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The Influence of the Soviet Era on the Use of Estonian First Names

Abstract

The use of first names by Estonians is characterised by large variation and rapid turnover. There are many artificially created names and new names are easily borrowed from other countries.

There were no restrictions on the choice of names after the war except for the number of names. There could be a maximum of two first names, and these had to be connected with a hyphen. Parents were often urged not to give two first names to their children, and in certain periods giving two first names was prohibited (directly after World War II and in the middle of the 1980s).

The choices of names by parents were also affected by other factors besides restrictions by law. In the years 1945–1990, there were two periods where Estonian names dominated. In the 1950s, Estonian names that were very popular in the 1930s became fashionable again. The local variants of international names and borrowed names became particularly popular in the 1980s, and this was seen as a reaction to the pressures of Russification. While Estonians borrowed names very easily and from many languages, they did not choose Russian names for their children.

Keywords

anthroponomastics, first names, Estonian name usage, Soviet era

1. Introduction

This article will look at three aspects related to the Soviet era in Estonia after World War II (1944–1991). This was a period when the use of first names was subject to somewhat different written and unwritten rules. No one explicitly told Estonians how they were or were not allowed to name their children. Rather, the main influence was the repressed atmosphere Estonians had to live in and their patterns of behaviour in this situation.

I will describe three aspects of the use of names by Estonians at that time, which emerge when analysing first names. The material was collected in the 1990s. It comes from children's birth certificates at the Vital Statistics Office, and these contain the parents' nationality (as given by the parents themselves).

Before the Second World War, the vast majority of the population in Estonia was Estonian-speaking and defined themselves as Estonians (89%) (Ainsaar, 1997, p. 57), but after the war many people came from other parts of the Soviet Union due to work (e.g., industrial and railway workers) and military service. Most of them settled in the capital Tallinn and other large cities, as well as in the industrial areas of north-eastern Estonia. In 1989, the share of Estonians in Estonia was 61.5% of the total population and the share of Russians was 30.3% (Ainsaar, 1997, p. 58).

The attitude of Estonians to use first names was described already in the 1960s as very free and open: names were very easily borrowed from various countries, near and far, names and name fashions changed quickly, people created their own names, and the proportion of rare names was high. This has characterised the use of Estonians' first names for the last 100 years (Rajandi, 1964, p. 271; Hussar, 2021, p. 288).

The three aspects that will be discussed in the article are:

- The use of multiple names during this time.
- The avoidance of Russian names.
- The popularity of national names.

2. The use of multiple names after World War II

The use of multiple names is the only one of the three aspects where the use was regulated by legislation or (oral) instructions provided by officials.

The giving of two or more first names began to spread among Estonians in the second half of the 19th century. This was a new fashion trend: 1) in 1900, in some areas almost all children had two names, although this tendency was non-existent in some remote areas; 2) two names were given more often in cities; 3) the giving of two names spread faster among girls (Hussar, 2015, pp. 64–65). The giving of two names did not become a widespread practice or tradition.

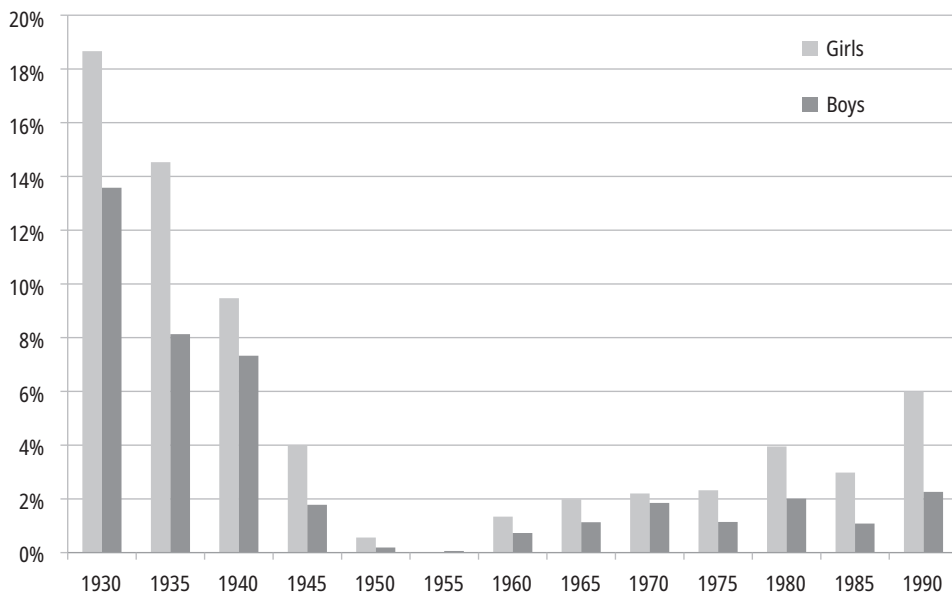


Figure 1. The share of multiple names of Estonians in the years 1930–1990

Source: Hussar, 1998, p. 109.

As can be seen in Figure 1, in the 1930s almost one fifth of girls and over 10% of boys were given two names, but the share of multiple names actually began decreasing before the war. After the war, the use of multiple names

disappeared almost completely, and it is clear that such a sudden disappearance was not a natural change.

Considering legislation, before the war the number of names was regulated to the extent that a child could be given as many names as could be written in the respective box on the birth certificate (Teder, 1939, p. 239). Children were usually not given more than two names. After the war, Soviet legislation did not even mention the number of first names (Mõistlik, 2005, pp. 184–191).

The father's name, as is characteristic of the Russian tradition, appeared in the documents of Estonians under Soviet rule. This may be the key: since there are no multiple names in the Russian tradition and the patronymic is used, this pattern also became official among the other nations in the Soviet Union. Multiple names do not fit well into this pattern, because it is quite a challenge to form the patronymic from a multiple name (e.g., *Paul* > *Paulovich*, *Sten-Erik* > ?).

In practice, this meant that multiple names were seen as not recommended by the state and its officials. In the birth records, the following note can often be found: "Based on the firm request of the parents, the child will be named (e.g.) *Mari-Liis"¹ (Hussar, 1998, p. 107). This demonstrates that the parents had been pressured not to give two first names to their child. It is not known how many parents gave in to the pressure. However, as seen in the birth records, some officials were more insistent and rarely were any children registered with a multiple name at their registry offices, while in some other regions multiple names were more common.

In 1945, the use of multiple names in Tallinn was very strictly monitored compared to other regions. One girl (**Anne-Lydia*) was given a multiple name, and supposedly permission had been sought from Moscow (the birth record states: "The registration of the birth was delayed since in order to give the child two names permission was obtained from the Moscow Department of Family Affairs"). It is not known whether such permission was actually requested or whether this was a postponing tactic to persuade the parents. One might ask who the parents were who so stubbornly stuck with the desired name: the girl's father was a pastor, and it was clear that her family had nothing to lose in the new political situation.

¹ Female names are marked with asterisks in this article.

All multiple names had to be written with a hyphen during the whole period (e.g., **Pille-Riin, Karl-Martin*); names written separately (e.g., **Pille Riin, Karl Martin*) were not allowed during the Soviet times. The giving of two names was exceptional, and more than two names could definitely not be given.

Over time, the pressure eased, and, to a limited extent, the giving of multiple names continued. Compared to the pre-war period, however, their share was very small (see Figure 1).

The next concrete attempt to ban the use of two names was made in the mid-1980s. The aim was probably to regulate once more the use of names. It can also be seen that giving two names became more popular again. At the same time, Russification intensified. In March 1984, the USSR Minister of Justice signed the “Instructional Guide to Birth Registration Issues” (Mihkels, 1987). This was supplemented by rules for the registration of civil status records prepared in Estonia (Mõistlik, 2005, pp. 192–195), which allowed children to be given only one name, though it could consist of two parts, such as **Mariann* or **Mailiis* (as compared to **Mari-Ann* or **Mai-Liis*, which were no longer allowed). The rules were implemented in the middle of 1985: that year, for the first time, a multiple name reached the top frequency list in Estonia: the name **Mari-Liis*. In the first months of the year, it was given to children in the form **Mari-Liis*, but from June, the form **Mariliis* was used (Hussar, 1998, p. 108). Other two-part names were **Annliis* (**Ann + *Liis*), **Katrelis* (**Katre + *Liis*), **Lauraliisa* (**Laura + *Liisa*), **Minnamari* (**Minna + *Mari*), **Marialuisa* (**Maria + *Luisa*), **Tiinamari* (**Tiina + *Mari*); *Stenerik* (*Sten + Erik*), *Pärtelpeeter* (*Pärtel + Peeter*), *Matskaarel* (*Mats + Kaarel*), *Hendrikjüri* (*Hendrik + Jüri*) and *Ollemikkel* (*Olle + Mikkel*).

This regulation was in force for a very short time. In 1987, public protests began; for example, articles appeared in newspapers (see Mihkels, 1987; “Nimi lapsele”, 1987; Riive, 1987) in which reference was made to the national tradition of giving children two names and spelling names in various ways. As a result, the restriction was removed. In addition to names written as one, names written with a hyphen were allowed again.

This was followed by corrections in birth records, where parents had names registered in the form they wished. There were instances where a hyphen was added (e.g. **Maybritt > *May-Britt*, **Annaliisa > *Anna-Liisa*, **Greteliis > *Grete-Liis*, **Helemai > *Hele-Mai*, **Mariliis > *Mari-Liis*, and *Stenerik > Sten-Erik*), and also cases where another name was added (e.g. **Daisy > *Daisy-Lola*, **Grete > *Grete-Lotte*, **Helena > *Helena-Victoria*, **Kadri > *Kadri-Ann*, **Piret >*

**Piret-Brigitta, Marek > Marek-Meelis, Sten > Sten-Aleks and Toomas > Toomas-Julius*), usually reflecting the original intention of the parents.

3. The avoidance of Russian names

Another example of the influence of the Soviet era on the first names of Estonians is the avoidance of Russian names when naming children.

Estonians use many different names, and names are very easily borrowed from near and far. The introduction of new and foreign names is common for Estonians, and Estonians are used to new and peculiar² names (Hussar, 2021, p. 281).

Some newly borrowed names became very popular. For example, in the 1960s, *Aivar*, taken from Latvian, was very popular. **Kaisa*, **Kertu* and *Toivo*, Finnish names, became fashionable too. **Egle* came from Lithuania and **Margit* from Hungary. Swedish names have always been in vogue: **Ingrid*, **Karin*, **Birgit* and *Sven*. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, most newly borrowed names came through German culture: **Katrin*, for example. Other examples of the most popular new loans of this period include the following: **Evelin*, **Helen*, **Jane*, **Kristel*, **Laura*, **Marika*, **Monika*, **Signe*, *Janek*, *Marek*, *Marko*, *Oliver*, *Ragnar*, *Rainer* and *Raul*.

What was not found among the analysed first names of Estonians were names used by Russians. Although there were contacts with Russian names during this period, either direct contacts or through the media (e.g., newspapers and television), and Russian names existed in the name book published in Estonia in 1966, these names were not chosen for Estonian children.

² By “peculiar” I mean here that many Estonian names come from other countries; that there are many instances of literally playing with names, as well as variants of “real” names (*Ragnar > Ragner, Regnar, Regner, Rigner*, etc.); that there may be, finally, many different spellings of a name (e.g. *Kristofer, Christofer, Christopher, Cristofer, Kristopher, Cristopher*, and similarly, there are about 40 variants for *Kathleen ~ Kätlin*).

Table 1. The ten most popular names in Tallinn in 1950

Rank	Russian girls	Estonian girls ³	Russian boys	Estonian boys
1	Ljudmilla	Sirje	Vladimir	Rein
2	Valentina	Anne	Nikolai	Jüri
3	Galina	Mare	Anatoli	Peeter
4	Tatjana	Ene	Aleksandr	Tõnu
5	Niina	Tiiu	Valeri	Toomas
6	Nadežda	Reet	Viktor	Lembit
7	Ljubov	Maie	Juri	Tiit
8	Natalja	Malle	Sergei	Kalev
9	Svetlana	Helle	Gennadi	Jaan
10	Tamara	Ülle	Jevgeni	Mati

Source: Hussar, 1998; Balashova, 2003.

Table 1 shows the 10 most popular Russian and Estonian female and male names in 1950; it is clear that the traditions of Estonian and Russian first names were completely different.

In Table 2, for a comparison of names given to children born in Estonian and Russian families, names given to children in Tallinn in 1990 are shown.

Table 2. The ten most popular names in Tallinn in 1990

Rank	Russian girls	Estonian girls	Russian boys	Estonian boys
1	Anna	Liis	Aleksandr	Martin
2	Jekaterina	Triin	Dmitri	Kristjan
3	Anastassia	Kätlin	Sergei	Madis
4	Julia	Kadri	Aleksei	Taavi
5	Maria	Maria	Andrei	Kaarel

³ The children's ethnicity was determined on the basis of information in vital records, which in turn was given by the children's parents. The names of mixed-marriage babies were not included.

Rank	Russian girls	Estonian girls	Russian boys	Estonian boys
6	Kristina	Kristiina	Maksim	Kaspar
7	Olga	Kristel	Jevgeni	Karl
8	Natalja	Kristi	Anton	Kristo
9	Tatjana	Laura	Roman	Marko
10	Viktoria	Maarja	Pavel	Siim

Source: Hussar, 2001, pp. 394–395.

The only names that overlap in these tables are the international **Maria* and **Kristiina*, with a slightly different pronunciation. In other words, the use of names has not converged in one way or another during these 40 years; only some convergence regarding the use of commonly used names has occurred.

Since the Second World War, Estonians have not adopted any typically Russian names. There are commonly used names that are ethnically neutral, and international, such as **Anna*, **Maria*, **Julia*, **Viktoria*, **Diana*, *Anton*, *Edgar*, *Erik* and *Mark*. The names **Anna*, **Maria* and **Julia* were very popular among Estonians at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and came back into fashion 100 years later. However, even these names were perceived as Russian 30–40 years ago. Recently, an older lady told me how she was asked 30 years ago why her grandchild had the Russian name **Anna*.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian names were not as strongly avoided. For example, in 1900, in Estonian Lutheran congregations, **Olga* was among the most popular female names (Hussar, 2015, pp. 58–59), and it spread along with other new loans (see Roos, 1962, p. 412). At that time, new loans reached Estonians mostly through German culture, but the influence of other languages and cultures also grew. (The Orthodox congregations naturally behaved according to the Orthodox tradition and the children of Estonian families received names suitable to their religion⁴). The name **Olga*, for example, was felt to be prestigious, through making a connection to the family of the Czar.

⁴ In 1897, 84.2% of the population belonged to the Lutheran congregation and 14.3% to the Orthodox congregation. In the same year, the share of Estonians was 90.6%, the share of Russians was 4%.

It is worth mentioning that in the 1960s and 1970s, in some countries around the world, Russian names or their diminutive versions were in fashion, e.g., *Anja, *Katja and *Tanja in Germany (Schlimpert & Schultheis, 1988, pp. 45–55); *Tarja, *Katja, *Tanja and *Niina in Finland (Kiviniemi, 1982, pp. 206–207); *Tanya and *Tonya in the US (Dunkling, 1977, p. 121), *Tania, *Tamara and *Natasha in Canada (Dunkling, 1977, p. 162) and *Tania in Australia (Dunkling, 1977, p. 213). As mentioned above, Estonians borrow names easily, but these Russian names did not come to Estonia even via other countries or based on their example. What plays a role here is the conflict such diminutive forms would have created with the Russian custom of avoiding diminutive forms in official use (*Tatjana* shortened to *Tanja*, *Maria* to *Maša* and *Edgar* to *Edik*). This is common knowledge among Estonians.

Although there was resistance to using Russian names, this did not apply to Slavic names in general. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s *Janek* and *Marek* were popular names. They must have reached Estonia via characters or crew members of the TV series “Four Tank-Men and a Dog” (1966–1970) and “More Than Life at Stake” (1967–1968), two very popular series. The book *Four Tank-Men and a Dog* was published in Estonian in 1974. The spread of the name *Marek* was probably helped by Edmund Niziurski’s book *Unbelievable Adventures of Marek Piegus* (1959, made into a film in 1966), which was translated into Estonian in 1963. The book was also used as the basis for an audio play in Estonia in 1966.

4. The popularity of national names

The third example of the influence of the Soviet era is the use of national names (i.e. Estonian versions of international names, such as *Andres*, *Priit*, *Kadri*) and native ones (i.e. artificially created, such as *Õie* ‘blossom’). These include 1) loan names: adaptations of international names that were borrowed a long time ago and are phonetically well adapted to Estonian (e.g., **Kadri*, **Mari*, *Jüri* and *Mart*) (these names are usually considered by Estonians to be the most typical Estonian names) and 2) completely native names or names based on native stems that were either artificially created or revived from old

documents or from folklore at the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. **Aino*, **Salme*, **Õie*, *Endel*, *Ilmar* and *Lembit*).

The following changes in name fashion occurred in Estonia in the 20th century:

- (1) from the turn of the century to the 1920s–1930s: new international names (German, Swedish and English), e.g., **Ellen*, **Ingrid*, *Erich* and *Harry* (see Must, 1964);
- (2) 1930s: the heyday of native names, e.g., **Helju*, **Laine*, *Kalju* and *Ülo*;
- (3) 1940s: old loan names, e.g., **Tiiu*, **Maie*, *Rein* and *Jüri*;
- (4) 1950s–1970s: new loans from other languages, e.g., **Katrin*, **Margit*, *Aivar* and *Marko* (see Rajandi, 1964, p. 273); additionally, self-created names with some popular structure or fashion element, e.g., **Anneli* > **Aneli*, **Eneli*, **Eveli*, **Janeli*, **Karoli*, **Marili* and **Merili*, as well as native language names, e.g., **Sirje*, **Ülle*, *Kalev* and *Urmas*;
- (5) 1980s: old loan names, e.g., **Kadri*, **Triin*, *Kristjan* and *Indrek*;
- (6) 1990s: international names, e.g., **Sandra*, **Laura*, *Martin* and *Robin*.

In the 1950s some other names of native origin experienced their comeback, names that were very popular in the 1930s. The name *Sirje* from folklore was very popular, as were **Ülle*, **Urve*, **Merike*, *Raivo*, *Urmas*, *Toivo*, *Kalev* and *Aare*. And *Lembit*, which had already been in fashion in the 1920s and 1930s, became popular again. (*Lembitu* was an Estonian leader in the 13th century, when the Estonian territory was conquered by Germanic Crusaders).

It has also been suggested that when old loan names became fashionable again in the 1980s, this was a reaction to the Russification that had intensified at that time.

In the 1980s, such names as **Kadri*, **Triin*, **Liis*, **Piret*, **Liisi*, **Liina*, **Mari*, **Maarja*, **Kadi*, **Kersti*, *Kristjan*, *Margus*, *Indrek*, *Tanel*, *Lauri*, *Priit*, *Andres*, *Mihkel*, *Siim*, *Madis*, *Tõnis*, *Mart* and *Mikk* were popular.

If we look at the general change in name fashions, two periods of loan names were very close in time: the previous one was only in the 1940s. However, the names themselves were completely different then, e.g., **Tiiu*, **Maie*, **Malle*, **Mare*, **Anne*, **Reet*, **Tiina*, *Rein*, *Jüri*, *Ants*, *Jaan*, *Jaak*, *Tõnu*, *Peeter*, *Tiit* and *Toomas*.

There may have been other reasons for choosing names, besides trying to emphasise Estonian-ness. For example, the use of names in the 1950s to the 1970s was very varied: many new loans were added and names were played

with. For example, **Jaanika* and **Reelika* followed the example of the existing names **Marika*, **Erika*, **Monika* and **Annika*. The *ka*-ending was added to other names as well: **Ailika*, **Ainika*, **Airika*, **Aivika*, **Anneka*, **Arlika*, **Aurika*, **Bionika*, **Edvika*, **Eelika*, **Eilika*, **Elika*, **Elleka*, **Ersika*, **Heelika*, **Helika*, **Hellika*, **Iivika*, **Julika*, **Junika*, **Kirsika*, **Klaarika*, **Leanika*, **Liilika*, **Liivika*, **Mailika*, **Mairika*, **Marjuka*, **Meelika*, **Merika*, **Merlika*, **Oliivika*, **Piiirika*, **Reilika*, **Tuulika*, **Viivika*, **Viorika*, etc.

There are many examples of such name variations (see Hussar, 2021, p. 285). In addition, new international loans were added. It is possible that old loan names came into fashion again because they seemed to stabilise the variability of names.

In fact, there is no definite answer to this question: name fashions keep changing, and for some parents it may be that they grew tired of unusual children's names that they could not spell, and for others it was important to emphasise the fact that they were choosing Estonian names. This led to a preference for short names that had been known for a long time and had traditionally been considered Estonian names.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented three examples showing that the choice of a name is influenced by the political situation in a country.

The first example was about the use of multiple names, where the state used legal regulations to prevent children from being given two names or to pressure parents to refrain from giving their children two names.

The second example demonstrated that people might also have been showing their attitudes towards the state implicitly. Estonians, who are very open in terms of the use of first names and who chose names from many different national name stocks while living in the Soviet Union, nevertheless did not give their children Russian names.

The third example showed that, in addition to avoiding Russian names, one could show one's attitude towards the state through a preference for native Estonian names.

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