

<https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.1997.3.05>

THE ESTONIAN DIASPORA

Hill Kulu

University of Tartu

Abstract: The present article focuses on the Estonian diaspora. Firstly, an overview of the formation of the diaspora is given, and then the changes in Estonian identity of the diaspora Estonians are analysed, and finally, the possible future trends for the diaspora are outlined. The census data from different countries are used for these purposes. The Estonian diaspora developed as a result of two waves of emigration. In the second half of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century, about 200,000 Estonians left for Russia, and during World War II at least 70,000 Estonians fled to western countries as political refugees. Nowadays there are 160,000 Estonians living abroad, which represents 14% of the total number of Estonians. The older generations in the diaspora are of single Estonian origin and are Estonian-speaking, while the younger generations are of multiple origin and are non-Estonian-speaking. Although the number of those having strong Estonian identity is continuously decreasing in the diaspora, the number of those having weaker ties to Estonian identity will remain considerable in the near future.

Introduction

One of the characteristics of population and migration studies in the 1990s is an increasing interest in diaspora-related topics. This is not, however, a new area of research. The history of diaspora studies goes back much farther, to the early decades of the present century, when the first studies of European emigration overseas were published (e.g. Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). More comprehensive studies on the topic began to appear only after the World War II, in the 1960s and 1970s. In many European countries during this period, national research institutions were created, at which, in addition to research into overseas emigration and its causes, questions of adaptation and acculturation in emigrants' new home countries were examined (e.g. Koivukangas 1974, *The Finnish...* 1975, *From Sweden...* 1976).

Whereas diaspora studies in the 1960s and 1970s focused on emigrants from Western and Northern Europe and their descendants, since the end of the 1980s Central and Eastern European topics have become popular in Europe. This increase in interest is due in part to the continually growing ethnic return migration from

Central and Eastern Europe to Western, Northern and Southern Europe¹, and also to the renewed opportunity for the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe to make an adequate survey of their compatriots abroad.

The aim of the present article is to give an overview of the Estonian diaspora. Using census materials from different countries, I will examine the origins, development and present condition of the diaspora, as well as looking to the near future.

The origins of the Estonian diaspora

Before the mid-19th century, few Estonians, only 3–4% of the total population at that time, lived outside the national homeland (Kulu 1992:17). Estonian settlements, which for the most part were created at the time of the Livonian and Great Northern Wars, were located in the direct vicinity of Estonian ethnic regions, in St. Petersburg, Pskov and Vitebsk Provinces and in Southern Livonia (see Kallas 1894, Kallas 1903, Niilus 1935, Kant 1948, Lorents 1971). Estonians were also sent into exile in Siberia (see Viikberg 1988).

Large-scale Estonian emigration began in the 1850s, when the first Estonian settlers departed for Samara Province and the Crimea in Russia (Pallo 1897, Meomuttel 1900, Nigol 1918). Over the next half-century, a number of Estonian settlements were created in Northwest, North and Central Russia, Siberia, the Russian Far East, the Caucasus, the Crimea, the Volga and elsewhere. In the mid-1910s, at the end of more than half-a century of emigration, approximately 200,000 Estonians lived in the Russian Empire, excluding Baltic and Finnish areas (Maamägi 1980:34–35, Raun 1986:354, Katus 1989:12, Kulu 1992:22, Võime 1992:312, Raag 1995:351)². As it is widely known, emigration was a widespread social phenomenon, caused firstly by rapid population growth brought about by demographic transition, and secondly by the gradual deterioration of agrarian society (cf. Zelinsky 1971, Chesnais 1992).

At the turn of the century, Estonians emigrated to other countries than Russia. Estonians, most of whom had resettled from Russia, founded early this century many settlements in South and North Dakota, Wisconsin and Montana States in the USA and Alberta Province in Canada (see Sandluk 1933, Laaman 1971a, Laaman 1971b, Laaman 1971c, Laaman 1975). The number of Estonians who emigrated overseas was, however, quite small. Thus by the end of the second decade of this

¹ For research on ethnic return migration, see Efrat 1991, Voutira 1991, Jones and Wild 1992, Sik 1992, Vasileva 1992, Klüter 1993, Bernstein and Shuval 1995, Kirişçi 1996, Kyntäjä 1997.

² In Latvia and Finland, which were part of the Russian Empire, there lived 10,000 Estonians (cf. Kulu 1992:70–71, 123). Nigol (1918) considers the number of Estonians in Latvia to have been 25,000 in the second part of the 1910s. However, 37,578 Estonians returned from the former territories of the Russian Empire to Estonia between the years 1920 and 1923 (*Valitsusasuiste... 1934:210*).

century, Estonians in North America totalled 10,000. A smaller number of Estonians also lived in Australia at that time (Kulu 1992:73–74).³

After the Great Emigration, Estonians again left homeland in larger numbers in the second half of the 1920s, when the political and economic situation of the young Republic of Estonia was unstable. At that time, Estonians departed for all parts of the world, especially North and South America and Australia, whereas a smaller number also emigrated to Europe. The origins of the present Estonian communities in Argentina and Brazil date back to this time (see Ise 1934). In total, about 15,000 Estonians emigrated from Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Kulu 1992:76–77). At the end of the 1930s, 175,000–180,000 Estonians lived outside Estonia, of whom 143,589 lived in the Soviet Union (Kulu 1992:77, 82).

The Estonians' second largest wave of emigration took place during the World War II. From 1939–1944 at least 70,000 Estonians fled to Germany and Sweden as political refugees (Parming 1972:54–56). At first the majority of these refugees stayed in German and Sweden refugee camps, but later most of the Estonians in Germany were settled in other western countries. Thus in the postwar period, the largest Estonian communities in addition to Germany and Sweden were to be found in the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom (Kulu 1992:80–121). Including those who had emigrated earlier, 85,000–90,000 Estonians were living in the West at the end of the World War II, and there were 105,000–110,000 Estonians in the Soviet Union⁴. Altogether, the size of the Estonian diaspora approached 200,000 by the end of the 1940s.

From the end of the WWII until the regaining of Estonian independence (1991), Estonian emigration from homeland was minimal, although in the postwar period, at least 52,000–54,000 Estonians from the Soviet Union arrived in Estonia (Kulu 1997:146)⁵. Over the last half-century, the number of Estonians living in the Soviet Union has decreased rapidly. Whereas in 1926 there were 154,666 Estonians living in the Soviet Union, by 1989 the number of Estonians living there was estimated to be 59,458 (Kulu 1992:52). This decrease began at the end of the 1920s and the 1930s, a time of deportations and repressions. In the 1940s, wartime conditions and the postwar return migration to Estonia were significant. In later years, another factor to decrease the number of Estonians in the Soviet Union was assimilation. The number of Estonians in the West, however, has until recently remained at the level reached by the end of the World War II.

³ It is interesting here to note that in the case of the majority of European nations, including Finns and Lithuanians, the main destination of the emigration were overseas countries, while Estonians and also Latvians left mainly for Russia (see Kero 1974, *From Sweden...*1976, Katus 1989, Katus 1990, Sakkeus 1992). The differences in the emigration destination between Estonians and Latvians on the one hand, Finns and Lithuanians on the other hand, have partly been explained by the differences in the timing of the demographic transition (see Katus 1989, Katus 1990, Katus 1994).

⁴ In addition, 5000 Estonians lived in Latvia (Kulu 1992:78).

⁵ This number includes the return migrants born after 1910 in the Soviet Union (Russia). With those born earlier, there may have been 55,000–60,000 return migrants from the Soviet Union.

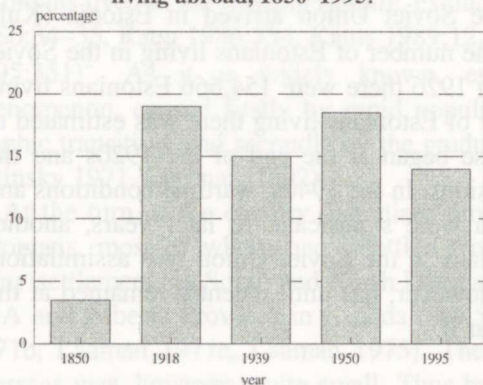
Since the restoring of Estonia's independence, the situation regarding emigration has changed once again. In the past few years, Estonians have left for many European countries, as well as for North America. As a result of this emigration, an Estonian community of up to 9000 has appeared in Finland, while a few thousand Estonians have settled in Germany and about a thousand have settled in Sweden. Estonians have moved to the United States, Canada, Israel and other countries. Thus 10,000–15,000 Estonians have left their homeland over the past ten years. Some of the Estonians who left Estonia during WWII and their descendants have returned to Estonia. Such returnees are few, however, and number in the hundreds. The number of Estonians who have returned from the territories of the former Soviet Union is somewhat greater, especially from Abkhazia, where about 500 people have returned (Estonian... 1996).

The present number and location of Estonians abroad

At the end of the 1980s, Estonians and their descendants who emigrated to the West numbered approximately 86,000, while on the territory covered by the last census of the Soviet Union (excluding Estonian territories) there were a little over 63,000 Estonians (Kulu 1992:133). In the past few years, 10,000 to 15,000 Estonians have left Estonia, which means that over 160,000 Estonians live outside

Figure 1

Changes in the proportion of Estonians living abroad, 1850–1995.



Estonia. If one considers the number of Estonians living in Estonia to be 950,000, then the total number of Estonians in the world today is 1,1 million. Therefore approximately 14% of Estonians live outside their homeland. At the end of the 1910s, 19%, and before the WWII 15% of Estonians lived abroad. At the end of the WWII 18–19% of Estonians lived abroad. Thus there are somewhat fewer Estonians abroad than earlier in this century, but still a considerably large number (Figure 1).

At the present time, the largest Estonian community abroad is to be found in Russia, where in 1989 over 46,000 Estonians lived (Table 1). There are also large Estonian communities, of about twenty thousand each, in the United States, Sweden and Canada. 3/4 of all Estonians abroad live in these four countries. There are also many Estonians in Finland, Australia, Germany, the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia, the United Kingdom and Georgia. There are communities of at least 100 Estonians in 24 countries.

Table 1

The number of Estonians by country of residence 1986–1995.

Country	Number
Russia	46390
United States of America	26760
Sweden	26438
Canada	20530
Finland	8710
Australia	6330
Germany	4469
Ukraine	4208
Kazakhstan	3397
Latvia	3312
United Kingdom	2730
Georgia	2316
Uzbekistan	854
Byelorussia	804
Lithuania	598
Kirghizia	430
Azerbaijan	324
Moldova	282
Turkmenistan	217
Tajikistan	147
New Zealand	130
Brazil	120
France	110
Belgium	100
Armenia	89
Argentina	70
Norway	70
Switzerland	60
Venezuela	50
South Africa	50
Denmark	50
Netherlands	40
Other	300
Total	160 000

Estonian identity in the diaspora

Aggregate statistics speak little of the changes in Estonian identity in the diaspora. In order to understand what has taken place over the last half-century, we must observe the differences between generations. Generations differ in socialisation: they hold different values, attitudes and behavioural norms. It is precisely at the transition between generations that significant changes in Estonian identity of the diaspora Estonians have taken place.

Looking at the distribution of Estonians in Canada by birth cohort and sex in 1986, it is evident that the Estonian community there has until today been able to

renew itself (Figure 2, 3). There are elderly, middle-aged and young people of Estonian origin in Canada. The older people are predominantly of single Estonian origin and speak Estonian, whereas the young are already of multiple origin and speak English. This situation may better be understood by analysing the origin and mother tongue and home language of Estonian Canadians by birth cohort. As we can see, it is possible to speak of four generations which each have a different Estonian identity (Figure 4)⁶.

Figure 2

The distribution of Estonian Canadians by origin and birth cohort, 1986.

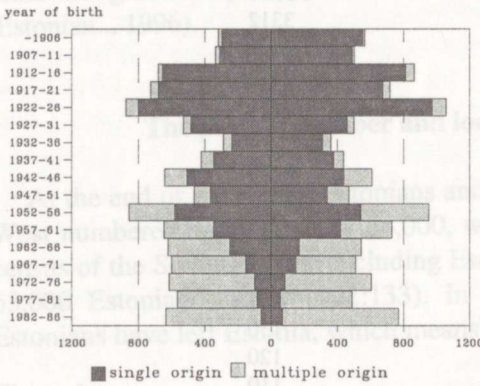
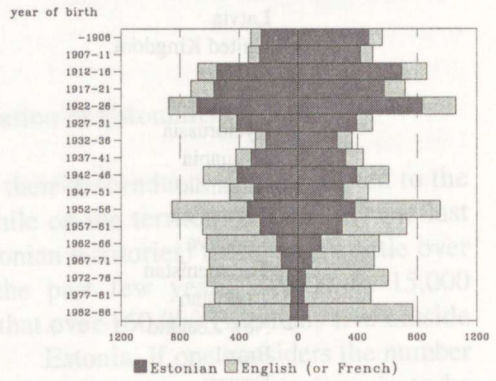


Figure 3

The distribution of Estonian Canadians by mother tongue and birth cohort, 1986.



The first generation consists of those Estonians born in the 1910s and 1920s, who had reached adulthood by the time when, during the war, they left Estonia. They are of single Estonian origin, their mother tongue is Estonian, and most of them also have an Estonian spouse. The second generation is made up of those Estonians born in the 1930s and 1940s who were children when they left Estonia or were born in refugee camps. Their parents are Estonians, but they themselves married non-Estonians in Canada. The third generation, those born in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s, already mostly come from mixed marriages, and there are less Estonian-speakers than English-speakers among them. Thus they are a transitional generation between Estonian Canadians and those Canadians whose Estonian origin is one among other origins. The last – those born in the 1970s and 1980s – can be considered to be the fourth generation of Estonians in Canada.

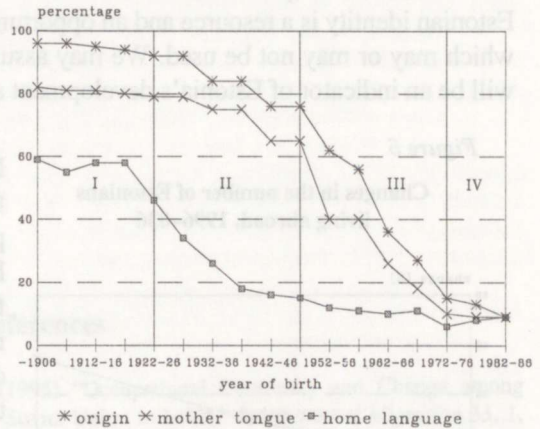
Thus Estonian identity of Estonians in Canada has changed. After the war, a 25-year-old Estonian was of single origin, spoke Estonian and was married to an Estonian, in other words was an Estonian Canadian. Today she would be of multiple origin, her mother tongue would be English and she would be in a mixed marriage,

⁶ It is not my aim to examine the nature of “Estonian identity” in this article. I rather proceed from the idea that the changes in the origin and the language-use refer to the changes in the identity.

thus a Canadian whose Estonian origin is one among others. There is nothing surprising about this. On the contrary, the changes in Estonian identity of Estonians in Canada have followed the pattern of what typically happens to a small ethnic group in a new country over the period of a few generations. The situation is similar with regard to Estonians in other western countries and also the descendants of those who emigrated to Russia. Considering the future, we must take the changed Estonian identity in the diaspora as our starting point. So – what happens now? Will the Estonian diaspora disappear or survive?

Figure 4

The percentage of those with single Estonian origin, Estonian as mother tongue and Estonian as home language among Estonian Canadians by birth cohort, 1986.



The future of the Estonian diaspora⁷

The future of the existing Estonian diaspora depends more than ever before on Estonia and its development. As demonstrated by the above overview, those Estonians who left Estonia during the WWII (or were born in Estonian villages in the Soviet Union) still dominate among Estonians abroad. It is clear that the traditions and language which they brought with them from homeland are still a part of their everyday lives – these people will be connected with Estonian identity and Estonia for their whole lives. The generations of Estonians who have emerged in the past couple of decades are, however, of multiple origin. Their connection to Estonian identity and Estonia is different and depends on other factors.

As of the 1980s, censuses in Canada, the United States and Australia include a question on ethnic origin (in Russia this has existed since the year 1920). While a large number of people consider themselves to be Canadians, Americans or Australians by citizenship, a majority identify themselves with one or two ethnic groups. It is significant to note that whereas origin earlier emanated automatically from the father, now a person's own choice is more important. Thus there is a growing number of situations in which, in an increasingly mixed society, one must choose from one's three or four origins the two "official" ones. The choice depends much upon which origin is more interesting, exciting or valued. Choosing one or

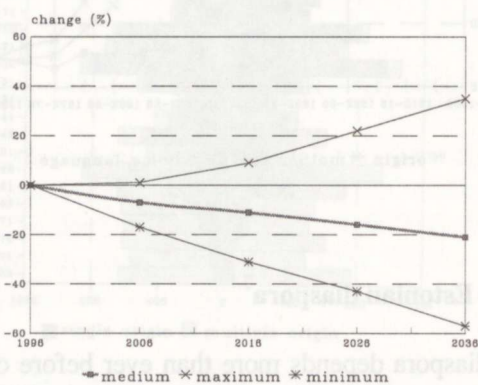
⁷ Here I wish to focus on the "internal" growth potential of the Estonian diaspora, I will ignore the possibility of receiving new members from Estonia.

another origin, a person ties himself (some loosely, some closely) with that ethnic group, transmitting that choice as a resource to future generations.

Thus the question of how many Estonians born of mixed marriages (whose parents were also the product of mixed marriages) choose Estonian as their origin, will depend on Estonia's development and how Estonia is seen and valued in the world. Therefore Estonian identity is a resource and an opportunity for people of Estonian origin abroad, which may or may not be used. We may assume that the number of Estonians abroad will be an indicator of Estonia's development and image.

Figure 5

Changes in the number of Estonians living abroad, 1996–036



60% over a few decades. This would be the minimum figure. If, however, we consider the possibility that half of those born of mixed marriages choose Estonian as their origin, then the number of the diaspora Estonians would decrease by 20%. Therefore it is clear that the Estonian diaspora, although modified, may remain in existence for quite a long time. Whether the number of people connected with it will be 50,000, 100,000 or 150,000, will depend on Estonia and its development, among other things.

In conclusion, we may say that Estonian identity in the diaspora has changed, and will change even more in the future. Estonians abroad will gradually disappear and they will be replaced by Canadians, Americans, Australians, Russians, etc., for whom Estonian origin is one of a number of origins. The altered nature of the Estonian communities abroad is a reality with which we will have to come to terms. While mixed marriages have so far played a major role in the changing of Estonian identity in the diaspora, we may consider them to be a mechanism through which the number of people connected with Estonia and Estonian identity in the world may grow. And what more could we wish for Estonia than that there were many people

It is clear that the present size of the Estonian community abroad will set the frames for the changes which will take place in the near future. There are, however, many possibilities. Firstly, if, for example, all children born of mixed marriages in the near future were to choose Estonian as one of their origins, then the number of the diaspora Estonians would increase by 35% over the next four decades (Figure 5). This would be the maximum figure. The other extreme would be if not even one child born from a mixed marriage were to identify himself with the Estonian ethnic group. In this case the number of Estonians abroad would decrease by

and countries in the world which are friendly towards Estonia. In that respect, the diaspora will continue in future to be an important resource for Estonia⁸.

Address:

Hill Kulu
The Center for Estonian Diaspora Studies
Institute of Geography
University of Tartu
Vanemuise 46
EE2400 Tartu
Estonia

Phone: + 372 7 465 817

E-mail: hill@math.ut.ee

References

- Bernstein, Judith H. and Shuval, Judith T. (1995) "Occupational Continuity and Change among Immigrant Physicians from the Former Soviet Union in Israel". *International Migration* 33, 1, 3–29.
- Chesnais, Jean-Claude (1992) *The Demographic Transition. Stages, Patterns, and Economic Implications*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Efrat, Elisha (1991) "Geographical Distribution of the Soviet-Jewish New Immigrants in Israel". *GeoJournal* 24, 4, 355–363.
- Estonian Citizenship and Migration Board (1996) Data file on return migrants in Estonia. Tallinn.
- From Sweden to America. A History of the Migration* (1976) H. Runblom and H. Norman, eds. Uppsala: University of Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Ise, R. (1934) "Eestlaste elu Lõuna-Ameerikas". *Välis-Eesti Almanak* 5, 4–9.
- Jones, P. N. and Wild, M. T. (1992) "Western Germany's 'Third Wave' of Migrants: the Arrival of the *Aussiedler*". *Geoforum* 23, 1, 1–11.
- Kallas, Oskar (1894) *Lutsi Maarahvas*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- Kallas, Oskar (1903) *Kraasna Maarahvas*. Helsingi: Soome Kirjanduse Selts.
- Kant, Edgar (1948) "Omstridd mark". *Svio-Estonica. Årsbok utgiven av Svensk-Estrniska samfundet 1944–48* 8, 5–71.
- Katus, Kalev (1989) "Eesti demograafiline areng läbi sajandite". *Eesti Kõrgkoolidevaheline Demouuringute Keskus, rahvastiku-uuringud* B 9.
- Katus, Kalev (1990) "Demographic Trends in Estonia Throughout Centuries". *Yearbook of Population Research in Finland* 28, 50–66.
- Katus, Kalev (1994) "Fertility Transition in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania". In *Demographic Trends and Patterns in the Soviet Union Before 1991*. W. Lutz, S. Scherbov, A. Volkov, eds. London: Routledge, 89–111.
- Kero, R. (1974) "Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War". *Turun yliopiston julkaisu* B 130.
- Kirişçi, K. (1996) "Refugees of Turkish Origin: 'Coerced Immigration' to Turkey since 1945". *International Migration* 34, 3, 385–412.

⁸ Keeping in mind an international reader, it is worth mentioning that the part played by the diaspora Estonians in the revelation of the true conditions of occupied Estonia (1940–1991) was significant. By doing so, the diaspora Estonians helped in the regaining of Estonian independence.

- Klüter, Helmut (1993) "People of German Descent in CIS States – Areas of Settlement, Territorial Autonomy and Emigration". *GeoJournal* 31, 4, 419–434.
- Koivukangas, Olavi (1974) "Scandinavian Immigration and Settlement in Australia before World War II". *Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, Migration Studies* C 2.
- Kulu, Hill (1992) *Eestlased maailmas. Ülevaade arvukusest ja paiknemisest*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, majandusgeograafia kateeder.
- Kulu, Hill (1997) "Eestlaste tagasiränne 1940–1989. Lääne-Siberist pärit eestlaste näitel. Summary: Estonian Return Migration 1940–1989. A Case of West-Siberian Estonians". *Publicationes Instituti Geographici Universitatis Helsinkiensis* C 9.
- Kyntäjä, Eve (1997) "Inkerinsuomalaisten muutto Suomeen – paluumuutto vai maastamuutto? Inkerin Liiton ja Inkerin Kirkon näkökulmia Pietarissa". In *Inkerinsuomalaiset kunnassa*. M. Pitkänen and A. Jaakkola, eds. Helsinki: Suomen Kuntaliitto, 129–141.
- Laaman, O. (1971a) "Eesti asundused Kanadas". *Meie Tee* 7–8, 108–112.
- Laaman, O. (1971b) "Eesti asundused Kanadas". *Meie Tee* 9–10, 153–157.
- Laaman, O. (1971c) "Eesti asundused Kanadas". *Meie Tee* 11–12, 173–177.
- Laaman, O. (1975) "Eestlased Kanadas enne Esimest maailmasõda". In *Eestlased Kanadas. Ajalooline koguteos*. A. Kurlents, ed. Toronto: Kanada Eestlaste Ajaloo Komisjon, 19–62.
- Lorents, Vaike (1971) *Eestlased Läti NSV Aluksne rajoonis. Diplomitöö*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, füüsilise geograafia kateeder.
- Maamägi, Viktor (1980) *Uut elu ehitamas. Eesti vähemusrahvus NSV Liidus (1917–1940)*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Meomuttel, Jüri (1900) *Eesti asunikud laialises Wene riigis. Esimene katse sõnumid kõikide Eesti asunduste üle tuua*. Jurjev: Postimees.
- Nigol, August (1918) *Eesti asundused ja asupaigad Wenemaal*. Tartu: Postimees.
- Niilus, V. (1935) "Leivu rahvas". *Eesti Kirjandus*, 365–381.
- Pallo, Kristjan (1897) *Esimesed Eesti väljarändajad ehk 40 aastat Saamaras*. Jurjev: Grenzstein.
- Parming, Tõnu (1972) "Population changes in Estonia, 1935–1970". *Population Studies* 26, 1, 53–78.
- Raag, Raimo (1995) "Virolaiset Viron ulkopuolella". In *Viro. Historia, kansa, kulttuuri*. S. Zetterberg, ed. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 339–376.
- Raun, Toivo U. (1986) "Estonian emigration within the Russian Empire 1860–1917". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 17, 4, 350–363.
- Sakkeus, Luule (1992) "Post-War Migration Trends in the Baltic States". *Eesti Kõrgkoolidevaheline Demouuringute Keskus, rahvastiku-uuringud* B 20.
- Sandluk, A. (1933) "Eestlased Põhja-Ameerikas. Arv. Asukohad. Seltsid. Asundused. Talud". *Meie Tee* 5, 6–13.
- Sik, Endre (1992) "Transylvanian Refugees in Hungary and the Emergence of Policy Networks to Cope with Crisis". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 5, 1, 16–28.
- The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives* (1975) M. G. Karni, M. E. Kaups and D. J. Ollila, eds. Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti.
- Thomas, W.I. and Znaniecki, F. (1927) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. New York: Knopf.
- Valitsusasutiste tegevus 1918–1934* (1934) Tallinn: Riigikantselei.
- Vasileva, D. (1992) "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return". *International Migration Review* 26, 2, 342–352.
- Viikberg, Jüri (1988) "Vanematest eesti asundustest Siberis". *Keel ja Kirjandus* 5, 284–288.
- Voutira, Effie (1991) "Pontic Greeks Today: Migrants or Refugees?" *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, 4, 400–420.
- Võime, Lembit (1992) "Väljarändamine ja väliseestlased". In *Eesti ajalugu ärkamisajast kuni tänapäevani*. S. Õispuu, ed. Tallinn: Koolibri, 307–317.
- Zelinsky, Wilbur (1971) "The hypothesis of the mobility transition". *The Geographical Review* 61, 2, 219–249.