



## Teacher material

# Forest Brothers

## Background information

During World War II civilians in many parts of Europe faced invasion, occupation and repression. This brought about many different forms of resistance in 1939-1945. In Eastern Europe, the fact that the Soviet Union and Germany were allies at the beginning of the war, but ruthless enemies after June 1941, and that the Soviet Union, led by Stalin, belonged to the winning coalition and held a dominant position from 1945, makes it particularly difficult and politically problematic to compare and assess different resistance movements against occupation and repression.

Dealing with resistance against Nazi Germany, clearly defined as an aggressor and offender in the war, is somewhat simpler and causes less controversy than resistance against Stalin and the USSR. At the same time, resistance in different countries was based on very different political authorities and strategies: there were big differences between political military conspiracy groups attempting to bring down Hitler; or partisan movements across a wide political spectrum in the Balkan countries, where the Communist movements gained control by the end of the war; or armed resistance groups of different political views in France that were coordinated as much as possible from abroad and are generally known as *Résistance*.

It is especially difficult to deal with resistance in countries that were occupied by two different aggressors, the Soviet Union and Germany, which meant that resistance against one regime was often directly influenced by the actions of the other occupation regime. Probably the prime example of this is Poland, which was invaded by both the Soviet Union and Germany in 1939. In Poland, organisations of different political and national groups (for example Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian) attempted to resist against either or both the aggressors or both of them (such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, the Polish resistance army Armia Krajowa and anti-Soviet partisans after 1945). The post-war sphere of influence of the Soviet Union in Poland and the political impact of the Cold War have left their mark on studying and assessing the different forms of resistance in Poland.

Another example is Estonia. In World War II, Estonia was first occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, which was accompanied by extensive repressions against Estonia's political and military leaders, and against civilians. The arrival of the German occupation army in 1941 was at first perceived by the civil population as being liberate3d from the Soviet occupation. That and the remaining danger of the Soviet Red Army invading again, as well as the successful political steps taken by the German occupation authorities in Estonia, prevented any active political and armed resistance against the German rule. The military and political elite had been quickly eliminated by the Soviet Union in 1940, the population was



small, and natural conditions were unsuitable for a long-time partisan war (small territory and lack of large forested or mountainous areas).

At the same time, civilians had good reason to fear harsh new repressions when German forces retreated and the Red Army returned in 1944. As a result, a great number of people from coastal areas escaped their homeland over the sea to Scandinavia or Germany. In inland areas, people hid themselves in the forest or tried to live illegally (by hiding their true identity) in the open. In addition to the civilians, a great number of soldiers, who had fought on the Germans' side against the Red Army, but were unable or unwilling to leave their homeland, also went to hiding.

People, who went to hiding during World War II and the post-war Soviet occupation, are traditionally known as the Forest Brothers in Estonia. No organised resistance was formed among the Forest Brothers during the post-war years and weapons were used mostly for self-defence. Very few Forest Brothers' groups were connected to direct and active military resistance against the Soviet regime. But the defiance of the Forest Brothers continued for many years after 1945; and was an important expression of the desire for freedom against occupation and repression. When the Cold War ended and Estonia became once again an independent nation, the memory of the Forest Brothers was reawakened as a symbol of the new Estonia.