A Short History
of the Republic of Estonia

by Rory Pilgrim
...connect only’ a compass to the co-ordinates 59°25′ N, 24°45′ E and you will come to an area of land of forests, islands, small rolling hills and bogs. If a time traveler were to enter these co-ordinates into their time machine, there would be no certainty as to the place they would find themselves. For they could arrive anywhere: Denmark, Poland, Germany, Estonia, Sweden, Livonia, or Russia.

Today, when entering the co-ordinates 59°25′ N, 24°45′ E by road, rail track, sea or air, in the airport ferry terminal and border control, you will be welcomed by a pleasant sign: ‘Tere Tulemast Eestisse, Welcome to Estonia’. Almost simultaneously afterwards you are likely to see another sign. Set in the colours of orange and black, you will be made aware:

‘wifi ee Traadita Interneti Leviala
Area of Wireless Internet’

Entering the Republic of Estonia, travelers do not just enter Estonia, but connect to the World Wide Web, wider web of the world, the ‘cathedral to celebrate human consciousness’.

Those entering Estonia with a mobile phone or personal computer can enter the World Wide throughout the land (without leaving the republic’s borders). The Internet was declared to be ‘a basic human right’ by the government of Estonia in 2004, as part of Estonia’s bid to become the first completely ‘Wireless’ country in the world, with every corner of the land connected. Two thirds of the Republic have been connected by 2008. As the Estonian Tourist Board proudly states: ‘you are more likely to see an old women in the Estonian countryside surfing the net, than milking a cow’.

However, just over 18 years ago, entering the land of Estonia was virtually impossible. At that time, as for most of its history, Estonia did not exist as a separate country or sovereign state.

1 ‘Welcome to Estonia’ Estonian Tourist Board Pamphlet
In the beginning the first people who came to the land from the east beyond the Ural Mountains, christened the land ‘Eesti’. Swiftly after the first conquerors arrived, Eesti was swallowed into the kingdom of Denmark, which then stretched far across the sea. The land was tossed and turned from kingdom to kingdom for nearly a thousand years. ‘Eesti’ remained only as the dream of those who first came to the land. Like the land of ‘Milk and Honey’, Eesti was seen by its inhabitants as a place that would be their own free land, where they would be released from the slavery of serfdom to which they were subject. A hope and dream - perhaps no different from imagined places such as the luscious Garden of Eden, Plato’s perfect state ‘The Republic, the heavens of the Kalevala or the island of ‘Utopia’?

As the first revolution in France flowered in the 19th Century, those who held power looked at the danger of the sea of exploited people. In the north-western corner of the Russian Empire, the Estonians were released as serfs under the Baltic Germans who kept order for the Russians. In the ‘Ärkamisaeg’ (Age of Awakening) the dream of Eesti came closer as the Estonians were given cultural and linguistic autonomy, their language no longer an alien tongue of the air. As the poet Kristjan Jaak Peterson wrote:

_Cannot the tongue of this land
In the fire of incarnation
Rising up to the heavens
Seek for eternity?_²

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristjan_Jaak_Peterson
As the world accelerated to a speed like never before due to Industrialism at the end of the 19th Century, revolution became imminent as the Empires that controlled power began to implode upon themselves. Exploding in the First World War in 1914 the empires finally ruptured with cracks.

Like flowers growing between, new states came into being. One of these, ‘Eesti’, finally became a reality. On 24th February 1918, ‘Eesti Vabariik’, the Republic of Estonia was declared an independent nation and the Estonian flag rose from the citadel of Toompea within the capital of Tallinn. Simultaneously Estonia joined the rest of the world to form a greater ‘League of Nations’. For the first time in its history, those who came from beyond the Ural Mountains were able to be Estonian within Estonia and for Estonia to exist in a wider world.

As Estonia blossomed, those left on the lower part of the canyon were left to rebuild themselves. As Imperial Russia fell, the revolution envisioned by Marx and Engels finally came into being as the workers united. Under Lenin, the people of Russia were put to sleep in the dream of the United Union of Socialist Republics. While Germany was left broken to form the Weimar Republic, an Austrian in Munich set out a new vision to rebuild Germany into her original greatness with the ‘Third Reich’. By 1933, this ideal came into being as Hitler gained power to build a German empire once again. Swiftly again, the world became a place of three ideologies that began to collide. Finally brimming over with the invasion of Poland by the Nazis, the world plunged into an even greater Second World War.

While the world fell into a state of shock of the Atomic Bomb, a ninth of the globe froze under a firm Iron Curtain. At the co-ordinates of 59°25´ N, 24°45´ E, the Republic of Estonia fell, swallowed up in to the Union of Socialist Republics- a dream of socialist brotherhood and equality. However, many had trouble falling asleep during this dream. A quarter of its population were killed, fled or sent to perish in the ‘gulags’ in Siberia. These were the ones who threatened to awaken others from their dreams.
At the co-ordinates 59°25′ N, 24°45′ E, from December to March the temperatures plummet as low as minus 30 centigrade, causing the Gulf of Finland to freeze and creating a pathway to a different world. Yet no one would while locked in sleep, for there was no need to wake. And why would anyone, when all that lay beyond the ice was a hell of capitalist corruption?

Yet in the ninth of the globe that the USSR covered, a faint glimmer of ‘otherness’ from the outside world beyond reached the televisions and radios of the city of Tallinn, the city that had been the capital of Estonia during the country’s 20 years of independence. Brought by the waves carrying the Finnish media from across the sea, those in the city could gaze at the images of a reality beyond.

In 1980 Estonians were able to see the challenges that were disturbing similar dreams to their own in Poland. As the former Estonian President Lennart Mart explained, ‘Estonians were the only one’s in the Soviet Union who knew that Lech Walesa had a moustache’.

The knowledge the Finnish media brought from the Western World meant that, more than anywhere in the Soviet Union, Estonians could see and question the double-sided reality of the socialist dream they were living. In 1980, at the Moscow Olympics they were first to toss in their sleep, rekindling a desire to bring their beloved ‘Eestimaa’ back into existence once again.

In 1985 cracks in the Soviet Union emerged as light from the outside slowly shone through with Gorbachev’s policies of Glasnost and Perestroika. In Estonia and its neighbours Latvia and Lithuania the people began to stir. In their ‘Singing Revolution’ Estonians challenged the Soviet regime, striving for the linguistic, cultural and political freedom they had always desired. By using their historical, cultural and artistic traditions - principally their immense tradition of choral singing, the Estonians literally sang their

3  http://www.balticsww.com/eurovision_soviet_union.htm
way to revolution. On the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of August 1989, two million people joined hands from across the Baltic States, covering a distance of 600 kilometres, on the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that illegally swallowed them up into the USSR, in protest against it.

After a series of phenomenal Song Concerts, bringing one in four of the Estonian population together, on 20\textsuperscript{th} August 1991 Estonia declared independence. Swiftly their wish was fulfilled by Iceland, the first to give the republic recognition. As Estonians and the rest of the world watched, the USSR crumbled on their television screens and the Estonian flag once again rose from the citadel of Toompea.

Awoken, the world of democracy flooded into the newly independent Republic of Estonia. Opening its borders, Estonia connected itself to the rest of the world, joining the UN on 17\textsuperscript{th} September 1991. What came was freedom: freedom of choice and speech and freedom once again to be Estonian within Estonia, and for Estonia to exist in a wider world.

Quietly at the co-ordinates of 59°25 ′N, 24°45 ′E, the Republic of Estonia started to build websites as fast as the Soviets had flooded their city with concrete apartment blocks. In 1991 only half the population were connected to a phone line; yet 14 years later in 2004, 360,000 of the 1.6 million population had a profile on www.rate.ee, a network dating website.

In the same year the Estonian government declared the Internet ‘a basic human right’\textsuperscript{4}, as part of its bid to become the first country in the world to be completely ‘wireless’, with every corner of the land connected. Two thirds of the Republic have been connected by 2008.

\textsuperscript{4} http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7258893.stm
Estonia further connected itself with the rest of the world in 2004, becoming a member of the European Union and NATO. The government also transferred its paper based system completely online, saving millions of Kroons in papers costs. In 2005 Estonia became the first country in the world to hold local elections via online voting and, in March 2007, the first to hold a general election where citizens could also vote online. Currently 1 in 4 Estonians have a digital identity card that can be used for online tax returns, banking and voting. As one of the heaviest users of Internet Banking and Internet technology, Estonia is a leading country for such technology and has emerged with the most thriving economy in Eastern Europe.

However, as the Soviets flooded the country with Apartment Blocks, so the Estonians have used the Internet to strengthen themselves politically, culturally and linguistically. Since the break up of the USSR, the Russian minority who came during the time of the USSR now form 25.6% of the total population and half of the population of the capital Tallinn. After independence, the Estonian Government swiftly encouraged a policy that discriminated against both the Russian language and dual citizenship. In the Russian population, 8.2% still have not been able to gain any citizenship rights. This is partly due to the enforcement of an Estonian language test, a language completely alien to Russian being a non Indo-European language family, and debatably one of the hardest languages in the world to learn.

In 2006, George W Bush came to the land, and declared that Estonia had undergone “one of the most dramatic transformations that proved the love of liberty is stronger than the will of an empire”\(^5\). Since then President Andrus Ansip has worn a small badge with the Estonian flag connected like a Siamese twin to the American flag.

In April 2007, the bubble of progress and development suddenly burst for Estonia. Ongoing tensions erupted between Estonians and the large Russian minority when the Estonian Government decided to remove a war memorial erected by Stalin and

dedicated to Russians on the defeat of the Nazis in the capital, Tallinn. Causing large riots among the Russian population, the country also came under cyber attack as the websites of the Estonian governments, banks, ministries, and media were subjected to an unprecedented external cyber offensive, forcing many to close. The attacks were believed to originate in Russia. The April Cyber War of 2007 caused great international dispute over the legalities and effect of such warfare. Also at stake was the safety of a nation building its foundations relying so greatly on the virtual realm. ‘Was Estonia recreating a state little different to its previous Soviet ‘Big Brother’?’ is a remaining question.

On 24th February 2008, the ‘National Day of Estonia’ commemorating the day that ‘Eesti’ first came into being, the Prime Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves refused to speak Russian at a public event. Speaking to a BBC journalist, he declared, ‘Speaking Russian would mean accepting 50 years of Soviet brutalization, because most Russian speakers settled in Estonia only after it was occupied by the USSR towards the end of World War Two’.

Occasionally you meet Estonians who feel very concerned that the development of their dreams has happened so fast that there has been no time for evaluation. They believe that soon their huge economic growth and relationship with Russia will have immense consequences, as they fail to recognize their ‘other’. Many blame the culture of not questioning on their Soviet and perhaps entire past.

For many Estonians politics is simply not ‘for them’; it is only something to do with the government. Why would they want to question it when life is going well, they have money, they have options? Another Kaubamaja (shopping mall) has just opened next to the first one for them to choose from...

However, as Estonia aims to become the first ‘wireless’ country in the world in 2009/10, a pressing possibility lurks. Since 2004 Estonia has had the highest decreasing population in the world. Are Estonians failing to produce themselves beyond their screens? Perhaps in the future a traveler wishing to come to the land of Estonia will only have to take

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6 [http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7258893.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7258893.stm)
a rocket into cyberspace, discovering Estonia as the first Utopian State in the cyber universe.

Or in reality: ‘only connect...