VOLUNTARY IMMIGRANTS VERSUS REFUGEES. MIGRATION STORIES AND IDENTITIES IN THE ESTONIAN COMMUNITY IN ARGENTINA AFTER WORLD WAR II.

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Abstract

In the 1920s there was a remarkable voluntary migration from Estonia to the West. After North America, the second preferred destination was South America, including Argentina. The next wave of Estonians arrived in Argentina after World War II. Although belonging to the same nation, the distinct borderlines between the so-called old Estonians and the new Estonians (newcomers) evolved and the confrontation "we versus others" emerged.

Voluntary immigrants had left Estonia mostly for economic, not political reasons. They could freely maintain connection with Estonia, and they knew they could have returned to their homeland if they had wanted to. All this was very different for the war refugees who carried with them the image of homeland in ruins. They had lost their home country because it was occupied by foreign forces. Consequently they had to take their homeland abroad with them but without territory. For the refugees the national social network abroad was crucial to compensate for the world they had lost. The community of "old Estonians" had also developed social activities shortly after arriving in Argentina, but it was activity of voluntary immigrants, activity without tragical and therefore political dimensions. They were immigrants with very different migration stories. No doubt, in details also the stories of refugees about fleeing Estonia differ from one another but they all had shared an experience that united them. That shared fate had a strong identifying dimension and among the Estonian refugees a strong sense of solidarity developed. They distinguished themselves from old Estonians, who did not share their fate and had a different relation to their homeland.