The Baltic Countries

The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania lie on the Baltic Sea in northeastern Europe. Though small, they are strategically significant for European trade and security. As a result they have experienced a turbulent history and a long road to independence.

**Estonia**
- Estonia is a democratic parliamentary republic with a population of 1.3 million. Its capital is Tallinn. Estonians revere nature and about half of the country is forested. Estonia has a long tradition of music and choral singing.

**Latvia**
- Latvia is a democratic parliamentary republic with a population of 2 million. It is one of the world’s greenest countries and its capital Riga is the largest Baltic city. Latvia has a rich cultural heritage, including dainas or folk songs that date back well over one thousand years.

**Lithuania**
- Lithuania is a parliamentary democracy with a population of 2.9 million. It is a lowland country with many forests and lakes, and a long tradition of literature and music. Lithuania was the last nation in Europe to be Christianized and the only Baltic country that did not become Lutheran with the Protestant Reformation – it remained Catholic.

Lithuania was under Russian control in the late 18th century. It declared independence in 1918, however, they lost much of their land and corporate interests. Some left, but many stayed and adapted to a new role as an ethnic minority in a democratic state.

At the beginning of the Second World War, the Baltic Germans were resettled to occupied Poland and Germany.

**Baltic Germans**
- Germans first came to Latvia and Estonia as merchants, missionaries and crucaders in the 13th century. Germany crusaded the area and took control of the area, a social system emerged in which Germans were the upper class and the indigenous population the peasantry. The captured territory between Lithuania and northern Estonia was known as Old Livonia and became part of the Holy Roman Empire. Old Livonia was also integrated into the Hanseatic League, an organization of German merchant communities that dominated commercial activity in northern Europe from the 13th to the 15th century. Lithuania did not have an elite, though some of its cities had a small German trading class.

The economic and social dominance of the Germans persisted throughout shifts in political power in the region until the end of the 19th century. After Estonian and Latvian independence in 1924, however, they lost much of their land and corporate interests. Some left, but many stayed and adapted to a new role as an ethnic minority in a democratic state.

Following the war, about 2,000 immigrants to Canada, which today has the largest Baltic German community outside of Germany. Baltic Germans have a unique German accent and have a distinct culture shaped by their 800 year history in the Baltic region. Their legacy in the Baltic region includes many buildings, institutions, and influences on language, literature and music.