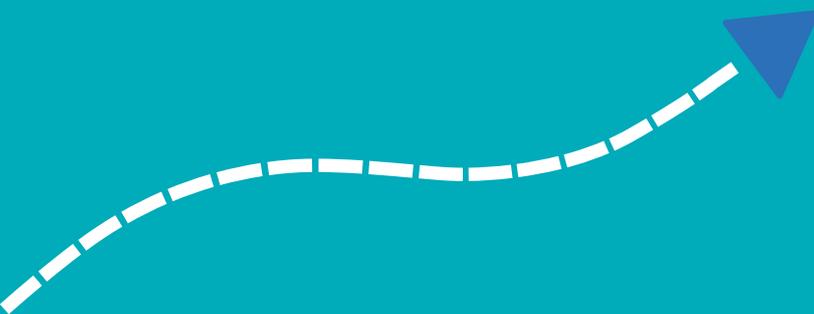


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2. THE HISTORY OF MIGRATION

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This chapter will provide an overview of the most important stages in the history of migration and will place modern migration in a broader context. Among other things, you will gain an understanding of migration during the Prehistoric period, Classical antiquity, Modern era and during the period of industrialisation up to the 21st century.

Migration and the possibility to migrate is undoubtedly an extremely important phenomenon in today's world. Sometimes it's even said that we live in the era of migration. However, is migration really something new and unusual?

The era of migration

In a way, the whole history of the human species is a story of migration. Like many animal and bird species, humans have been mobile for most of their history, and have only started to settle in the last millennia.

Migration has also been a key to success and formula for progress. Migration requires cooperation and communication. As human migration is not solely a routine, seasonal phenomenon like it is for many bird and animal species, it is less possible to rely on set routines. One needs to be constantly prepared to learn and adapt.

To our knowledge, the modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, appeared in Africa about 200,000 years ago and at first migrated around Africa, reached the Middle East about 65,000 years ago, Europe about 55,000 years ago, Asia about 45,000 years ago, Australia about 40,000 years ago and the American [continents](#) about 10–15,000 years ago. We are gaining more knowledge on an ongoing basis, as paleoanthropologists make new discoveries and come up with new theories ([read more here](#)).

We know today that different species of hominids evolved in different parts of the world but none of them was as widespread as the *Homo sapiens sapiens*, or modern human. Paleoanthropologists have found evidence that *Homo erectus*, a species of ancient hominid, travelled outside of Africa and that the Neanderthal's ancestor *Homo heidelbergensis* is from Africa. Nevertheless, none of these species migrated as extensively and spread as successfully as *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Even Neanderthals, who lived in Europe for about 200,000 years, eventually merged with the one and only true world traveller, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Genetics research indicates that we all have a common African ancestor, who lived about 150,000 years ago.

Migration and ancient civilisations

Humans started to settle roughly around [10,000–7,000 years ago](#), when agriculture began to develop rapidly and there was enough wealth for the first cities and civilisations to evolve. The story of migration is woven into all high cultures starting from the most ancient ones – cities that became centres of civilisation were never established by local people alone; they were always a magnet that attracted talented or enterprising people from the periphery. Diasporas, or minority communities that represent other cultures in a foreign land, are considered to date back to approximately the same time.

Trade and the exchange of cultures have never been solely based on travelling merchants, as there has always been a local diasporic support hub. Written sources show that a thousand years ago, Constantinople (today's Istanbul) was home to large communities of Babylonians, Sennarians, Medes, Jews, Persians, Egyptians and Canaanites, as well as Russians, Hungarians and Spaniards.

In addition to merchants, different missionaries and scholars have also always travelled. The famous Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was a metic: a foreigner who had the right to live in the Athenian city-state and the same obligations as a citizen but who lacked some of the rights of a citizen, e.g., the right to vote.

However, there is another, darker story of migration that's written in our genes. Migration has also been a side product of natural disasters and wars. In addition to the word "metic", Ancient Greeks also called foreigners "barbarians". This term denoted a foreigner who didn't speak Greek or follow the traditions of classic antiquity, and one who was usually the member of a foreign and dangerous nation that had embarked on a conquest.

One might even say that migration was the last drop that precipitated the downfall of the Roman Empire. In the 4th century, the Huns travelled from the Central Asian steppes to Eastern Europe in search of better living conditions. They, in turn, forced several Germanic and Slavic tribes to migrate further, into the territory of the Roman Empire. Today, this era is known as the Migration Period, and it led to the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the so-called Dark Ages in Europe.

Migration and the Modern era

People's urge to migrate has broadened our world immeasurably, led us to new technological discoveries and brought us knowledge and goods from other cultures. There is a reason why the great explorers' journeys – such as those of Vasco Da Gama sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, Columbus arriving in America or Ferdinand Magellan famously travelling around the world – are considered the starting point of the Age of Enlightenment. There were only a handful of men on these voyages, but they opened new migration routes that are now being used by millions.

However, not everything about those travels was humanistic and enlightened. In the 16th century, after the great explorations, the arrival of the Conquistadores to Central America caused both armed conflicts as well as extensive waves of infectious diseases. In the Philippines, there is no monument to honour Magellan, who died in battle there, but to Lapulapu, the local tribal leader who put an end to his life.

Migration hasn't always been voluntary either. In 1526 – more than 400 years before the waves of deportation from Estonia – the first ship transporting slaves from Africa to the Americas arrived at the coast of modern Brazil. The first of many: it is estimated that between the 16th and 19th centuries about [12 million slaves](#) were transported from Africa to the Americas and another million or two died en route. Unfortunately, similar practices still persist. Today we call it human trafficking. This will be discussed in more detail in **Chapter 6 "Illegal Migration"**.

Migration and industrialisation

In the 19th century, when slavery was banned in the colonial empires, a different movement of people began: indentured workers. These were simple peasants, mainly from China and India, who left home for years on the promise of receiving land or a large sum of money when the contract ended. Even though they were officially free, their working and living conditions were often comparable to those of slaves. These workers were the backbone of big plantations and it was thanks to them that huge infrastructural projects were built in the Americas, Africa and Asia. Reportedly, these workers never arrived in Estonia, yet the word used for them (*kuli*) made it to the Estonian language. The word *Coolie* originally meant a slave, but later on it was used globally as a derogatory slang term for low-paid Asian labourer.

The highest known number of indentured workers – [roughly two million](#) – left India and their descendants established rather large Indian communities in areas in Southern Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Fiji and the Caribbean islands. In addition to workers from Asia, Nordic and Irish peasants went abroad based on similar contracts.

Roughly around the same time there were millions more who migrated but were somewhat freer in their decision-making. In both Europe and China, a real demographic explosion had occurred, and there wasn't enough land and food in the region for everyone. From the mid-19th century until the beginning of the Second World War, [over 55 million](#) people migrated from Europe to the New World. Around [50 million](#) people travelled from China and India to Southeast Asian countries. However, the fast growth of Northern Asian settlements also took place during this time. Millions of Chinese, some Korean and also millions of Russian people who had just been freed from serfdom migrated to Manchuria and Siberia.

Perhaps the era of most extensive migration in global history lies between the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, also known as the Great Migration? The migration flows at that time reached around 150 million, while the world's total population remained between one and two billion. In 2020, there were about [280 million](#) first generation migrants in the world; however, the world's population today has reached 7.6 billion.

Towards a world with borders

A few years ago, when I was flying to Southern India, the following happened to me. The plane had a layover at Bangalore airport and I was engrossed in Christian Joppke's book *Citizenship and Immigration*, when a grey-haired Indian gentleman stopped next to me and stared at my book. "How pointless!" grunted the old man. "This book is pointless. In his time, my grandfather travelled the whole world – lived in London, in the United States – without ever having a passport".

And so it was. Unlike today, when countries meticulously check who goes where, for how long and for what purpose, prior to the First World War people could move around quite freely.

A passport in the meaning of a travel document required by the destination country only came into existence during the First World War when Germany, Italy and France started requiring documents from other countries' citizens, and soon enough neutral countries followed suit. Therefore, passport checks barely date back a hundred years.

However, at the dawn of the 20th century other ideas emerged and started setting other boundaries on people's mobility. For example, at that time a pseudo-science called eugenics gained popularity. Much like today's science of genetics, eugenics was based on the presumption that people's physiological qualities derive from genes. However, unlike geneticists, eugenicists thought that the most healthy, strong and noble people are born from racial purity. Influenced by that idea, many countries started to limit the immigration of so-called racially undesirable nationalities. For example, [in 1924](#), the United States prohibited immigration from Asia and set strict immigration quotas on Eastern Europeans, including Estonians, who were considered to be inferior.

This of course didn't mean that immigrants were treated with more tolerance prior to this – racial discrimination and exclusion, in the labour market for example, was more common in many places than it is today. Still, the restrictions that countries set on migration were more lenient.

Nevertheless, this didn't mean that migration stopped after the First World War. Quite the contrary. The fact that roughly 20 million people were killed in the war meant that there weren't enough workers and once again many European and American countries contributed to labour migration. It's worth noting that even Nazi Germany, which preached racial purity, had about [7.5 million](#) foreign workers towards the end of the 1930s.

Migration after the Second World War

The period between the world wars and the Second World War itself brought the topic of forced migration into international politics, which we have covered in detail in **Chapter 7 "Refugees and Asylum"**. It is estimated that the Second World War displaced about [175 million](#) people, including 40 million international refugees within Europe. The Second World War also led to the establishment of a bipolar world order, which shattered the remaining hope of restoring a peaceful world with free borders. However, there are some regional exceptions. For instance, the predecessor of the European Union, the European Economic Community, started drafting the regulation on the free movement of workers with the Treaty of Paris in 1951, even though it was only fully implemented in 1968. Of course, there was still a long way to go before the fully free movement of European Union citizens, which was solidified with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

The robust economic growth in the years following the war coupled with labour force shortages encouraged countries to experiment with their migration policies. For instance, in the United States the Bracero programme was initiated, which enabled Mexicans to go and work in the US as short-term workers. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Western European countries, such as Western Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the Nordic countries started guest worker programmes. This facilitated the recruitment of workers with low or intermediate level qualifications from different countries of the Mediterranean region (e.g., Turkey, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Tunisia, Greece). Although the original purpose was to foster short-term work-related mobility, so that people would work in Western Europe for a short period of time and then return to their country of origin, many guest workers became long-term residents, who were so essential to their employers that their work and living permits were consistently extended. In the 1970s, when the world was hit by economic recession, the guest worker programmes in Europe were terminated (in the US the Bracero programme had already been terminated in 1960). At that time, states realised that there were no short-term workers with 20 years of tenure in the country, and those who had the right to stay also brought along their families. Instead of decreasing, migration started growing under the new, more restrictive policy. Migration policies and their dysfunctions are discussed in detail in **Chapter 4 "Migration Policy"**.

Migration in the 21st century

The 21st century has created many prerequisites for migration to pick up again. The fall of the Iron Curtain resulted in the increase of mobility between East and West. There is also migratory pressure from the South to the North, even though countries endeavour to control it with migration restrictions. Different new technologies and business models have probably contributed the most to the transformation of migration. Low-cost airlines, the internet and cable television allow us to figuratively be in multiple places at once and to discover the world in a different manner. Perhaps the current period could be named the era of mobility – although the ratio of migrants in today's world is much smaller than a century ago, they are much more mobile and they have a much stronger connection with their homeland.

It's hard to say what future migration will look like. There are a plethora of prognoses, both utopian and dystopian. Inspired by the coronavirus pandemic, there are prognoses of a world in lockdown (to many people), where the possibilities of migrating will decrease, but also forecasts of increasing migration. That type of migration, is another topic. The American migration researcher [Douglas Massey](#) has predicted that in the 21st century the main type of migration will be forced migration, meaning that people won't mainly migrate to fulfil the needs of the labour market but instead to escape conflict or humanitarian crises. It is rather likely that technology will play an increasingly important role in enabling people's movement and in tracking them.

It is predicted that increasing inequality – both between and within countries – may increase migration further, but there are also prognoses, which indicate that global inequality is in fact diminishing. Another reason which might induce migration could be climate change. There are more details on this in **Chapter 12 "Climate Migration"**. The demand for a foreign workforce may also be increased by the decreasing birth rate and the reversal of the population pyramid in many developed countries. At the same time, the demand for workers may also decrease due to automation, and population growth in the upcoming decades will most likely stop in countries where it is currently growing. Statistician Hans Rosling has estimated that "[peak child](#)" has already been reached, and it is estimated that the global population might start to decrease instead from mid-21st century.

However, it is certain that while most of the world's population will remain settled, there will also be a minority more open to taking risks and one that is prepared to seek a new life across borders.

Discussion points

- Discuss which era would you consider to be the most prominent era of migration and why? The Prehistoric period, the age of ancient civilisations, the Age of Exploration, the second half of the 19th century or today?
- How do you think migration today differs from migration in the second half of the 19th century or early 20th century?

Further reading

King, R. (2007) *An Atlas of Human Migration*. New Burlington: New Burlington Books

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