonia. Engraving by Adam Olearius. Schleßwig: Holwein, 1647.

Narva and Tallinn (Reval) gained prominence as centres of Sweden's lucrative eastern trade.

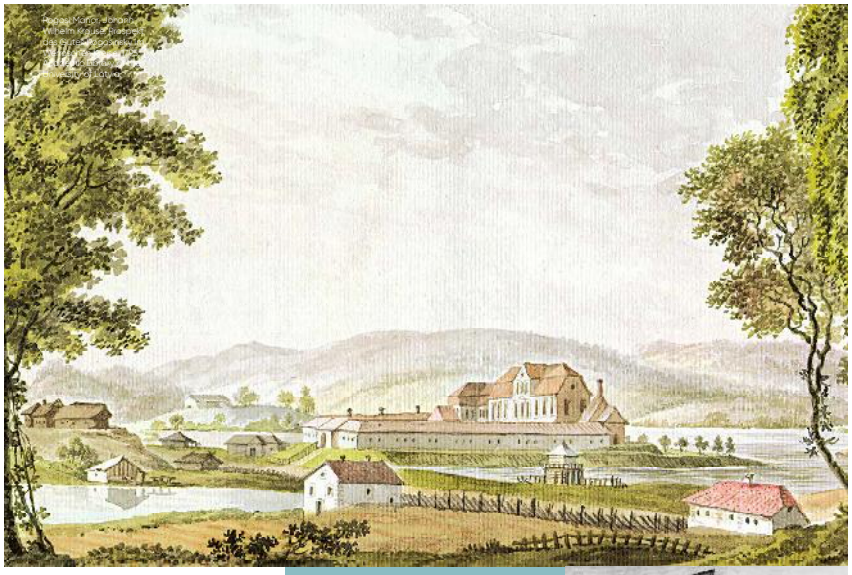
The Reformation, arriving in Estonia in early 1520s, was supported by the major cities. Tallinn adopted the new confession in 1525.
From 1558 to 1581 the devastating Livonian War was fought between Russia, Sweden, Denmark and Poland-Lithuania, the main prize being Estonia. Warfare between the two combatants – Catholic Poland-Lithuania and Lutheran Sweden – continued into the 1620s, the latter emerging as the winner. 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.
As the result of the Great Northern War (1700-21), Russian forces returned to the Baltics, and in 1710 ended Swedish power in the area.

Tallinn City Archives. Photo: Ervin Sestverk.

The Reformation encouraged the spread of the new art of printing, which, in turn, led to the publication of the first books in Estonian.
Fragment of the Wanradt-Koell catechism (1535), the earliest extant example of printed Estonian text.

In 1632, the second university of the Kingdom of Sweden was founded in Tartu.
In 1992 King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden reopened the monument to Gustaf II Adolf, founder of the University.

Tartu University Library. Photo: Eduard Sokk.



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. 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.

The country witnessed a boom in the construction of manor houses in the late 18th century.

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.

Viljandi Museum. Photo: Jaan Riet.

Various societies played an important part in the national awakening. Choirs and orchestras were established in parishes, and the first song festival was organised in 1869. Climbers' detachment of the Viljandi Voluntary Fire Fighting Brigade.

1905–1940

The proclamation of the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918.

Maximilian Mahelity. Eesti Vabariigi väljakuulutamine. 1926–27. Tallinn City Museum.

In 1917, tens of thousands of soldiers returned to Estonia from the fronts of WWI after the Russian revolution. When the War of Independence broke out in 1918, the Republic of Estonia was able to rely on these soldiers and officers. Seizing the opportunity offered by the withdrawal of the demoralized Russian troops ahead of the advancing German army, the National Salvation Committee proclaimed Estonian independence on 24 February 1918.

Estonian Film Archives. Photo: Nikolai Petrov.

Estonia had to defend its independence against both the Red Army and the Landeswehr, a local German army unit.

Estonian Film Archives. Photo: Karl Akel.

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.

Pärnu beach in 1920-30s.

The National Archives of Estonia

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. In contrast to the previous and subsequent periods of foreign rule, the two decades of independence saw unequalled advances in Estonian public life.

Tartu University Library. Photo: Eduard Sakk.

By Albert Pullerits, Eduard Laaman, Bernhard Linde, Volter Soo and Antoni Tooms (eds.). 1939.

Modern buses in Tallinn, 1930s.

An entirely Estonian cultural space was created, including science, higher education, a police force, public health and legislation, and many more essential facets of a modern nation state.

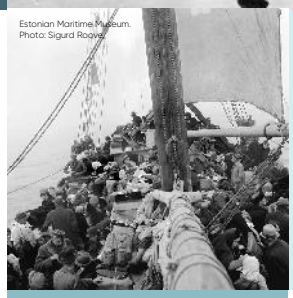
Livestock of a newly established farm.

Viljandi Museum. Photo: Heino Metsamärt.

1940–1956

Estonian History Museum

The secret protocol of the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 made Estonia one of the countries the Nazis and Soviets shared between themselves. In June 1940, a de facto military take-over ensured. Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and the civil society, social organization, economy and cultural life were quickly altered to fit those in the Soviet Union. Repression targeted a large part of the intellectuals, and nearly all civil servants, from heads of state to office clerks.



Estonian Maritime Museum. Photo: Sigurd Roovet

Local and immigrant communists, installed in power by overtly farcical elections, promptly 'requested' Estonia be attached to the Soviet Union, June 1940.

Thousands of Estonians, who were fortunate enough to get to the coast and find any kind of vessel, escaped overseas. Refugees leaving for Sweden, 1944.

Viljandi Museum

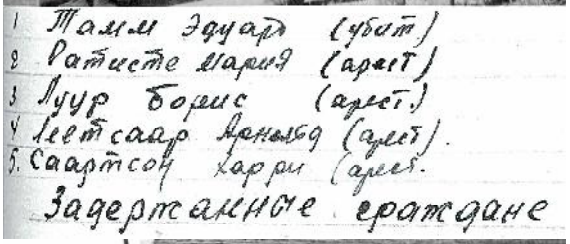
Estonia lost almost one fifth of its population through execution, deportation, war and exile between 1940 and 1949.

Red Navy in the Bay of Tallinn.

Estonian History Museum. Photo: Vassili Samussenko.

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. Estonian State Archives



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.

Estonian Film Archives. Photo: Nikolai Petrov.

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

Estonian History Museum. Photo: Hans Sõosaar

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

1956–1991

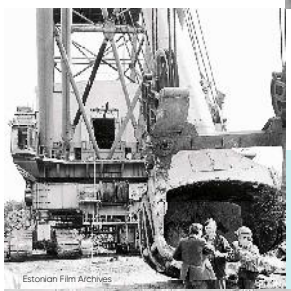
Estonian Public Broadcasting. Photo: Anton Mats

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'. 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'.

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

Long queues and empty shops became inevitable features of everyday life in the Soviet Union.


Estonian Film Archives


Estonian Film Archives

Industrial development in the 1970s.

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


Estonian Film Archives

Estonian National Museum

The Baltic Way – a 600 km human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius.

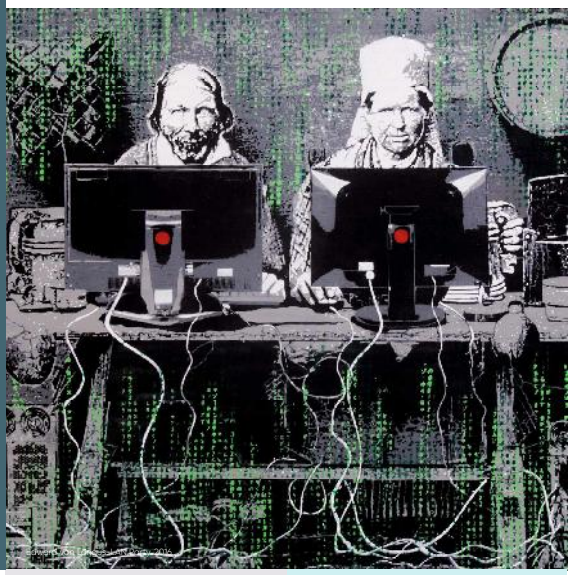
The campaign that rose up in 1987 against the planned massive phosphorite quarrying, and the movement of heritage societies that started at the end of the same year, grew into an open critique of the Soviet system and even more overt demands for the Estonian's right of self-determination. The crowning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

The protest movement known as Phosphorite War invigorated the Estonian society. Soon environmental issues were overshadowed by political grievances.

Photo: Tiit Veermäe.

After the attempted reactionary coup d'état, Estonia declared the restoration of its sovereignty on 20 August 1991.

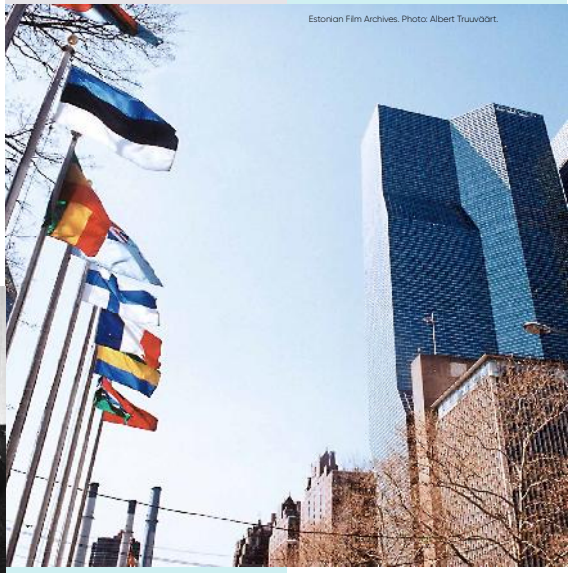
1991–2018



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.

Estonia declared the restoration of its sovereignty on 20 August 1991.
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.



Estonian Film Archives. Photo: Albert Truuväärt.

Estonian Institute

In 1992 the writer and ethnographer Lennart Meri was elected a President.

ESTONIA 18

Megaphones by students of Estonian Academy of Arts. 2015. Photo: Tõnu Tunnel.

Eesti Instituut

In 2017 Estonia assumes the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time, and in 2018 Estonia celebrates the 100th anniversary of its independence. The foundation of identity for many nations is a triumphal war. Estonians do not worship their military past: instead of fighting together, their sacred heroic deed has been singing together.

Three gigantic megaphones help people notice and listen to the sounds of Estonia's forest.

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.

Photo: Kaupo Kikkas.

Photo: Endel Grensmann.

The song celebration in Tallinn, 2009. The roots of this festival stretch back to 1869, the dawn of Estonian national movement.