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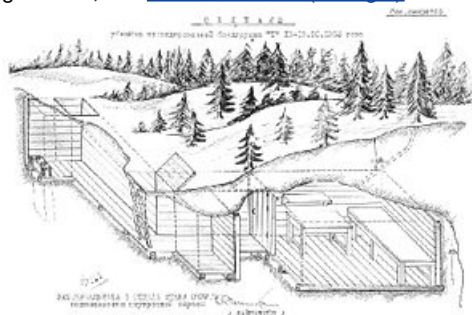
Forest Brothers

Interpretation



Forest Brothers

This article is about the Baltic WWII anti-Soviet resistance movement. For the Georgian anti-Russian guerrillas, see [Forest Brothers \(Georgia\)](#).



The Forest Brothers often used cellars, tunnels or more complex underground bunkers such as the one depicted here (found in Lithuania).

The **Forest Brothers** (also: Brothers of the Forest, Forest Brethren; Forest Brotherhood; [Estonian](#): *metsavennad*, [Latvian](#): *meža brāļi*, [Lithuanian](#): *miško broliai*) were [Estonian](#), [Latvian](#), and [Lithuanian partisans](#) who waged a guerrilla war against Soviet rule during the Soviet invasion and occupation of the three [Baltic states](#) during, and after, [World War II](#). Similar [anti-Soviet](#) Eastern European resistance groups fought against Soviet and communist rule in [Bulgaria](#), [Poland](#), [Romania](#), [Croatia](#) and western [Ukraine](#).

The Soviet Army [occupied](#) the independent Baltic states in 1940–1941 and, after a period of [German occupation](#), again in 1944–1945. As Stalinist [repression](#) intensified over the following years, 50,000 residents of these countries used the heavily-forested countryside as a natural refuge and base for armed anti-Soviet resistance.

Resistance units varied in size and composition, ranging from individually operating guerrillas, armed primarily for self-defense, to large and well-organized groups able to engage significant Soviet forces in battle.

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Forest Brothers	
Participant in Guerilla war in the Baltic states	
Active	1940-41, 1944-1956
Ideology	National liberation
Leaders	
Area of operations	Baltic states
Strength	~50,000
Part of	Occupation of the Baltic states
Allies	British, American and Swedish intelligence services
Opponents	Soviet Army, NKVD

Background

Origins of the term

The term forest brothers first came into use in the [Baltic](#) region during the chaotic Russian Revolution of 1905. Varying sources refer to forest brothers of this era either as peasants revolting^[1] or as schoolteachers seeking refuge in the forest.^[2]

Caught between two powers

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania]had gained their independence in 1918 after the collapse of the [Russian Empire](#). The ideals of nationalism and [self-determination](#) had taken hold with many people as a result of having established independent states in Estonia and Latvia for the first time after the 13th century. At the same time Lithuanians re-established a sovereign state, which had rich former history, being the largest country in Europe during the 14th century, however, occupied by Russian Empire since 1795. Allied declarations such as the [Atlantic Charter](#) had offered promise of a post-war world in which the three Baltic nations could re-establish themselves. Having already experienced occupation by the Soviet regime followed by the Nazi regime many people were unwilling to accept another occupation.^[3]

Unlike Estonia and Latvia where the Germans conscripted the local population into military formations within [Waffen-SS](#), Lithuania never had its own Waffen-SS division. In 1944 the Nazi authorities had created an ill-equipped but 20,000-strong "Lithuanian Territorial Defense Force" under General [Povilas Plechavičius](#) to combat [Soviet partisans](#) led by [Antanas Sniečkus](#). The Germans, however, quickly came to see this force as a nationalist threat to their occupation regime. The senior staff were arrested on May 15, 1944, with General Plechavičius being deported to the concentration camp in [Salaspils](#), Latvia. However, approximately half of the remaining forces formed guerrilla units and dissolved into the countryside in preparation for partisan operations against the Soviet Army as the [Eastern Front](#) approached.^{[4][5]}

The guerrilla operations in Estonia and Latvia had some basis in [Adolf Hitler](#)'s authorization of a full withdrawal from Estonia in mid-September 1944 — he allowed any soldiers of his Estonian forces, primarily the [20th Waffen-SS Division \(1st Estonian\)](#), who wished to stay and defend their homes to do so^[citation needed] — and in the fate of [Army Group Courland](#), among the last of Hitler's forces to surrender after it became trapped in the [Courland](#) Pocket on the Latvian peninsula in 1945. Many Estonian and Latvian soldiers, and a few Germans, evaded capture and fought as Forest Brothers in the countryside for years after the war. Others, such as [Alfons Rebane](#) and [Alfrēds Riekstiņš](#) escaped to the [United Kingdom](#) and [Sweden](#) and participated in [Allied](#) intelligence operations in aid of the Forest Brothers.

While the Waffen-SS was found guilty of war crimes and other atrocities and declared a criminal organization after the War, the Nuremberg Trials explicitly excluded conscripts in the following terms:

“ The Tribunal declares to be criminal within the meaning of the Charter the group composed of those persons who had been officially accepted as members of the SS as enumerated in the preceding paragraph, who became or remained members of the organization with knowledge that it was being used for the commission of acts declared criminal by Article 6 of the Charter, or who were personally implicated as members of the organization in the commission of such crimes, excluding, however, those who were drafted into membership by the State in such a way as to give them no choice in the matter, and who had committed no such crimes.^[6] ”

In 1949–1950 the United States Displaced Persons Commission investigated the Estonian and Latvian divisions and on September 1, 1950 adopted the following policy:

“ The Baltic Waffen SS Units are to be considered as separate and distinct in purpose, ideology, activities, and qualifications for membership from the German SS, and therefore the Commission holds them not to be a movement hostile to the Government of the United States under Section 13 of the Displaced Persons Act, as amended.^[7] ”

The Latvian government has asserted that the [Latvian Legion](#), primarily composed of the [15th](#) and [19th](#) Latvian Waffen-SS divisions, was neither a criminal nor [collaborationist](#) organization.^[8] [Mart Laar](#) (Prime Minister of Estonia, 1992–1994 and 1999–2002), in his 1992 book *War in the Woods: Estonia's Struggle for Survival, 1944–1956*^[9] rejected Soviet propaganda that had painted the Baltic resistance as having been orchestrated by wealthy landowners and Nazi officials and noted that the Forest Brothers counted among their ranks anti-Nazis and former Soviet partisans.

The ranks of the resistance swelled with the Red Army's attempts at [conscription](#) in the Baltic states after the war, with fewer than half the registered conscripts reporting in some districts. The widespread harassment of disappearing conscripts' families pushed more people to evade authorities in the forests. Many enlisted men deserted, taking their weapons with them.^[9]

Summer War

After [Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union](#) on June 22, 1941, Finland sided with Germany in what they called the [Continuation War](#). On July 3, [Joseph Stalin](#) made his public statement over the radio calling for a [scorched earth](#) policy in the areas to be abandoned. About 10,000 Forest Brothers, which had organized themselves into countrywide [Omakaitse](#) (Home Guard) organizations, attacked the forces of the NKVD, [destruction battalions](#) and the [8th Army](#) (Major General Ljubovtsev), killing 4,800 and capturing 14,000. The battle of Tartu lasted for two weeks, and destroyed a large part of the city. Under the leadership of Friedrich Kurg, the Forest Brothers, drove out the Soviets from Tartu, behind the Rivers [Pärnu](#) – [Emajõgi](#) line. Thus they secured South Estonia under Estonian control by July 10.^[9]^[10] The NKVD murdered 193 people in Tartu Prison on their retreat on July 8.

The German [18th Army](#) crossed the Estonian southern border on July 7–9. The Germans resumed their advance in Estonia by working in cooperation with the Forest Brothers and the Omakaitse. In North Estonia, the [destruction battalions](#) had the greatest impact, being the last Baltic territory captured from the Soviets. The joint Estonian-German forces took [Narva](#) on August 17 and the Estonian capital [Tallinn](#) on August 28. On that day, the red flag shot down earlier on [Pikk Hermann](#) was replaced with the [flag of Estonia](#) by Fred Ise only to be changed by a German [Reichskriegsflagge](#) a few hours later. After the Soviets were driven out from Estonia, German [Army Group North](#) disarmed all the Forest Brother and Omakaitse groups.^[11]

Southern Estonian partisan units were yet again summoned in August 1941 under the name of Estonian Omakaitse. Members were initially selected from the closest circle of friends. Later, candidate members were asked to sign a declaration that they were not members of a Communist organization. Estonian *Omakaitse* relied on the former regulations of [Estonian Defence League](#) and Estonian Army, insofar as they were consistent with the laws of German occupation.^[12] The tasks of the *Omakaitse* were as follows:

1. defense of the coast and borders
2. fight against parachutists, sabotage, and espionage
3. guarding militarily important objects
4. fight against [Communism](#)
5. assistance to [Estonian Police](#) and guaranteeing the general safety of the citizens
6. providing assistance in case of large-scale accidents (fires, floods, diseases, etc.)
7. providing military training for its members and other loyal citizens
8. deepening and preserving the patriotic and national feelings of citizens.^[12]

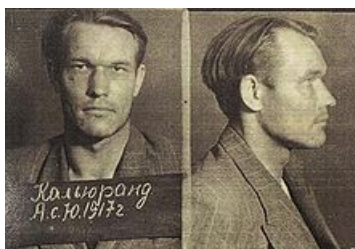
On 15 July, the *Omakaitse* had 10,200 members, on 1 December 1941, 40,599 members. Until the February 1944, the membership was roughly around 40,000.^[12]

The partisan war

By the late 1940s and early 1950s the Forest Brothers were provided with supplies, liaison officers and logistical coordination by the [British](#) (MI6), [American](#), and [Swedish secret intelligence services](#).^[citation needed] This support played a key role in directing the Baltic resistance movement, however it diminished significantly after MI6's [Operation Jungle](#) was severely compromised by the activities of British spies ([Kim Philby](#) and [others](#)) who forwarded information to the Soviets, enabling the [KGB](#) to identify, infiltrate and eliminate many Baltic guerrilla units and cut others off from any further contact with [Western intelligence](#) operatives.

The conflict between the Soviet armed forces and the Forest Brothers lasted over a decade and cost at least 50,000 lives. Estimates for the number of fighters in each country vary. Misiunas and [Taagepera](#)^[13] estimate that figures reached 30,000 in Lithuania, between 10,000 and 15,000 in Latvia and 10,000 in Estonia. Investigation of newly-opened Soviet archives during [Perestroika](#)^[citation needed] showed evidence that NKVD units dressed as forest brothers committed atrocities in order to discredit them and demoralize the civilian population.^[14]

In Estonia



Famous Estonian partisan fighter
Ants "Ants the Terrible" Kaljurand

In Estonia a total of 14,000 – 15,000 men participated in fighting during 1944–1953. Estonia's Forest Brothers were most active in [Võru County](#) and the border areas between [Pärnu](#) and [Lääne](#) Counties, with significant activity between [Tartu](#) and Viru Counties as well. From November 1944 to November

1947, they made 773 armed attacks and killed about 1000 Soviets and their supporters. [August Sabbe](#), one the last surviving Forest Brothers in Estonia, was discovered in 1978 by KGB agents posing as fellow fishermen. Instead of surrendering, he leaped into the stream and hooked himself to a log, drowning. The KGB insisted that Sabbe drowned while trying to escape, a theory difficult to credit given the shallow water and lack of cover at the site.

In Latvia

In Latvia, preparations for partisan operations were begun during the German occupation, but the leaders of these nationalist units were arrested by Nazi authorities.^[15] Longer-lived resistance units began to form at the end of the war; their ranks were composed of former [Latvian Legion](#) soldiers as well as civilians.^[16]

In Latvia, the number of active combatants peaked at between 10,000 and 15,000, while the total number of resistance fighters was as high as 40,000.^[15] One author gives a figure of up to 12,000 grouped in 700 bands during the 1945–55 decade, but definitive figures are unavailable.^[17] Over time, the partisans replaced their German weapons with Russian ones. The Central Command of Latvian resistance organizations maintained an office on Matīsa Street in [Riga](#) until 1947.^[15] In some 3,000 raids, the partisans inflicted damage on uniformed military personnel, party cadres (particularly in rural areas), buildings, and ammunition depots. Communist authorities reported 1,562 Soviet personnel killed and 560 wounded during the entire resistance period.^[17]

One account of the typical actions of the Forest Brothers is provided by Talrids Krastiņš. Talrids, a [reconnaissance](#) soldier in the [19th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS \(2nd Latvian\)](#) was recruited, along with 15 other Latvians, into a Nazi [stay-behind](#) unit at the close of the war. Escaping to the forest, the group avoided all contact with local residents and relatives, robbing trucks for money and maintaining an apartment in the center of Riga for reconnaissance and operations. At first they operated by assassinating low-level Communist party managers, but later focused their efforts on attempting to kill the head of the Latvian SSR, [Vilis Lācis](#). The group recruited a Russian woman working at the [Supreme Soviet](#) of the Latvian SSR who informed them about Lācis' transportation schedule. They set up a roadside ambush when Lācis was traveling from [Riga](#) to [Jūrmala](#), but shot up the wrong car. The second attempt likewise relied on a female Russian collaborator, but one who proved to be an undercover [NKVD](#) agent. The entire group was apprehended and sentenced to prison in 1948.^[18]

The Latvian Forest Brothers were most active in the border regions. Areas where they were most active included [Dundaga](#), Taurkalne, [Lubāna](#), [Aloja](#), and [Līvāni](#). In the eastern regions, they had ties with the Estonian Forest Brothers; in the western regions, with the Lithuanians. As in Estonia and Lithuania, the partisans were killed off and infiltrated by the MVD and [NKVD](#) over time, and as in Estonia and Lithuania, Western assistance and intelligence was severely compromised by Soviet [counter-intelligence](#) and Latvian double agents such as Augusts Bergmanis and Vidvuds Sveics.^[19] Furthermore, the Soviets gradually consolidated their rule in the cities, help from rural civilians was not as forthcoming, and special military and security units were sent to control the partisans.^[17] The last groups emerged from the forest and surrendered to the authorities in 1957.^[19]

In Lithuania

Main article: Lithuanian partisans



Wall of former KGB headquarters in Vilnius inscribed with names of those tortured and killed in its basement.

Among the three countries, the resistance was best organized in Lithuania, where guerrilla units were effectively able to control whole regions of the countryside until 1949. Their armaments included [Czech Skoda guns](#), [Russian Maxim heavy machine guns](#), assorted [mortars](#) and a wide variety of mainly German and Soviet light machine guns and submachine guns.^[4] When not in direct battles with the Soviet Army or special [NKVD](#) units, they significantly delayed the consolidation of Soviet rule through ambush, sabotage, assassination of local Communist activists and officials, freeing imprisoned guerrillas, and printing underground newspapers.^[20] Captured Lithuanian Forest Brothers themselves often faced torture and [summary execution](#) while their relatives faced [deportation](#) to Siberia (cf. [quotation](#)). Reprisals against pro-Soviet farms and villages were harsh. The NKVD units, named *People's Defense Platoons* (known by the Lithuanians as [pl. sribai](#), from the [Russian](#): *izstrebiteli* – *destroyers*) used shock tactics to discourage further resistance such as displaying executed partisans' corpses in village courtyards.^{[4][21]}

The report of a commission formed at a [KGB](#) prison a few days after the October 15, 1956 arrest of Adolfas Ramanauskas ("Vanagas"), chief commander of the *Lietuvos Laisvės Kovotojų Sąjūdis* or "Union of Lithuanian Freedom Fighters", noted the following:

“ The right eye is covered with haematoma, on the eyelid there are six stab wounds made, judging by their diameter, by a thin wire or nail going deep into the eyeball. Multiple haematomas in the area of the stomach, a cut wound on a finger of the right hand. The genitalia reveal the following: a large tear wound on the right side of the scrotum and a wound on the left side, both testicles and spermatic ducts are missing.^[22] ”

[Juozas Lukša](#) was among those who managed to escape to Western states; he wrote his memoirs there and was killed after having returned to occupied Lithuania in 1951.

[Pranas Končius](#) (code name *Adomas*), was the last Lithuanian anti-soviet resistance fighter killed in action by Soviet forces on July 6, 1965 (some sources indicate he shot himself in order to avoid capture on July 13). He was awarded the Cross of Vytis posthumously in 2000.

[Benediktas Mikulis](#), one of the last known partisans to remain in the forest, emerged in 1971. He was arrested in the 1980s and spent several years in prison.

Decline of the resistance movements

See also: [Operation Priboi](#)

By the early 1950s, the Soviet forces had eradicated most of the Forest Brother resistance. Intelligence gathered by the Soviet spies in the West and KGB infiltrators within the resistance movement, in combination with large-scale Soviet operations in 1952 managed to end the campaigns against them.

Many of the remaining Forest Brothers laid down their weapons when offered an [amnesty](#) by the Soviet authorities after [Joseph Stalin](#)'s death in 1953, although isolated engagements continued into the 1960s. The last individual guerrillas are known to have remained in hiding and evaded capture into the 1980s, by which time the Baltic states were pressing for independence through peaceful means. (See [Sajūdis](#), The Baltic Way, [Singing Revolution](#)) All three republics regained their independence in 1991.

Aftermath, memorials and remembrances



Lithuanian partisan veterans in 2009 at 65th anniversary of [Battle of Tannenberg Line](#)

Many Forest Brothers persisted in the hope that [Cold War](#) hostilities between the West, [which never formally recognized the Soviet occupation](#), and the Soviet Union might escalate to an armed conflict in which the [Baltic states](#) would be liberated. This never materialized, and according to Mart Laar^[3] many of the surviving former Forest Brothers remained bitter that the West did not take on the Soviets militarily. (See also [Yalta Conference](#), [Western betrayal](#)). When the brutal suppression of the [Hungarian Revolution](#) in 1956 did not bring about an intervention by, or a supportive response from, Western Powers, organized resistance in the Baltic States declined further.

As the conflict was relatively undocumented by the Soviet Union (the Baltic fighters were formally charged as common criminals), some consider it and the Soviet-Baltic conflict as a whole to be an unknown or forgotten war.^{[4][22][23]} Discussion of resistance was suppressed under the Soviet regime. Writings on the subject by Baltic emigrants were often labelled as examples of "ethnic sympathy" and disregarded. Laar's research efforts, begun in Estonia in the late 1980s, are considered to have opened the door for further study.^[24]

In 1999, the Lithuanian [Seimas](#) (parliament) enacted a [declaration of independence](#) that had been made on February 16, 1949, the 31st anniversary of the February 16, 1918 declaration of independence, by elements of the resistance unified^[4] under the "Movement of the Struggle for the Freedom of Lithuania".

“ ... a universal, organised, armed resistance namely, self-defence, by the Lithuanian State, did take place in Lithuania during 1944–1953, against the soviet occupation ... the goal ... was the liberation of Lithuania, relying upon the provisions of the Atlantic Charter and a sovereign right acknowledged by the democratic world, by bearing arms against one of the World War II Aggressors ... The Council of the Movement of the Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania ... constituted the supreme political and military structure ... and was the sole legal authority within the territory of occupied Lithuania.^[25] ”

In Latvia and Lithuania, Forest Brothers veterans receive a small pension. In Lithuania, the third Sunday in May is commemorated as Partisan's Day. As of 2005, there are about 350 surviving Forest Brothers in Lithuania.^[26]

In a 2001 lecture in [Tallinn](#), U.S. Senator [John McCain](#) acknowledged the Estonian Forest Brothers and their efforts to liberate their country.^[27]

Films

The Canadian film *Legendi loojad* (Creators of the Legend) about the Estonian Forest Brothers was released in 1963. The film was funded by donations of Estonians in exile.^[28]

The 1966 Soviet drama film *Nobody Wanted to Die* (*Lithuanian*: Niekas nenorėjo mirti) by Soviet-Lithuanian film director [Vytautas Žalakevičius](#) shows the tragedy of the conflict in which "a brother goes against the brother." The film garnered Žalakevičius the [USSR State Prize](#) and international recognition, and is the most well known film portrayal of the conflict.

A 1997 documentary film *We Lived for Estonia* tells the story of the Estonian Forest Brothers from the viewpoint of one of the participants.

The 2004 film *Utterly Alone* (*Lithuanian*: *Vienui Vieni*) portrays the travails of Lithuanian partisan leader [Juozas Lukša](#) who travelled twice to [Western Europe](#) in attempts to gain support for the armed resistance.

The 2005 documentary film *Stirna* tells the story of Izabelė Vilimaitė (codenames *Stirna* and *Sparnuota*), an American-born Lithuanian who moved to Lithuania with her family in 1932. A medical student and pharmacist, she was an underground medic and source of medical supplies for the partisans,

eventually becoming a district liaison. She infiltrated the local [Komsomol](#) (Communist Youth), was discovered, captured, and escaped twice. After going underground full time, she was suspected of having been turned by the KGB as an informant and was nearly executed by the partisans. Her bunker was eventually discovered by the KGB and she was captured a third time, interrogated and killed.^{[29][30]}

The 2007 Estonian film *Sons of One Forest* (*Estonian*: *Ühe metsa pojad*) follows the story of two Forest Brothers in Southern Estonia, who fight together with an Estonian from Waffen-SS division against the Soviet occupants.

The last Forest Brother

The last known forest brother was Jānis Pīnups, who became a legal citizen of Latvia again only in 1994. He had gone to the forest in 1945 as a member of a resistance organization called "Don't Serve the Occupying Army".

Jānis Pīnups never had a Soviet passport and his legal status was nonexistent during the era of Soviet occupation. His hideaway was located in a forest in Pelēči parish. In 1994, a new passport of the restored Republic of Latvia was issued to Jānis Pīnups: he had said that he was waiting for a moment when he could again see Riga as the capital of an independent Latvia.^[31]

See also

- Goryani
- [Crusaders \(Ustaša\)](#)
- [Lešni](#)
- [Romanian anti-communist resistance movement](#)
- [Cursed soldiers](#)
- [Hovhannes Bagramyan](#)
- Estonian anti-German resistance movement 1941-1944
- [Ukrainian Insurgent Army](#)
- [March deportation](#)
- [Occupation of the Baltic states](#)

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External links

- [Could the Baltic States have resisted to the Soviet Union?](#) – Forum discussion, includes many links and pictures of Lithuanian partisans
- [Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania](#)
- [Lithuanian Tauras District Partisans and Deportation Museum](#)
- [Museum of Occupations of Estonia](#)
- [Occupation Museum of Latvia](#)
- [Crimes of Soviet Communists](#) – Wide collection of sources and links
- *Vienui Vieni* ("Utterly Alone") – 2004 film about the Lithuanian Forest Brothers, based on the real life events of Juozas Lukša aka Juozas L. Daumantas
- [What Happened in Lithuania in 1940?](#) – Article by Alfred Erich Senn
- [War Chronicle of the Partisans](#) – Chronicle of Lithuanian partisans, June 1944 – May 1949, prepared by Algis Rupainis

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