

VITAL EVENTS IN ESTONIA THROUGH NINE DECADES^a

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This article gives an overview of how the population size and the numbers of births and deaths, marriages and divorces have changed since the beginning of the Republic of Estonia. It also studies how the age-sex structure of the population has changed, what the mother's average age at first childbirth has been, and how the proportion of marriages to divorces has changed in the last 94 years.

Population

In 1923 (in this article, population figures are presented as at 1 January of the given year) the population of Estonia was 1,107,130. The population remained stable in the years 1923 to 1940: there were some fluctuations, but these were not big. A comparison of the population in 1923 and 2012 shows that the population has increased by more than 210,000 persons. However, it must be remembered that the populations of these two years refer to different territories. As a consequence of World War II, Estonia lost a big part of its territory (Petseri county and areas east of the Narva River) and thereby also lost about 60,000 people living there.

After World War II, the population of Estonia decreased about 10%, but from the 1950s until the year 1990 the population increased by about 548,000 persons, reaching the number of 1,570,599. The main cause of the population increase was immigration. The population figure in 1990 was the highest in the whole period considered. In the fifties and sixties, the population also increased due to the return of people deported or sent to Stalinist labour camps: in the period 1954–1960, about 28,000 such people came back to Estonia (Ainsaar 1997). In the mid-1950s, the economic situation in Estonia was better than the average of the Soviet Union, which also stimulated immigration. In the following decades, industry developed and there was a need for labour force – the outcome was increased immigration and a rise in the share of workers in the working-age population (Ainsaar 1997). After the year 1990, there is a clear decrease in population which is related to the sudden decrease in fertility and to emigration (Figure 1, p. 109).

In 1991, the decrease in fertility was mostly due to the decrease in the number of second-born children. There were plenty of reasons for that. Due to changes in the economic system, the standard of living was low; unemployment increased; the costs of raising a child rose; the benefits for parents gradually disappeared. It was possible to lower costs by not having (more) children. As a result, the average age of mother at first childbirth also began to increase (Ainsaar 1997).

There have also been changes in the age-sex structure of the population. According to 1923 data, there were fewer men than women in the population, with their shares being 47% and 53% respectively. Based on 2012 data, the share of women has increased by 1%. The age distribution of the population indicates that there has been an increase in the elderly population. In 2012, the share of women in the elderly population was greater than the share of men. In 1923, there were much smaller differences in the sex distribution among the elderly (Figure 2, p. 110)

Births and deaths

Nowadays, the number of births has decreased considerably compared to the past. In 1919 there were about 4,000 live births more than in 2011 (Figure 3, p. 111). A decrease in births is evident during the wars. Between the two World Wars, there was a global economic crisis which began in the United States. The impact of the crisis on fertility can only be noticed starting 1933. Fertility

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was the lowest among entrepreneurs and capitalists, the highest among farmers (Ainsaar 1997). There were nearly 15,000 births in 1945, which is comparable to the level of 2011. In the last year of World War II, there were even 289 births more than in 2011. After 1945, the number of births gradually rose, but in most of the European countries the growth in the number of births was higher than in Estonia. The number of live births was the highest in 1987–1988, during the Singing Revolution, when about 25,000 children were born in a year. In the second half of the nineties, fertility decreased. In 1998, the number of births was the smallest of the whole period (i.e. of the more than 90 previous years) at only 12,167 (Figure 3, p. 111). In the period 1919–2011, crude birth rate, that is, births per 1,000 inhabitants, was the highest after the Estonian War of Independence: in 1921–1923, it was 20 per mil. In terms of sex, there have always been more boys born than girls.

The number of births is also influenced by the number of abortions. There are no reliable abortion records for the earlier decades. Abortions were legalised in Estonia already in 1955, but remained a taboo in the society. Even after legalisation, the records were kept in multiple sources and there was no clear overview. Accurate data about abortions are available since 1970 (Tiit 2000). When contraceptives became more easily available, the number of abortions decreased. Thus, the number of abortions decreased about five times in the years 1970 to 2011.

In the period under observation, the biggest number of twins was born in 1946. In the first half of the 20th century there were more twins born than in the second half of the century – 226–340 pairs a year. There have never been more than ten births of triplets per year; usually two or three families per year have triplets.

Based on the mother's age group, we can see that until 1940 there were no children born to women aged under 16. The number of young women giving birth has been the highest in the last 22 years. Ainsaar and Kiivet (2004) have pointed out that women's age at childbirth was the lowest in 1990–1993, when the mean age of mother at first childbirth was under 22.8 years. We can clearly see that in the older age group (45 and above) the number of women giving birth has continuously decreased: in 1925 there were about 14 times more of them than in 2011. Awareness of the risks related to giving birth in older age has increased among women. In the last ten years, the age-specific fertility rate (annual number of live births per 1,000 women of specific age) has been the highest in the age group 25–29 and the lowest in the age group 40–49. Education is considered increasingly important and causes women to postpone their first childbirth. Kasearu (2009) has claimed that the importance of childbearing as self-realisation has decreased over the years, whereas childbirth is usually considered more important for women than for men. In 2009, children, as an important form of self-realisation for women, were rated 36.5% less important than in 1990. It is unfortunate that more and more women in the best childbearing years are not considering childbearing as an important form of self-realisation.

Mortality in Estonia was the highest in 1919 (as a result of the War of Independence) when there were 28,800 deaths. Mortality remained high after the war as well, mostly due to different infectious diseases, especially tuberculosis which took many lives. In addition to tuberculosis, other infectious diseases, like measles and scarlet fever, spread as well, further increasing the mortality rate. World War I was followed by difficult economic conditions and the Great Depression, which had a strong impact on mortality in Estonia (Tiit 2011). This is very clear in 1929 when the number of deaths increased 13%. At that time, people's health was still greatly affected by living conditions and mortality was high in cold winters. The number of deaths after World War II was smaller than after World War I. It is likely that many people who would have been old in the late 1940s had already died in the World Wars. In 1947 there were about 7,000 deaths less in Estonia than in 1919. Mortality was the lowest in the 1950s and 1960s, as the population was still quite young as an aftermath of the war and immigration (Tiit 2011). In general, mortality has decreased over the decades. This is because of the improvement in living conditions, changes in hygiene habits and, most of all, the development of medicine. In 2011 the number of deaths was about 15,000.

Since 1951, mortality was higher among women than men, but from the beginning of the nineties the situation has been reversed and mortality among men has been higher than among women.

In the last three years, the mortality of men and women has been relatively equal, but there are slightly fewer men dying than women (Figure 4, p. 112).

Infant mortality, which refers to deaths of live-born infants up to one year old, has generally decreased over time. In the 1920s, the infant mortality in Estonia was almost 100‰, meaning that there were 100 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. After that, infant mortality started to decline. After World War II, there was a temporary rise in infant mortality, but it has steadily decreased since 1948. There are several causes for the death of infants. When medicine was not as developed as now, the main reasons were various birth defects and weak constitution. It could be that the high infant mortality rate was related to the fact that the society disapproved of children born outside of marriage. Namely, infant mortality was nearly twice as high for children born outside of marriage. The probability of death was also affected by birth order. Infant deaths were less likely in case of firstborn children (Ainsaar 2007). During the more than 90 years under consideration, the number of infant deaths has decreased considerably. For example, in 1924 there were 2,142 infant deaths, compared to just 36 in 2011. Since 1992, very small fetuses weighing at least 500 grams are also considered as live-born, and therefore there was an increase in infant deaths. Nevertheless, the overall decrease in infant mortality in 1970–2009 was considerable (Tiit 2011). Medicine and public health care are very highly developed; this is proved by decreased infant mortality. There are no significant differences in infant mortality by sex. Generally, mortality is higher among boys, but there are also more boys born than girls (Figure 5, p. 112).

Marriages and divorces

The popularity of marriage has changed over the years. It has been affected by several factors. In the post-war years, there was a slight increase in marriages (Figure 6, p. 113). There were quite many marriages in the period 1947–1991, with about 12,000 marriages per year on average. After that, the number of marriages has generally decreased. Changes in the society also mean changes in people's values. Nowadays, cohabitation is an increasingly popular alternative to marriage, since it has several advantages over marriage. Cohabitation gives people more freedom and means fewer obligations than an officially registered marriage, especially in times when relationships do not last long. A comparison of the year 1919 with today shows that we have come back to the same level: there are 4.1 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants per year (crude marriage rate) which is almost as much as in 1919 (Figure 6, p. 113).

Since 1970, there has been a slight decrease in the mean age at the contraction of first marriage, but from 1993 onwards the mean age at first marriage has been increasing (Figure 7, p. 113). In the last twenty years, the mean age at first marriage has risen to 28 for women and to 31 for men. In the whole period, men have been two to three years older than women at the contraction of first marriage. The mean age at marriage has been stable throughout the period. At the end of the 1920s, the average age at marriage was 30.8 for men and 27 for women (Ainsaar 1997). The youngest average age at marriage was recorded in 1992 after the restoration of independence – 25 years for men and 22 years for women. Education and career have become more and more important, which means that people postpone marriage and having children. Before starting a family, couples want to obtain economic stability.

Divorce has become quite a common phenomenon nowadays. Compared to other European countries, divorce rate has always been high in Estonia. Estonian people are also not very religious, so they do not see any moral obstacles to divorce. In 1900–1934, the share of divorces compared to marriages started to increase. At that time, one of the main reasons for divorce was childlessness. It has been determined that 51% of divorced couples in that period did not have children. Couples with many children hardly ever got divorced (Ainsaar 1997). It has also been found that in 1994 41% of divorced couples did not have common children. The number of divorces was the biggest in 1995. This might be connected with an amendment to the law, resulting in the registration of earlier divorces as well (Tiit 2011). Until 1995, the crude marriage rate (the number of marriages per 1,000 inhabitants per year) was falling, while the crude divorce rate (the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants per year) increased. After 1995, there has

been a decrease both in the number of marriages and in the number of divorces. For example, in 2011, the crude divorce rate was almost twice as small as the crude marriage rate. It is important not to misinterpret this as an increase in marriage stability, because at the same time the number of marriages has decreased as well.

Over time, divorces have been most common among couples whose marriage has lasted 5–9 years, but in last seven years divorce has been the most common among couples whose marriage has lasted at least 20 years. In the first four years of marriage there are noticeably fewer divorces (Figure 8, p. 114).

Conclusion

Through nine decades there have been big changes in the vital events in Estonia. The size of the population, which increased in the Soviet era mainly due to immigration, has decreased since 1990. The number of births has also decreased over the decades. Development of medicine and improvement in living conditions have helped to reduce mortality, especially infant mortality. As a result, the share of the elderly in the population has increased.

Education and career are valued more and more highly, meaning that young people start a family at an older age than in the past. Nowadays, it is possible to use birth control and therefore the mean age of mother at first childbirth is higher than it was at the beginning of the 20th century.

In brief, we have reached a stage where fertility and mortality are quite low, families are planned by choice, marriages are often unstable and cohabitation therefore very common – this is characteristic of the low stationary stage of the demographic transition model.