

The Forest Sisters: Women in the Estonian Post-World War II Forest Brother Movement

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In historical tradition, the ‘forest brother movement’ means going into hiding in the woods, bogs, or on bog islands to escape wars or looting raids. The term ‘forest brother’ came into use as a more contemporary general term during the German occupation (1941–1944). It originally meant the brotherhood in arms of the time of the Summer War of 1941 but its meaning quickly started broadening. Although forest brothers are even nowadays defined as participants in armed resistance, generally speaking, in historical literature, everyone who hid themselves from the Soviet regime is referred to using this term, regardless of age and gender.

While ‘the forest brother movement’ and ‘forest brother’ are established general terms, ‘forest sister’ is more of a colloquial expression. Thus, that term has not gained general acceptance in historical literature. Although as a rule, the gender of forest brothers is abstract in research papers, the term itself can lead to the mistaken understanding that only men hid themselves or fought against the Soviet regime. For that reason, this overview attempts to fill that gap and shed some light on the role of women in the history of the forest brother movement after the Second World War.

Keywords: Forest sisters, Deportation, Resistance, Concealment, Forest brothers.

It is difficult (if not impossible) to describe the entire history of the forest brother movement under a single denominator. For this is a movement which consisted of thousands of individual histories which are seldom connected to one another. Since the Estonian forest brother movement was little-organised, fragmented, and actually quite passive in its nature, it can be said in summation that this history is not so much one of combat than it is one of concealment. For this reason, it can also be argued that one could associate women with the forest brother movement (in one way or another) even more than men.

One should recognise the phenomenon of the Forest Brothers in connection the term "Forest Brother". Historically, the term referred to individuals seeking refuge from wars or raids in forests, swamps or bog islands. The phrase was in use as far back as the 19th century, but it only entered into common usage during the first half of the 20th century. Originally, "Forest Brother" was a broad term that described individuals who had evaded conscription or found themselves in conflict with the authorities or their landowners. The goal of these Forest Brothers was not to fight for national freedom, but rather to protect their own lives and liberty.

"Forest Brother" acquired its contemporary meaning during the German occupation of Estonia (1941–1944). During the 1941 uprising, also known as the Summer War, a distinction was still made between passive fugitives and the more active resistance fighters (or partisans¹). Initially, "partisan" was nothing more than a synonym for "bandit".² But, in August 1942, Adolf Hitler ordered that "for psychological reasons, the use of the word 'partisan', a word introduced and glorified by the Bolsheviks, must stop". For this reason, the occupying German authorities wanted to distance themselves from the term.³ Consequently, the participants of the Summer War resistance movement gradually assumed the title of Forest Brothers, with the intention of emphasising their role as armed resistance fighters. In this context, the concept of the Forest Brothers hinted at armed rebellion first and foremost. Throughout the period of the German occupation, however, the concept evolved to encompass a broader range of meanings.⁴

Although the term "Forest Brothers" has been used specifically to designate armed resistance fighters, in writing throughout history it typically refers to all who sought refuge from the Soviet authorities, regardless of age or gender. This includes individuals who actively fought against Soviet power.

Estonian has no gender-specific nouns. While there are a few ways to indicate gender,

¹ See e.g. Arno Raag, "Metsavennad", in: *Postimees*, 02-07-1942, no. 154, p. 1.

² See e.g. "Vägedejuhataja üleskutse", in: *Sakala*, 29-09-1941, no. 37, p. 1.

³ Aivar Niglas, Toomas Hiio, "Estonian Defence Battalions / Police Battalions in the German Army Forces", in: *Estonia 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity*, edited by Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, Indrek Paavle, Tallinn: IKUES, 2006, p. 843.

⁴ "Metsavendade päev Kehras", in: *Postimees*, 10-07-1942, no. 161, p. 2.

they typically involve adding male or female suffixes. This feature of the language has led to contradictory-sounding constructions like “female Forest Brother”.

Given the many and differing accounts of individuals’ lives, recounting the whole story of the Estonian Forest Brothers using a common gender denominator is challenging, if not impossible. Admittedly, the term “Forest Brothers” might suggest that only men resisted or concealed themselves from the Soviet regime. But this would be a mistake, and any attempt to distinctly categorise genders in these stories could suggest a reality which is artificial and misleading. Given this context, the following discussion will briefly examine the role of women in the Forest Brother movement during the post-World War II period.

This article examines the role of women in Estonian anti-Soviet (armed) resistance in the 1940s and 1950s, makes mention of some individuals that became members of the resistance movement, and analyses the underlying motivation behind the choices that they made. This paper also delves into some issues regarding terminology, and explores possible future research avenues. Considering the constraints of this paper, the author does not aim to give an in-depth comparative overview of similar resistance movements in other countries; it focuses solely on a case study of Estonian women who acted as partisans.

The Forest Brothers’ helpers

When it comes to the subject of the Estonian Forest Brothers, those legal residents who helped these individuals to hide played a pivotal role. This happened even though legal residents themselves struggled with the hardships of collective farm life. As far as this goes, the subject of the Forest Brothers’ allies attracts special attention, and what follows provides a general outline of this phenomenon.

One thing worthy of note is that there was a higher presence of women than men among those who helped the Forest Brothers. This can be substantiated by looking at the relevant demographic statistics. Following the war, the male population in Estonia was significantly reduced due to factors such as active military service, imprisonment in camps (including prisoner of war (POW) and filter camps), conscription into the Red Army and hiding in order to escape repression. By 1 January 1945, the registered population numbered 885,727 individuals (251,018 men, 404,799 women and 229,910 children). Disregarding children, the male-to-female ratio among legal residents was 1:1.6.⁵

Understandably, precise statistics regarding the number of helpers are unavailable. This problem is made more acute by the lack of consistency in existing Soviet “anti-banditry” records. Nonetheless, official data indicates that a total of 9,870 arrests occurred during anti-banditry operations that took place between 1944 and 1953, with helpers constituting merely 1,803, or less than a fifth, of those arrested. The Soviet approach involved recurring

⁵ “Сведения о количестве населения” [Data about population numbers], 22-01-1945, in: *Estonian National Archives (ENA)*, fond. ERAF1, opis 3, file 437, sheet 9.

deadlines intended to propel an ongoing fight to “eradicate banditry”. As a result, the pressure on those helping gradually increased. Whereas in 1945, helpers accounted for only 5.4% of the total arrests, by 1948 the share of helpers arrested in anti-banditry operations soared 29.4%, surpassing the number of actual “bandits”. By 1949, this proportion rose to 44.7%, after which it decreased to 41.4% by 1950 and 40.3% by 1951 before finally tapering off. In 1952, helpers constituted 31.8% of all anti-banditry arrests;⁶ in 1953 it was 25.1%.

In this context, starting in 1948, the percentage of women among those arrested in anti-banditry operations saw a significant increase. To illustrate this, one may look at several major court cases related to the Forest Brothers. Before going into details, it is important to note that the label “squad” was used loosely, for it sometimes grouped together individuals who were not in hiding together or engaging in coordinated actions in any way. Moreover, the squads were named after the apparent leader, who might not have been the actual leader. There were frequent punishments for a number of criminal cases. As the table below shows, women usually acted as helpers, although there were exceptions.

	Trial date	Persons arrested in connection with a criminal case	Arrested women
Estonian Liberation Committee ⁷	12.12.1945	32	11
Arnold Leetsaar's squad ⁸	26.03.1946	24	6
Karl Kask's squad ⁹	16.06.1946	12	3
10th Green Partisan Battalion ¹⁰	31.08.1946	39	15
Friedrich Kurg's squad ¹¹	12.04.1947	12	8
Otto Helm's squad ¹²	05.02.1948	11	5
Voldemar Jakovits's squad ¹³	12.03.1949	28	11

⁶ Tõnu Tannberg, “Relvastatud vastupanuliikumine Eestis aastatel 1944–1953 julgeoleku statistikapeeglis”, in: *Tuna*, no. 1, 1999, p. 29.

⁷ Investigation file on Voldemar Hendrikson, Leida Juhan, Linda Moorats and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 85.

⁸ Investigation file on Arnold Leetsaar, Hilda Enmann, Lea Einmann and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 26031.

⁹ Investigation file on Arno Nieminen, Elena Adamtau, Helmi Järvesoo and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 25996.

¹⁰ Investigation file on Friedrich Lukk, Agnessa Eher, Asta Eher and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 32.

¹¹ Investigation file on Olaf Tammark, Marta Kurg, Kinda Klettenberg and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 374.

¹² Investigation file on Otto Helm, Leonida Luukas, Laine Luuka and others, in: *ENA*, ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 26232.

¹³ Investigation file on Voldemar Jakovits, Loviisa Altermann, Hilda Kalmist and others, in: *ENA*, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 25810.

Richard Saaliste's squad ¹⁴	09.09.1950	24	7
Ants Kaljurand's ("Ants the Terrible") squad ¹⁵	13.11.1950	19	7

This table is illustrative; it does not definitively establish that a third of those brought to trial were women. All the groups listed above were active squads, and most had already become notorious within the regime, instilling fear in local communists for longer or shorter periods. Other squads also represented attempts at some sort of organisation, and were the focus of later investigations. Since, however, a complete overview of the participation of women in these squads would call for a review of thousands of investigation files, these other groups have been excluded from this discussion.

Nevertheless, these figures are of secondary importance; they represent only a small fraction of the total number of individuals who were repressed in the execution of the anti-banditry operations. In the Soviet Union, the issue of helpers was conventionally resolved by means of mass deportations.¹⁶ Estonia endured such a fate in March 1949. While the precise figures may differ slightly between various reports, again it is worth noting the share of women among the deportees. For instance, on 12 April, the Minister of the Interior of the Estonian SSR presented a list of 20,535 deportees in Moscow, of which 48.1% or 9,890 were women (approximately 30% were children and approximately 22% were men).¹⁷ Needless to say, not all of the 10,000 or so women deported were aiding the Forest Brothers, but "guilt" was an abstract notion in actions such as these. As part of the "class struggle", the primary goal of deportation was to weaken the "bandits' economic base" and break passive resistance in rural areas (thus bolstering collectivisation through fear).

In its essence, the Estonian Forest Brother movement was poorly organised, fragmented and largely passive. As a result, the majority of these partisans heavily relied on outside help, with women constituting a significant portion of such helpers. Thus, women were not mere bystanders in the story of the Forest Brothers, but direct participants who faced persecution from the Soviet authorities on a par with that suffered by men.

Forest Sisters

The story of the Forest Sisters can be divided into two chapters: the time before the March 1949 deportation and the time after it. Prior to 1949, the presence of Forest Sisters among

¹⁴ Investigation file on Vambola Oras, Asta Kala, Erika Kuusk, Linda Tamsalu and others, in: ENA, fond ERAF.130SM, opis 1, file 9329.

¹⁵ Investigation file on Ants Kaljurand, Mari Jalakas, Elfriida Kapak and others, in: ENA, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 25819.

¹⁶ Meelis Saueaak. "Märtsiküüditamine NSV Liidu sõjajärgsete massideporteerimiste kontekstis", in: *Tuna*, no. 4, 2019, pp. 80–97.

¹⁷ "Dokumente 1949. aasta märtsiküüditamisest, XI osa", in: *Akadeemia*, no. 12, 1999, pp. 2648–2655 [Minister of Internal Affairs of the ESSR, Report No. 1/00443, issued to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR, 04-12-1949].

those in hiding was marginal, which makes it difficult to arrive at any general conclusions based on the data that is available. Still, the total number of fugitives probably peaked in the autumn of 1944 – before, during and immediately after the Red Army invasion.

During the post-war era, there were very few women among those in hiding. This was due purely to practical matters. Abandoning the household was usually not an option, and hiding with children posed substantial difficulties. Above all, there was, at first, little reason for women to hide, as they were not targeted by the initial wave of repressions. The Second World War was predominantly deemed a “man’s war”, with women traditionally serving in medical roles, free from the threat of conscription or ending up involved in combat. And while women were gaining an increasing presence among technical staff in local administrations, it was rare for any of them to take up “senior” positions. Similarly, while politicians, police officers, military personnel, the economic elite and other active members of the pre-war society of the Republic of Estonia were also engaged in the fight against “bourgeois nationalism”, these groups were also predominantly male.

In short, women were not confronted with direct retribution from Soviet authorities for their activities during the Republic of Estonia or the German occupation. Neither were they at risk of conscription into the Red Army, which became a major factor motivating mass hiding in 1944. Thus, the percentage of women among those hiding was initially low. Over the years, however, this number increased.

A more significant crackdown on the Forest Brothers’ allies began in 1948. One of the results of this crackdown was an increasing number of women joining those in hiding. This often occurred as a result of interrogations,¹⁸ and in many cases, these women were joined by their sheltering husbands, fathers or brothers, which led to many leaving their homes and living in semi-secrecy.

Another catalyst for the increasing numbers of those in hiding was Sovietisation – in particular, the subsequent land reform and collectivisation campaign. The Land Reform Act was implemented through a series of ominous regulations. Leaving aside the issue of “kulak households”, Decree No. 380, declared on 14 December 1944, outlined procedures for transferring land and property from “German collaborators”.¹⁹ Another infamous decree (dating from 4 September 1945 – No. 790) equated the households of Forest Brothers (“bandits”) and their supporters with “occupiers’ collaborators”. This decree targeted families in which (it was said) “the head of the family or a member of the family is a bandit

¹⁸ See e.g. excerpt from the interrogation protocol of Arnold Märton, 05-02-1948, in: Martin S. Kull, *Osula Ott ja tema pillimehed*, Tartu: Eesti Ajalookirjastus, 2016, pp. 109–110.

¹⁹ EKP KK ja ENSV RKN määrus nr. 380 ENSV Ülemnõukogu 1944. a 17. septembri seaduse “Saksa okupantide poolt äravõetud maa tagasiandmise kohta Eesti NSV talupoegadele” täitmise käigu ja ENSV põllumajanduse taastamise esmajärjekordsete abinõude kohta, 14. detsember 1944, in: *ENSV Teataja*, no. 15/186, 1944 [Estonian Communist Party Central Committee (ECP CC) and ESSR Council of People’s Commissars Regulation No. 380, 14-12-1944].

fighting against Soviet power, and the family maintains contact with and supports relatives involved in crimes against Soviet power”.²⁰ The land, buildings and equipment of those targeted were also subject to inventory and disposal. Families were allowed to retain 5–7 hectares of land, along with a cow, a pig, a sheep and basic farming tools.²¹

The policy focused on persecuting “hostile households”. Leveraging the idea of the “class struggle”, increased taxes and impossible-to-meet legal standards were introduced to help eliminate “kulak” and “bandit” households. Non-compliance with these taxes and standards often resulted in actual imprisonment. As a result of this, household abandonment rates increased. And while not all these people sought refuge in the forests, a considerable body of semi-legal individuals emerged as a result.²² To illustrate this point, consider the following excerpt from the interrogation protocol of Forest Sister Erna Lüidik:²³

“In 1946, when I couldn’t meet the standards imposed on the farm, they confiscated my horse and started raiding my house for bandits. The farm was surrounded and searched on two occasions. Fearing the security services would discover my support for the bandits, I handed the household over to my mother-in-law, and in March 1947, I fled to the forest to join the bandits, with whom I’ve remained until my recent arrest [Erna Lüidik was arrested on 28 October 1949].”²⁴

While children weren’t common in the forest, they were not entirely uncommon either. Some couples spent years living in the forest with their children. One example is the Tamm family, who hid themselves around the Parika bog. The Tamm family lived in the village of Kotsama, in the Kõo parish. In January 1945, during the attempted arrest of the father, forest guard Voldemar Tamm, two raiders were shot.²⁵ After that, Tamm went into hiding. Enduring harassment from the authorities, his wife, Laine, also sought refuge through hiding, leaving their son Peep in her parents’ care. In April 1946, their daughter Eha was born. In the autumn of 1948, their son Peep (born 1944) also joined his mother, father and sister. The family survived in forests and bogs for nearly a decade. Voldemar

²⁰ For more information on the implementation of the decree, see *Vastupanuliikumine Eestis 1944–1949: dokumentide kogu*, edited by Evald Laasi, Tallinn: Nõmmõco, 1992, pp. 24–26.

²¹ EKP KK ja ENSV RKN määrus nr. 790, 14. detsembri 1944 määruse punkt 1 “a” ja “b” täiendamise kohta, 4. september 1945, in: *ENSV Teataja*, no. 35/546, 1945, [ECP CC and ESSR Council of People’s Commissars Regulation No. 790, 04-09-1945].

²² “EKP KK I sekretäri N. Karotamme ettekanne NSV Liidu MIN esimehele J. Stalinile, 17. jaanuar 1949”, in: *Eesti NSV Põllumajanduse kollektiviseerimine: dokumentide ja materjalide kogumik*, edited by E. Laasi, chief editor E. Tõnurist, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1978, pp. 489–494 [Report by Nikolai Karotamm, First Secretary of the ECP CC, to Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, 17-01-1949].

²³ Erna Lüidik’s husband Johannes was arrested in the summer of 1945 after he was labelled as a “German collaborator”.

²⁴ Excerpt from the interrogation protocol of Erna Lüidik, in: Martin S. Kull. *...kuni surm teid lahutab*, Tartu: Eesti Ajalookirjastus, 2014, pp. 80–82.

²⁵ Report drafted by the Head of the NKVD Department of Viljandimaa, 11-08-1945, in: Urmas Kuusik. *Aimla metsavennad 1944–1987*, Urmas Kuusik: Põltsamaa, 2018, p. 87 (ENA, fond ERAF.129, opis 1, case 11292).

Tamm was arrested on 23 May 1954.²⁶ Following her husband's death, Laine Tamm relocated with her children to her aunt's house in the Jõgeva district, eventually gaining legal status on 26 May 1954.²⁷

The 1949 deportation and the Forest Sisters

In March 1949, during Operation Priboi, approximately 7,550 Estonian families and 20,600 to 20,700 individuals were deported.²⁸ Orders to seize the entire reserve were issued as early as the second day of the operation. Later estimates suggest that up to 10,000 individuals avoided deportation in March 1949. A significant portion of this group chose to hide (as did many who simply feared they might be among the designated deportees), while others found themselves in a semi-illegal position, often undergoing bureaucratic trials for violating passport regulations.²⁹

Accurately estimating the number of those in hiding is difficult because many individuals only sought refuge for short periods following the deportation. A state of disorder and chronic labour shortages in all areas of work made it possible to live as a semi-illegal person. One thing worthy of particular note during this period is that there was a substantial increase in the proportion of women among those in hiding.

To illustrate, I will discuss the last major operation in Estonia, which took place in the Vastseliina district in February and March 1953.³⁰ In this region there were four larger groups who were known to have been active, their members totalling 30. The operation led to the arrest and death of 45 individuals, with 16 deaths, four of which were women. Their reasons for hiding are described as follows:

"Elsa VÄHI, born in 1924, evaded deportation and headed to distant regions of the USSR in 1949.

Lehte-Kai OJAMÄE, daughter of Alfred, born in 1924, was a former member of an anti-Soviet organisation. She evaded deportation and headed to distant regions of the Soviet Union in 1949.

Leida GRÜNTAL, daughter of Karl, born in 1923, avoided deportation and headed to distant parts of the Soviet Union in 1949 [...]

Mahti SAARNIIT, daughter of Joseph, born in 1927, daughter of a kulak, evaded deportation and

²⁶ Reports drafted by the ESSR Council of Ministers and the KGB Commissioner in the Suure-Jaani District, Major Amossov, 26-05-1954, 07-06-1954, in: Urmas Kuusik, *Aimla metsavennad*, p. 102. For more information, see the investigation file on Voldemar Tamm, in: ENA, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, case 4472.

²⁷ Kuusik, *Aimla metsavennad*, pp. 93–96, 104.

²⁸ Aigi Rahi-Tamm, Andres Kahar, "Deportation operation Priboi in 1949", in: *Estonia Since 1944: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity*, edited by Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, Indrek Paavle, Tallinn: IKUES, 2009, pp. 445–446.

²⁹ Indrek Paavle, "Soviet Passport System in the Estonian SSR", in: *Estonia Since 1944*, p. 82.

³⁰ Tõnu Tannberg, "Julgeolekuorganite tegevusest metsavendluse mahasurumisel 1953. aasta esimestel kuudel", in: *Akadeemia*, no. 3, 2005, p. 554–573.

headed to remote areas of the USSR in 1949.”³¹

While this document gives an idea of the general patterns of hiding, it is interrogation protocols which better convey individual motives. For instance, a passage from Johanna Martins’ interrogation protocol reads:

“One early morning, my son Elmar Martins came home and told me that many cars were arriving in our village, Päinurme. They were taking away people identified as kulaks. As my husband was convicted and imprisoned, there was reason to believe that I might be taken too [...] That evening, I heard from my mother-in-law, Anna Martins, that soldiers were searching for me and my son. Learning this, we no longer dared to stay at home. My son and I decided to go into hiding. We found refuge in the forests of Päinurme and Adavere.”³²

Johanna Martins and her son Elmar spent years hiding with Hugo Ruusna’s and Ülo Altermann’s squad, which predominantly consisted of individuals who became fugitives during or after the deportation operation – many of whom were women. Here are the stories of three women, which illustrate the conditions people were forced to endure during this period.

Johanna Martins’ husband was arrested in 1945. Martins went into hiding in 1949, and in 1954 she was recruited as an agent for the Ministry of State Security (MGB), where she was given the code name “Mutt”. Johanna’s recruitment likely involved a mix of threats and incentives. She began by contacting her former accomplice, Aime Juga, through mutual acquaintances, with whom she then went into hiding. The agent successfully fulfilled her mission by helping officials capture one of Estonia’s most-wanted forest brothers, Ülo Altermann.³³

Johanna Martins’ story, like many recruitment stories, was a tragic story of how the difficult circumstances of the time were being leveraged by the security services. More specifically, Johanna’s son, Elmar Martins, was arrested on 15 January 1953, and his mother was most likely coerced or persuaded into cooperating with the promise of securing a lighter sentence for her son. This promise was never fulfilled. Elmar Martins was sentenced to death on 14 April 1954 and executed on 9 August of the same year. Aime Juga also failed to evade punishment, receiving an 8-year prison sentence from the tribunal on 24 July 1954. Her husband, Voldemar Juga, was killed during a raid on 26 November 1953.³⁴

Heinrich Mihkelson’s household was labelled as a “kulak” after the war. In March 1949, he and his wife Evi went into hiding, joining Hugo Ruusna’s squad. Their daughter, Ene

³¹ ESSR MGB special report for the Secretary of the ECP CC, 06-04-1956, in: *Eesti metsavennad 1944–1957*, edited by Tiit Noormets, Helina Tamman, Tartu: ENA, 2014, pp. 513–519.

³² Extract from the interrogation protocol of Johanna Martins, in: Martin S. Kull, *Puhake, paremad pojad IV*, Tartu: Eesti Ajalookirjastus, 2013. See investigation file on Elmar Martins, in: ENA, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 18355.

³³ ESSR MGB special report for the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, 20-04-1954, in: *Eesti metsavennad 1944–1957*, pp. 539–542.

³⁴ See investigation file on Aime Juga in: ENA, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, case 18304.

Mihkelson (a future writer), stayed with relatives. In February 1953, Heinrich Mihkelson was killed during a raid. After this, his wife Evi continued hiding with Hans Sapp until November 1955. Evi Mihkelson was granted legal status in December 1955 and tasked with persuading Sapp to assume legal status. Her enthusiasm for fulfilling this task seemed to be limited. Sapp received legal status in 1958.³⁵

The Alber family serves as another illustration of the fate of the Forest Sisters following the deportation of 1949. Karl Alber, the family's patriarch, was arrested in 1944, and the household was deemed "hostile". Aliisa Alber, his wife, and their daughters Aino and Laine were evicted from their home, before they settled in the sauna of their former residence. All three faced deportation in 1949.³⁶ However, the Alberts managed to hide before they were deported – although this led to the breakup of the family. Aliide, now using the name Aliide Mägi, sought refuge with relatives in Tartu County, leading a semi-illegal life and working in various collective and state farms. Meanwhile, the sisters hid in their aunt's house in the village of Kurista. Their story might have faded into a routine tale of silent hiding if not for Üinart Mitt, a Forest Brother who found shelter in the same household. To keep himself occupied while he was in hiding, Üinart Mitt tuned into The Voice of America and other radio broadcasts. And, based on these broadcasts, he began to put together the underground publication The Voice of Freedom, which featured contributions from the Alber sisters. The publication was reproduced and distributed manually. On 3 November 1954, both Mitt and the Albers were arrested.³⁷ In May 1955, Laine Alber was sentenced to 10 years in a camp (she was released in 1956), and Aino was acquitted "due to lack of evidence". Mitt was sentenced to death and executed in September 1955.³⁸

The Involvement of Women in Armed Resistance

First of all, it is necessary to define the concept of "armed resistance". While the act of concealing oneself was considered resistance in Soviet terms, it doesn't qualify as armed resistance. Estonia's post-war Forest Brother movement was scattered and disorganised, and it could hardly be classified as a full-fledged partisan group. However, the tactics were similar: terror, diversion, sabotage. In short, they attacked authorities and their representatives. While some economic targets were hit, whether this could be classified as direct resistance is debatable. Although these actions have been described as arbitrary requisitioning or even "undermining the economy of the USSR", in a context of resistance they fall under the banner of extracting war spoils.

Armed resistance remained a minority endeavour. Although thousands of people pos-

³⁵ Hans Sapp, "Minu Kolgata", in: Martin S. Kull, *Puhake, paremad pojad IV*, pp. 106–184.

³⁶ Deportation file of Aino, Aliide and Laine Alber, in: ENA, fond ERAF.3-N, opis 1, file 1378.

³⁷ ESSR KGB special report for the ECP CC, 11-03-1964, in: *Eesti metsavennad 1944–1957*, pp. 544–545.

³⁸ Investigation file on Üinart Mitt, Laine Alber, Ain Alberi and others, in: ENA, fond ERAF.129SM, opis 1, file 18378.

sessed weapons, only a small fraction of those in hiding used them, and these weapons were often for self-defence or hunting. While some women in hiding also had access to firearms, they were likely a minority. The majority of women were passive fugitives. Moreover, owning a weapon was often disadvantageous as it was always considered an aggravating circumstance in the event that the one who owned it got arrested. Security authorities perceived women as “less threatening” and for the most part classified them as “illegals”.

The role of women within forest squads is evident in the following excerpts of official documents:

Virve Rekor: “As a member of an armed terrorist group, Rekor cooked, washed and mended bandits’ clothes.”³⁹

Elfriede Mägi: “The tasks included cooking, laundry and cleaning the bunker.”⁴⁰

The description of women’s tasks in these quotes (based on interrogation protocols) could well be enough to depict the situation of the majority of women in the movement. And while not all women had to perform these kinds of chores, this sort of thing was still typical. Given that the Forest Brothers and Sisters were primarily simple farmers, roles within these groups were aligned with customary divisions of labour, with efficiency being the decisive factor. With groups with women, assigning tasks like cooking or clothing repair was unlikely to bring about any significant disputes. These roles were undertaken by those with the required experience and skill. Moreover, within such “households”, everyone had a range of responsibilities, irrespective of gender.

It was uncommon for women to participate in Forest Brother actions, and it is important not to exaggerate the importance of armed actions, as most participants were not directly involved. However, this did not undermine the possibility for women to participate; such a fact is corroborated by various references documented in Soviet investigations. For example, women took part in one of the most major actions engaged in by the post-war resistance, in which a significant number of activists of the Sõmerpalu parish met their end in March 1946.⁴¹

The final story that commands attention concerns Redeese Tomson. Redeese was one of the most notorious Forest Sisters in the eyes of the Soviets, and her career as a resistance fighter put many men to shame. Tomson was one of the few women in Estonia (if not the only one) who stood apart amongst the fugitives as a particularly dangerous resistance

³⁹ Excerpt from an operational report of the ESSR MGB Department of Jõhvimaa, 30-06-1950, in: *Eesti metsavennad 1944–1957*, pp. 408–420.

⁴⁰ Excerpt from the interrogation protocol of Elfriede Mägi, 01-07-1948, in: Mati Mandel, *Kogu tõde Hirmus Antsust*, Tallinn: Eesti Ajaloomuuseum, 2010, p. 72.

⁴¹ “Eesti NSV siseasjade rahvakomissari operatiivteade 22. märtsist 1946”, in: *Akadeemia*, 1992, no. 6, p. 1314 [operational report by the ESSR People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, 22-03-1946].

fighter or “bandit-terrorist”. However, her actions should not be considered separately from those of her partner, the legendary Saaremaa Forest Brother, Elmar Ilp. Elmar Ilp was already a living legend, and rumours about him not only spread within Estonia, they also reached the free world.⁴² Stories published in expatriate Estonian newspapers suggest that legends about Ilp’s activities were widespread in Estonia, and that they reached the West via refugees. While much of the lore is fantastical, the stories often mention Ilp’s inseparable companion, Redeese Tomson.

Take this relatively objective perspective from Eduard (Edward) Õun, who fled Saaremaa for Sweden in 1955:

“He [Elmar Ilp] had become a chief among the Forest Brothers. People said that either his lawful wife or his lover worked alongside him. Whatever the case actually is, she had been a strong fighter. Ilp was pursued and cornered in the woods but he managed to escape. Both he and his female companion were well-armed; they carried submachine guns with ample ammunition. He also led a larger group of Forest Brothers [...] Ilp and his female companion fell to enemy bullets. Encircled by the Reds in the Aeska swamp in central Saaremaa, they fought valiantly until the last bullet. Both corpses were displayed at the NKVD’s (now MVD’s) yard on Pikk Street in Kuressaare as the “war spoils” of the Reds for the people to see.”⁴³

Soviet security documents consistently describe Ilp as the leader of Saaremaa’s Forest Brothers. It remains uncertain whether Ilp himself claimed this role, but he never objected to it in any case. While Ilp interacted with other squads and engaged in joint ventures, operating in a way which saw relatively few negative consequences, he did not organise any kind of larger group. His immediate circle consisted mainly of Tomson and a couple of other Forest Brothers.

Less is known about Redeese Tomson. Various sources suggest that she was born in 1928 or 1929, making her around ten years younger than Ilp. In 1945, Elmar Ilp found refuge with Redeese’s father, Aleksander Tomson, a resident of Haeska village in the Valjala parish. He spent one winter in a hiding place built into the stove at Tomson’s farm. Redeese (Teresa) Tomson, the family’s 17-year-old daughter, joined Ilp, becoming a member of his squad by the summer of 1946. In 1948, Aleksander and Miina Tomson, Redeese’s parents, were arrested for aiding the Forest Brothers. This event might have contributed to Redeese’s “radicalisation”, a turn of events that didn’t go unnoticed by local Soviet operatives.

There are numerous legends about this story in circulation, including rumours that Ilp and Tomson had a child. Many of these rumours were encouraged by Ilp’s squad. There was never a doubt that the activities of Ilp’s squad directly obstructed the process of Sovietisation, and Soviet soldiers who joined the officer ranks were made to seriously consid-

⁴² See e. g. “Eesti Valge Tito”, in: *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, 18-02-1950, no. 7, p. 3.

⁴³ “Lähemalt metsavendade pealikust Ilpist”, in: *Meie Kodu*, 12-01-1956, no. 2, p. 2.

er whether Sovietisation was still practical with Ilp's group still around. For some people, their presence was an emblem of hope; for the Communists, it was something they feared.

The relationship between Tomson and Ilp is an example of opposites attracting. Ilp was a charismatic "man of the people", while Redeese was remembered as an abrupt and reserved young woman. This may be one of the reasons why, in later memoirs, she is depicted as somewhat intimidating. In any case, there must have been something special in this young girl who was able to assert herself in a man's world. The presence of other women around Ilp didn't seem to bother Redeese much. A comprehensive report on the internal dynamics of the squad,⁴⁴ authored by agent "Peetri" (August Põld) in July 1949, depicts their relationship as an armed alliance rather than a romantic liaison.

In modern Estonia, and in Saaremaa in particular, opinions about Ilp's and Tomson's actions are divided. While they are heroes to some, others perceive them as thieves and murderers. Ilp has been referred to as a "controversial Forest Brother". While he is a controversial figure in modern terms, in the context of the Forest Brothers' time Ilp's activities were anything but controversial. Security forces aimed to capture Ilp and Tomson, dead or alive, as "bandit terrorists" who instilled fear in the island's Communists. Ilp's squad, in turn, was determined to avoid falling into the trap of this unequal battle. Their significant support base helped shield them from potential informants. While not loved, Ilp and his companions commanded respect and fear from villagers and Communists alike.⁴⁵

Conclusion

To conclude: the term "Forest Brother" has clearly evolved over time; today it has a broader meaning compared to its early usage. This has brought about a certain ambiguity, whereby, when one considers how it is used today, the term encompasses all men and women who sought refuge from Soviet rule, with the Forest Brothers often being depicted as constituting a uniform movement even though the examples used to illustrate their activities are drawn from exceptional cases.

It is no longer possible to determine how many people were hiding during this period. More conservative estimates suggest around 15,000, yet the actual number was likely higher, with many remaining unaccounted for in statistical summaries.

However, the story of the Forest Brothers goes beyond mere resistance and passive fugitives. Due to the unique nature of resistance in this context, the movement was closely linked with individuals who had legal status. Thus, the story of the Forest Brothers is not

⁴⁴ Report filed by Agent "Peter", 07-1949, in: Martin S. Kull. *Elmar Ilp: Veri mu kätel*, Tartu: Eesti Ajalookirjastus, 2011, pp. 166–191.

⁴⁵ For more information on the pursuit of Ilp's squad (in the Estonian language), see the reports, special bulletins, information summaries, etc. of the Saare County MVD and MGB departments in: ENA, f. ERAF131SM, opis 1, files no. 65, 95, 138, 172.

just about resistance; it is also about opposition. This allows for a broader definition, along the lines of which Tiit Noormets writes:

“The Estonian Forest Brotherhood was a grassroots movement encompassing a multitude of participants and activities. Contemporary literature referencing them has made various generalisations – this includes emphasising certain aspects of this phenomenon and extending them to the entire Forest Brother movement. The Forest Brothers have been portrayed both as historical subjects – active, heroic freedom fighters – and as historical objects – passive victims seeking refuge from political turmoil. In essence, they were a part of Estonian society, comprising both its members and those who lived and operated within that society.”⁴⁶

Keeping this definition in mind, it is plausible that there were even more women than men involved in the Forest Brother movement, and in a number of capacities, while all of them were facing severe repercussions from the Soviet authorities, regardless of their gender.

Nonetheless, exploring “women-Forest Brothers” (or “men-Forest Brothers”, for that matter) as a research area is likely to be unproductive unless the intention is to emphasise exceptions rather than the norm. The examples of the Alber sisters and Redeese Tomson were indeed remarkable, but they do not represent the typical Forest Sister. Indeed, the experiences of the average person hiding from Soviet authorities did not significantly differ based on gender, and the Soviet government did not make clear gender-based distinctions. Likewise, there was no clear division of roles along gender lines, as the circumstances at the time were so extreme that roles were determined by necessity rather than gender.

In a way not unlike that of their male counterparts, most Forest Sisters were passive fugitives. However, it can be tentatively suggested that punishments for women for specific actions were somewhat less severe compared to what they were for men. This was not primarily a matter of gender; rather, it was to do with women’s background. Consequently, there were also some differences to be noted in the motivations for men to go into hiding compared to those of women. Initially, the “transgressions” of women were perceived as relatively minor by the Soviet authorities. This was due to the limited opportunities for women to advance their careers or assume socially prominent roles during the preceding Republic of Estonia and the German occupation. Moreover, women were not subject to the threat of conscription into the occupying army, which was another significant factor motivating men to go into hiding in response to Soviet reprisals. Nonetheless, the role of women held great significance in the narrative of the Forest Brothers, not least because they made up the majority of the movement’s support network. Over time, however, the penalties for helpers grew more severe, culminating in the March 1949 deportations. Fol-

⁴⁶ Tiit Noormets, “Eesti Metsavennad pärast Teist maailmasõda”, in: *Eesti sõjaajalugu: valitud peatükke Vabadussõjast tänapäevani*, compiled by Tõnu Tannberg, edited by Mart Orav, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2021, pp. 428–429.

lowing this tragic event, the motivations for hiding, whether for men or women, became more closely aligned.

In conclusion, one might question whether the term “Forest Brother”, originally associated with comrades in arms during the Summer War, remains an appropriate general term. In the period following the March deportations of 1949, at least, there were already a substantial number of women among those in hiding, which justified the adoption of the term “Forest Sister” – a term which, for its significance, should be used without any apprehension or irony.

Peeter Kaasik

Miško seserys: apie moterų vaidmenį miško brolių judėjime po Antrojo pasaulinio karo

Santrauka

Istorinėje plotmėje miško brolių judėjimas reiškia žmonių slapstymąsi miškuose, pelkėse ar pelkių saulose. Šie žmonės slapstėsi nenorėdami įsivelti į karus ar išvengti plėšikavimo išpuolių. Terminas „miško brolis“ kaip bendrinis terminas pradėtas vartoti vokiečių okupacijos metais (1941–1944). Iš pradžių jis reiškė ginklo brolybę 1941 m. Vasaros karo metu, tačiau greitai įgijo platesnę reikšmę. Nors miško broliai dar ir šiandien apibūdinami kaip ginkluoto pasipriešinimo dalyviai, apskritai istorinėje literatūroje šiuo terminu vadinami visi, kurie slapstėsi nuo sovietinio režimo, nepriklausomai nuo amžiaus ir lyties. Terminai „miško brolių judėjimas“ ir „miško brolis“ yra nusistovėję bendriniai terminai, o „miško sesuo“ yra labiau šnekamojoje kalboje vartojamas terminas. Todėl istorinėje literatūroje šis terminas nėra visuotinai pripažintas. Nors paprastai moksliniuose darbuose minimų miško brolių lytis yra abstrakti, pats terminas gali sukelti klaidingą supratimą, kad tik vyrai slapstėsi arba kovojo prieš sovietų režimą. Todėl šioje apžvalgoje bandoma užpildyti šią spragą ir atskleisti moterų vaidmenį miško brolių judėjimo istorijoje po Antrojo pasaulinio karo.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: partizanės, partizanai, deportacijos, pasipriešinimas, slapstymasis.