abstract
This article considers the spread of ideas on vegetarianism in Estonia from the turn of the 19th century until 1940. The study builds on analyzing archival sources, media texts and educational work conducted by nutrition experts, schools and organizations. Propaganda about the consumption of vegetarian food was associated with the general modernization of domestic culture and the discourse on healthy food as the basis for the nation’s vitality. The article highlights the leading role of women’s movement in home economics, including attempts to implement food culture informed by nutritional science, especially teaching the people to eat more fruits and vegetables. The spread of vegetarian ideas in Estonia also illustrates how the previously dominating German cultural influences were gradually replaced by an orientation towards the Nordic countries, and demonstrates how these ideas were adapted to an Estonian context.

KEY WORDS: Vegetarianism, modernization, home economics, nutritional science.
In this article we analyze the arrival and spread of ideas and practices of vegetarianism and the attempts to modernize the diet of Estonians from the turn of the 19th century up to 1940. The period of Estonia’s transition from a province of the Russian empire (1710–1918) to independent statehood (1918–1940) was especially significant when considering the changes in food culture that took place in the context of rapid modernization and the emergence of a modern nation state. Estonia represents an interesting case for examining the intertwining of different ideologies and cultural influences because of the country’s geographical location at the crossroads between Germany, Russia and the Nordic countries.

Starting from the 1870s, Estonian intellectuals who led the national movement increasingly began to look towards the rest of Europe, especially the Nordic countries, for examples of progressive culture and civilizing everyday life – the ideals that vegetarian visionaries also expressed in their writings and public speeches. Novel nutritional ideas were adapted to the local climate, economy and food habits. Since the late 19th century, the importance of vegetarian food – not just vegetarianism – was emphasized in the public discourse on food and the nation’s diet, based on nutritional science and scientific household management. The consumption of vegetarian food was associated with the general modernization of domestic culture and a healthy diet as the basis for the nation’s vitality. The focus on health, physical fitness, natural lifestyle, scientific rationalism, but also ethical consumer awareness, reflected the values of modernity. Furthermore, vegetables were envisioned as the food of the future for both health and economic reasons. Plant-based nutrients were less expensive and more accessible to all strata of society. Thus, the ultimate goal of advocates of a plant-based diet was not to convert people to vegetarianism but rather to convince them to change their everyday eating habits by consuming more vegetables and fruits.

We explore the development of ideologies and initiatives related to educating the nation about healthy eating, the benefits of vegetarian food and how advocating for vegetarian food became a project about modernizing the nation of Estonia. Our main sources are articles published in newspapers and magazines, advice literature and cookbooks, but we have also relied on archival documents (files of home economics schools, the Chamber of Home Economics and the Tartu Association for Vegetarians), as well as published surveys about health conditions. In order to understand the context of our study, it must be stressed that the promotion of plant-based food until the late 1930s was aimed at a mainly agrarian society in which the emerging rural or urban middle class still retained peasant foodways (How did the educated elite perceive the food habits of the masses and what were the arguments used to convince people to eat more vegetarian food? Unlike the Russian empire until 1917 – and in Western Europe – in which male nutritional scientists and physicists played a prominent role in leading the people towards a modern diet, after World War I in Estonia, female home economics teachers took the leading role in both the nutritional and the culinary education of the nation. Women home economics teachers who instructed other Estonian women to become reformers of the nation’s diet by changing their own eating habits are the main focus of this study. Who were these women? Where did they receive their education and how did it shape their values and understanding of vegetarian food? Estonian women who established home economics education and led the diet reform can be regarded as “culture builders” who were not only addressing workers and peasants, but also the middle class who, like themselves aimed to change their everyday food habits and values. Their goal was similar to what was envisioned in other European countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – housewives were regarded as being responsible for the physiological and economic prosperity of the nation and a vegetarian diet was seen as a tool for achieving this goal.

Early introduction of vegetarianism: male experts as educators

Since the 18th century, Estonian (food) culture had developed under the influence of two major cultural spheres. Although Estonia was part of the Russian empire, the cultural influence of the Baltic German elite prevailed until the end of the 19th century. Thus, due to socio-historical circumstances, like much of the working classes in Europe in the 19th century, Estonians were “vegetarians by necessity, not by choice” – they appreciated meat but could eat it only on festive occasions. Furthermore, families (the most recent from 1867 to 1868) were still relatively fresh in people’s minds at the end of the century. However, Estonian simple folk traditionally regarded meat, particularly fat, as a desirable and nutritious food. During holidays, at weddings, and particularly at Christmas, there had to be plenty of meat, and they wanted to eat as much meat as possible. At the everyday table, grain-based dishes dominated, and fruits and vegetables had a poor reputation (with the exception of

Illustration 1. A frame for serving radishes. Source: Maria Koith Praktisches Kochbuch (Riga, 1911).


“STINGING NETTLES (URTICA DIOICA L.) AND GROUND ELDER (AEGOPODIUM PODAGRARIA L.) COULD BE CHOPPED AND BRAISED WITH SOME MILK OR DRIED ICELANDIC MOSS (AEGOPODIUM PODAGRARIA L.) POWDER COULD BE ADDED TO BREAD DOUGH.”
potatoes since the mid-19th century which, in turn, reduced the consumption of other vegetables. Similar to neighboring countries, vegetables were not popular as a food in general, except for certain species like animal fodder or a fad of gentlefolk.12 The attitude of Estonians towards vegetables also reflected the social hierarchy between the social classes. In contrast to modest allotments at farmsteads, horticulture was well developed in upper-class households by the end of the 18th century. In manor gardens, particular types of vegetables were cultivated, using heated beds and greenhouses for more cold-sensitive plants (e.g., tomatoes, eggplants) and a variety of vegetables were cultivated, using heated beds and greenhouses for more cold-sensitive plants (e.g., tomatoes, eggplants). To ensure large yields and protect the plants from bad weather, farmers used heated beds and greenhouses.13

...In the 19th century (e.g., doctor and literate Friedrich Reinhold Kreutz-Samuelson) was one of the leading figures of the Estonian national movement in the 19th century. In manor gardens, particular types of vegetables were cultivated, using heated beds and greenhouses for more cold-sensitive plants (e.g., tomatoes, eggplants). To ensure large yields and protect the plants from bad weather, farmers used heated beds and greenhouses.13

Illustration 3. Peasants at Saaremaa island at the breakfast table (1910). © Juhani Paluatse. Source: ERM Fl 13/78

“HELLAT WAS VERY CRITICAL OF ESTONIANS’ NUTRITIONAL HABITS AND BELIEFS. HE CLAIMED THAT THE DIET OF THE PEOPLE WAS UNVARIED, THE CHOICE OF FOOD POOR AND COOKING SKILLS LACKING.”

...In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the attitude towards vegetables changed. The idea of vegetarianism was novel in Estonia: he proposed complete menus for different meals; there should be three hours between supper and bedtime. The tone of the advice was moralizing — eating had to be governed by strict rules: you could only drink half an hour after a meal; there should be three hours between supper and bedtime. Vegetables were served in restaurants, whereas meat was a luxury item in moderate amounts. He repeatedly explained the harmfulness of coffee, even calling it a poison that caused nervousness and thin blood and recommended “coffee substitutes” which included tea instead. In his book, British vegetarian and women’s rights campaigner Anna Kingsford’s (1846–1888) The Perfect Way in Diet (originally published in 1881) was translated in a German by Jaan Spuhl-Rotalia. The book actively promoted vegetarianism, stressing both health and economic arguments. However, in his postscript, Spuhl-Rotalia himself expressed only moderate support of vegetarianism: “As vehement enthusiasms and excessive praticians can be found in any society, they are not lacking among vegetarians, but a golden and mean moderation are best even in this.” He concedes that eating only raw vegetables is not conceivable in the Nordic countries. He mentioned bread and fruit as the most valuable foods, emphasised a balanced diet and the correct combination of vegetables and dairy foods. Spuhl-Rotalia concluded that cooking vegetable dishes was simpler and less costly; in addition, vegetarian eating was clean and humane.

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was mainly an agrarian society, unlike the leading industrialized and culinary discourse. Promotion of vegetarian food became part of a modern home nutritional habits was a critical aspect of the modern housewife's traditional attitudes towards food and their diverse diet for Estonian country folk. Estonian authors translated food started creating health issues in the population and undoubtedly laid by the active participation of Estonian women in temperance societies in which they represented one third of the total membership at the turn of the century. Also, the periodicity of the modernization of Estonian home culture could be understood in light of the fact that women's reading skills and practice were more advanced than those of men at the time. The rapid pace of the modernization of everyday life at the turn of the century is vividly illustrated by the change in opinions about the importance of education on food and home economics in just a couple of decades. At first, it was advocated by a few intellectuals. The major home economics culture was introduced by middle-class women and became a means of spreading the values of this social group into the lower strata. The modern educated, rational and efficient housewife who contributed to the nation's welfare became an ideal at the beginning of the 20th century. The aim of home economy was not just a private concern of the family because women were supposed to change the way of life and the mindset of the entire nation. Reforming the people's attitudes towards food and their nutritional habits was a critical aspect of the modern housewife's battle. In Finland, the shift towards the consumption of a more balanced, nutritious diet and the transformative power of science in cooking as “culinary idealism.” Domestic scientists were inspired by the nutritional properties of food, by traditional recipes and by the social and political growth. The promotion of vegetarian food became part of a modern home economics education and also part of the modern nutritional and culinary discourse.

In the years preceding World War 1, vegetarianism had already become significantly more visible in Estonia. Similar to the Nordic countries, the term “vegetarian” was not widely used in promoting vegetarian ideas. In the early 20th century, Finland (at that time the Grand Duchy of Finland as an autonomous part of the Russian empire) became the closest sphere of influence for Estonian women. The term “man” was already used in the discussions, and by the beginning of the 20th century, the term “vegetarian” was used in the context of the first cooking courses to last three months were organized in 1906. The advertisement for the course emphasized that the role of cooking was to create a new scientific approach to real life and the Finnish art of creating better and less expensive dishes should be considered as an example. The course manager was invited over from Finland. In the 1920s, educated Estonian women started expressing their opinions in local newspapers about vegetarianism and learned about its economic and health-related effects.50 In her book, Sapas presents vegetarianism as a food choice that is naturally suited to humans and will give more money as vegetable protein is less expensive than meat only be used as a dessert but should make up a part of the daily fare. She describes how vegetarian food represents better value for money as vegetable protein is less expensive than meat. However, Sapas does not consider it either necessary or feasible to give up meat entirely: “Strict vegetarians who abstain from any form of meat are likely to remain isolated in our conditions in the 21st century.”

As food was scarce during World War 1, the need for and interest in vegetarian dishes grew. They were introduced at exhibitions and offered at universities and restaurants. In July 1915, a law was introduced that prohibited the sale of meat products and the serving of meat dishes from Tuesdays to Fridays. In September, the Estonian Exhibition in Tartu had a separate buffet offering vegetarian dishes. The daily Postimees wrote that it would give tips “to the numerous vegetarians who had previously followed its principles and were adapting to the circumstances. In this current period of vegetarian food, these are especially useful.” Housekeeping instructor Marta Põld (1882–1943), who also graduated from the Järvenlinna school in 1902, conducted courses in vegetarian food at the Central Society for Farm Work for domestic employees, as well as the wives of military personnel (without charging a fee). At the course she demonstrated how to cook dishes made from legumes and grains, as well as various soups. The students agreed that by using the Finnish examples, Marta Põld could “even make nettle infusion taste delicious, not to mention more delicate garden plants.” However, some journalists also published ironic comments about an exclusively vegetarian menu, describing it as an oddity, even during wartime. Her cookbook A Course on Vegetarian Food (Est. Taimetoodustav kursus) (1906) contained recipes using vegetables, cabbages, potatoes, carrots, spinach, pea, and beans in combination with rice, macaroni and mushrooms. She suggested meat substitutes such as “fake meat” made from buckwheat porridge and beetroot (illustration 5) or “fake liver caserole” made from pearl barley, rice and raisins, etc. Such imitation meat dishes were supposed to make vegetable dishes more attractive and acceptable for consumers. Also, mock meat products (e.g. such as Protose) that were available in the USA or Britain and that tasted, felt and smelled like meat were not available for Estonian consumers at the time.51 Remarkably, the recipes in Marta Põld’s handbook

**FAKE MEAT**

**Ingredients:**
- approx. 0.7 l water
- approx. 230 g buckwheat groats
- 3 beets
- 2 tablespoons of butter or fat
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoon of sour cream
- salt, pepper

**Cook the beets until they are soft. Cook the buckwheat porridge. Allow the beets and porridge to cool and then pass them through the mincer. Sauté the onions in butter or fat and add to the buckwheat and beet mix. Add lightly whipped eggs and salt and pepper to taste. Pour the mix into a buttered oblong oven dish and bake in the oven. Serve with boiled potatoes, brown sauce and cucumber salad.**

*Contemporary measurements have been used.*

Illustration 5. A recipe of “Fake meat” from Marta Põld’s A Course on Vegetarian Food (1916).
were almost identical to those published in Finnish cookery books compiled by the teachers at the Helsinki home economics school, which had been published some years previously. Finally, it should be mentioned that neither Marta Põld’s nor Marie Sapas’ vegetarian cookbooks were strictly vegetarian but rather lacto-ovo vegetarian in the contemporary sense. Thus, in the years preceding and during World War I, a significant change took place in the educational activities related to Estonian food culture: a leading role was adopted by women and women’s organizations, and the teaching of gardening and nutrition was also directed at homemakers. Consequently, we can see a powerful Finnish influence on the modernization of food culture and gardening in Estonia. The Estonian alumni of Finnish housekeeping schools proved to be capable instructors and leaders of educational reform. Close contact between Finnish teachers and teacher educators of home economics, as well as several Estonian home economics experts and schools, continued until 1930.

**The modernization of food culture from the 1920s to the 1930s**

In the 1920s, a network of home economics schools developed in Estonia that started to prepare both educated housewives and professional teachers, cooks, nurses, etc. By the late 1930s, 44 educational institutions specialized in home economics and approximately 6,000 women had been trained in home economics. During the second half of the decade, specialist advice on food topics started to appear in the media, which specifically emphasized the wholesomeness of vegetarian dishes and suggested particular guidelines and recipes. The most influential works were the Estonian Woman’s Temperance Union, which appeared in 1924, published by the Estonian Women’s Temperance Union (Est. Eesti Naine), which adopted by women and women’s organizations, and the teaching of gardening and nutrition was also directed at homemakers. Consequently, we can see a powerful Finnish influence on the modernization of food culture and gardening in Estonia. The Estonian alumni of Finnish housekeeping schools proved to be capable instructors and leaders of educational reform. Close contact between Finnish teachers and teacher educators of home economics, as well as several Estonian home economics experts and schools, continued until 1930.

**The development of nutritional science in the second half of the 20th century**

By the end of the 1930s, some educational activities concerning healthy food became particularly extensive and systematic, and the Chamber of Home Economics (Kodumajanduskoda), founded in 1936, became the leading force in the field. The Chamber’s Committee was tasked with studying, improving and managing the dietary conditions in homes and in public, including offering various consultation services. In the series of publications by the Chamber, the booklet *Inexpensive and Healthy Food* (Est. Odav ja tervislik toit) was published. It underscored the importance of eating local foods from the perspective of both health and value for money and emphasized the need to carefully consider vitamins and calories when making food choices. First and foremost, growing, preserving and using garden produce was promoted (see Illustration 7). By the end of the 1930s, some...
advances in vegetable consumption had been made, mainly due to the awareness-raising activities concerning the health benefits of fruits and vegetables. Numerous lectures and sample cooking classes were organized. For instance, weekly demonstrations of the preparation of inexpensive and healthy dishes were given at schools. Home economics experts underscored that the outdated and complicated recipes based on bourgeois Russian and French cooking should be abandoned and replaced by a healthier diet. The experts even stated that public eateries should be supervised by home economics teachers, like in the Nordic countries.

Some home economics and nutrition experts such as Elisabeth Sild (1888–1986) and Olga Keski (1889–1973) also collaborated with groups of devoted vegetarians. The only officially registered organization was the Association for Vegetarians (Est. Taimtoidu- ja majapidamisraamat) with groups of devoted vegetarians. The only officially registered organization was the Association for Vegetarians (Est. Taimtoidu- ja majapidamisraamat) which, in turn, had taken on several French and Russian influences, with its elaborate bourgeois recipes, preference for imported products and excessive eating. In the period studied, the influences of both spiritual and medical branches of Russian vegetarianism in Estonia remained marginal.

In the 1930s, educational efforts through the media, schools and courses, as well as general economic growth, resulted in the people having a more varied and balanced diet. However, progress in the consumption of vegetable food was relatively slow. Regional descriptions of health conditions from the 1930s conducted by medical scientists give a brief idea of people’s actual diet: bread and potatoes were staple foods, as were grain porridges and soups. The persistence of such food habits also reflected generational attitudes towards proper food.

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Moreover, the media also sometimes published critical or humorous pieces about vegetarians, who would go to extremes in vitamin hunting, depriving themselves of the necessary animal nutrients (see illustration 10). Several diaries wrote that in Estonian conditions, imported fruit was an excessive luxury and also warned their readers that raw food could become a health hazard if the rules of hygiene were ignored (which was often the case in rural areas).

Conclusion

The introduction of vegetarian ideas in Estonia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the systematic spreading of science-based knowledge about the benefits of eating the skills of cooking vegetable food in the decades between the two world wars reveal some unique patterns to the modernization of everyday life. At that time, Estonia transformed itself from a province of the Tsarist empire, in which Baltic German culture dominated, into an independent nation state. Western ideas and practices was considered part of new, modern Estonians, who were supposed to rid themselves of both old “unhealthy” peasant food habits as well as admire for the Baltic German food culture which, in turn, had taken on several French and Russian influences, with its elaborate bourgeois recipes, preference for imported products and excessive eating. In the period studied, the influences of both spiritual and medical branches of Russian vegetarianism in Estonia remained marginal.

M A L E N T E L E C T U R A L S — doctors, horticulturists and journalists — were important figures in the early promotion of vegetarian ideas in Estonia. Since the 1930s, female home economics teachers trained in Finnish schools played a particularly significant role in the modernization of food culture. They established similar educational institutions in Estonia and followed similar ideas about healthy nutrition: praising local products, seasonal diet and preferring moderate vegetarianism that did not exclude products of animal origin. Despite the dietary reform efforts of medical professionals and general home economics teachers, the eating habits of the broader population were slow to change and conservative attitudes rooted in peasant culture persisted until the 1990s. Yet, a broad network of home economics schools and cooking courses, numerous manuals, cookbooks and articles in the media, as well as state-sponsored institutions like the Chamber of Home Economics, contributed to the spread of modern ideas and practices, especially among the younger generation. Furthermore, home economics experts were realistic about the people’s living standards in what was still largely an agrarian society and therefore mainly promoted vegetables and fruits, while energy- and nutrient-consuming meat-based healthy food was highly encouraged.

References

In the Russian empire the (then) territory of Estonia was divided into two administrative regions: Estonian and Livonian Governorates. In 1918, after the February Revolution, the whole territory was renamed into the Estonian Republic. In February 1918, Estonia declared its independent statehood, which lasted until the Soviet occupation in 1940.


2 Shirnina, 64.

3 According to the 1935 census, approx. 20% of the Estonian population lived in rural areas.


5 Jonas Frydman and Oveg Lidgren, Culture-Builders: A Historical Anthro­pology of Middle-Class Life (Rutgers University Press, 1987).

6 Treutl, 52.

7 Until the 1920s, Estonian peasants’ warnings and motives at the manor and their limited household resources determined their poor diet.


10 Aiko Moore, Kevätkuukausi nenäkki (Traditional Food among the Estonian Peasantry) (Tartu: Tartu 1911), 9.

11 Anu Kannike is Ethnologist, Senior Researcher at the Estonian National Museum.

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16 The first Baltic-German cookbook to contain a separate chapter on vegetari­an dishes was the 1911 edition of the Practical Cookery Book by Maria Korth (1852–1918), a well-known cookbook author and headmistress of the Riga cookery school. She described how vegetarian food had been successfully used in foreign institutions of natural healing in recent years and could also be easily cooked at home, yet her own suggestions were confined to recipes for vegetable soups, stews or puddings. — See Maria Korth, Praktisches Kochbuch (Practical Cookbook) (Halle, 1911), 626–630. The number of vegetable dishes was also limited compared to meat dishes in German bourgeois cookbook authors at the end of the 19th century (see Treutl, 69–70).

17 Johann Wilhelm Ludwig von Lasa, Nua ja õli, kui suur on nulgikas, in [Advice and Help for Times of Poverty and Hunger] (Tallinn: J. Hessl, 1808), 44–46.


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Illustration 10. A comical character T oslem in a vegetarian canteen. Author: Gori. Suuremo, August 1, 1937.

18 *Taimetoitlus ja vanaline ja jõudulid. Kalame pärast* [Vegetarian Foods and Beverages according to N. Bäcklin], Miehikkä, no. 6, 1905, 258–264 and no. 12, 1905, 159–182; *Toitutmeetodised decałość ja kusumae* [Lives of Healthy and Economic Cooking in Calvino, 2001, 77–102].

19 For example, *Mette Bjerregaard*.

20 See also Alain Drouard, *Reforming Diet at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21–52.

21 Danish orig. “Reform af vor Ernæring: lev sundt! lev kraftigt! lev billigt!”


25 Julia Malitska, *Vegetarian Dishes* (Tartu: Põhja Taimtoidu- ja majapidamisraamat [Vegetarian Course] (Tartu: Põhja Taimtoitlaste toitude valmistamisõpetus [Vegetarian Dishes], 1926); Olga Kesk, *Kesk, “Mis on meil vananenud toitlustuse alal “* [What has happened to our nutrition in the past?].

26 Shapiro, 83, 198.

27 Olga Kesk, *Kesk, “Mis on meil vananenud toitlustuse alal “* [What has happened to our nutrition in the past?].

28 Before World War I around 100,000 Estonians lived there, many of them also women who were home teachers or servants in upper-class families.

29 See Treitel.


31 Maria Pihlamägi, *Eesti tööliste töö- ja elutingimused Esimese maailmasõja aastail* [Working and living conditions of Estonian workers during the First World War].

32 Shapiro, 83, 198.