

# How to Counter Russian Occupation: Building Multinational Resistance Networks Before a Crisis

## Description

The resurgence of Russian aggression has reignited the importance of preparing for occupation and resistance, particularly for nations on NATO's eastern flank. History shows that Russian occupation consistently involves at least three key elements: forced deportations, population control, and the systematic dismantling of leadership to suppress resistance movements. Drawing lessons from past efforts, such as the Forest Brothers' guerrilla war in the Baltics, and integrating modern tools like [publicly available secure digital technologies](#), NATO and its allies can better prepare resistance networks to counter these tactics. This article explores historical lessons from resistance movements, examines contemporary challenges posed by Russian occupation, and proposes solutions that emphasize pre-crisis planning, technological innovation, and multinational coordination.

## Lessons from History

As the Second World War concluded, bands of [partisan groups](#) maneuvered through Europe, determined to end foreign occupation. Among these, the [Forest Brothers](#) waged a decade-long guerrilla war in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia against Soviet forces. Through raids, ambushes, and covert operations, these guerrilla forces imposed significant costs on the occupiers. However, the Forest Brothers' ultimate collapse highlights three critical lessons: the indispensability of external support, the importance of pre-crisis planning, and the devastating impact of Russian population control measures.

Across Europe, Soviet occupation frequently meant brutal population control measures aimed principally at breaking the common will to resist. The Baltic states are a case in point. The onslaught of [mass deportations, rapid repopulation, and forced industrialization](#) suffocated resistance forces just as external support began drying up. Soviet loyalists were [appointed to local government offices](#) in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Institutional opposition weakened considerably as foreign special operators and intelligence agents gradually reduced assistance to the resistance forces. It was in this context of Soviet occupation and [reprioritization of Western military aid](#) elsewhere during the Cold War that the Forest Brothers were eventually forced to capitulate. Their demise was due more to those restrictive protocols and lack of support rather than any tactical errors in the swamps and forests. This case of

resistance against Soviet occupation in the Baltics sheds light on the difficulties nations face in resisting more recent Russian occupations.

For irregular warfare practitioners, the example of the Forest Brothers is instructive. These forces countered Soviet efforts at reoccupation throughout the Baltic states in the 1940s. This followed a pattern common to other Russian occupation efforts since the end of the Second World War. In the years following Germany's surrender, Soviet forces annexed and occupied the Baltic states. A cycle of cultural repression and economic collectivization began, quickly followed by insurrection. In response, the Soviets stepped up their oppressive population control measures culminating with Operation Priboi.

Launched in March 1949, [Operation Priboi](#) was the largest of many attempts at forced emigration designed to deflate local capacity to resist. Logistically complex, the operation entailed the arrest and deportation of almost one hundred thousand people who were transported via nearly five thousand boxcars across the Baltic states. This deportation scheme was meticulously coordinated at more than a hundred train stations in designated areas. Nearly three percent of the Baltic population was displaced or otherwise removed in just under one month.

Operations like Priboi took their toll on the resistance. By 1959, the Forest Brothers movement was forced to capitulate after more than a decade of resisting Soviet occupation. In retrospect, their collapse seems almost inevitable. External support evaporated after the Second World War ended, leaving groups like the Forest Brothers to fend for themselves against the centralized and well-resourced Soviet military behemoth. Without allied or partner support to those Baltic resistance groups, Russia's deportation campaign eventually achieved its goals. But mass deportations were just one component of Soviet occupation measures exercised throughout the Baltic states.

Soviet occupation forces instituted additional population control measures to deny inhabitants the basic resources necessary to comprehensively resist. The Soviet-era secret police known as the KGB kept informants on the payroll to identify the slightest indications of resistance activities. The KGB [implemented passport and language control](#) to force Russification upon local populations. Meanwhile, independent leaders and their parties were swiftly pushed aside and replaced with apparatchiks loyal to Russia.

Indications of this strategy were already apparent shortly after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Act. In 1940, Latvia's president Karlis Ulmanis was forced to resign and Soviet loyalist Augusts Kirhensteins quickly replaced him. Soviet officials denied Ulmanis's application to emigrate to Switzerland and then deported him to Stavropol in southeastern Russia where he died of dysentery in 1942 while still in Russian captivity. Future efforts were constrained without robust external support

from beyond the occupation area. This lack of support inhibited the resistance from gaining legitimacy despite living among a population deeply dissatisfied with Soviet occupation. In contrast, Russia's operations in Ukraine since 2022 demonstrate the effectiveness of foreign allied and partner engagement with the resistance, both in terms of tangible logistical support and political legitimacy.

## Contemporary Challenges in Russian Occupation

Ukrainian resistance efforts have come up against a Russian occupation cycle reminiscent of that which groups like the Forest Brothers experienced eight decades earlier. Russian occupation in Ukraine prompted ethnic Ukrainians to either flee occupation zones or be displaced by imported ethnic Russian populations. Following the same playbook as the 1940s, political [appointees](#) favorable to Russia replaced existing Ukrainian leaders. Eastern Ukrainian territories were emptied through operations informed by Operation Priboi. Indeed, Russia does not attempt to conceal these occupation methods. Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights reported that more than 700,000 children from Ukraine [were removed to Russia](#), claiming the move was for humanitarian purposes. Beneath this façade, Russia's deportation of Ukrainians and repopulation with ethnic Russians exemplifies the Russian model for occupying foreign areas. As Russia's efforts to [forcibly remove](#) Ukrainians in occupied areas increases, the methodologies outlined in the resistance operating concept grow untenable without further innovation.

The Forest Brothers vignette combined with lessons from the current war in Ukraine are instructive for irregular warfare practitioners as they shape pre-crisis resistance plans. More precisely, these lessons inform the planning process in developing, supporting, and employing resistance networks against potential Russian aggression in the future. History is rife with examples of cycles of Russian occupation eschewing international norms and the rule of law. In their place, one finds programs designed to decapitate domestic leadership structures and [appoint civil authorities loyal to Russian interests](#). Worse, Russian occupation often entails [forced deportations](#). Occupying forces import ethnic Russians while employing rigid population control measures and enforcing a security apparatus designed to reduce the will to resist. Civilians [able to flee](#) often travel abroad to avoid persecution under Russian occupation. The remaining populations are less resilient and more malleable, further hamstringing the formation of effective resistance networks.

Historically, organized resistance against Russian occupation has failed in part due to a paucity of coordinated support from neighbors and sympathetic nations. Without sufficient strategic depth, eastern European states require comprehensive plans backed by allies and partners to support the formation of resistance elements prior to occupation forces digging in. A comprehensive framework recognizing and legitimizing exiled governments can streamline future resistance efforts. Such a

framework would enumerate necessary logistical support, security, and communication mechanisms for exiled resistance leaders while also supporting their legitimacy.

Networks to counter these occupation techniques are not completely out of reach to planners. Joint Special Operations University published the [Resistance Operating Concept](#) in 2020, offering solutions for a whole-of-government resistance planning framework. The concept focuses on strengthening social resilience. That resilience is a key deterrent against occupying adversaries like Russia. A cohesively resilient nation mobilizing its entire government to resist is better prepared to disrupt occupation forces upon arrival and during the conflict. Without this cohesion and resilience, resistance movements are denied freedom of action in a suffocating occupation environment. Synchronizing a multinational resistance architecture before a crisis begins is a necessary ingredient for later success. But this goes beyond the framework outlined in the resistance operating concept and requires finesse with emerging technologies.

Additionally, increased awareness has spurred like-minded states to [support resistance movements](#) against Russian occupation. This support has come in the form of advanced training programs, intelligence sharing, and information operations. Innovative recruitment and training methods combined with allied and partner resources can help sustain and even grow resistance operations despite Russia's suffocating tactics. Resistance forces are realizing the power of [information warfare](#) as they leverage social media and independent journalists to expose Russian atrocities. The resulting international pressure influences Russia's choices, creating international public support and breathing room for resistance groups. The information space invites a dynamic and adaptable approach with multinational support that can bolster resistance against Russia in places where that resistance can be most effective.

Successful multinational pre-crisis resistance planning for states bordering Russia will hinge on leveraging emerging secure commercial digital technologies to support states without strategic depth. Critically, these technologies can facilitate remote coordination and oversight for decentralized operations from safe positions beyond the occupied areas. This depth adds a layer of protection and anonymity for leaders in the resistance hierarchy while also enabling better coordination between the resistance group and friendly states. Broad coordination of this kind has eluded resistance movements in the past.

From Romania and Moldova to Finland and Estonia, predesignated international resistance support mechanisms could increase security along NATO's eastern flank. States along this boundary can incorporate mechanisms into their own national security and defense strategies, further coupling their objectives with those of their neighbors. Operational depth across the region could be enhanced through formal agreements between these states. Such an environment of regional cooperation and

support creates a space for exiled governments to maintain legitimacy and continue supporting resistance efforts from outside an occupied area.

Nations along NATO's eastern flank contain vulnerabilities in their strategic depth. This situation inhibits force generation and operational employment of a resistance headquarters temporarily situated in one of these states. Collocation and formalized agreements would enable operational synchronization among neighboring countries, thereby increasing their collective security. Identifying predesignated headquarters locations for potential exiled resistance leadership in nearby nations can act as a counter to Russia's suppression of legitimate national leaders and detention of locals in occupied areas. NATO's enlargement provides additional opportunities for this kind of cooperation among states.

NATO's newest members in the Scandinavian High North could provide strategic depth and additional collocation options for exiled resistance leaders forced out of occupied territories in the Baltic states. Key leaders gain operational flexibility during an occupation event if predetermined locations and governing authorities are already in place between concerned states. Deliberate planning of this nature can mitigate perceptions that exiled leaders are fleeing persecution or abandoning their people. These exiled political and military leaders can leverage predetermined areas and agreements to organize, train, and equip forces while coordinating logistics and launching clandestine operations.

The keys to successfully employing this expanded resistance concept against Russian occupation are mutual support, shared responsibility, and, above all, establishing resistance infrastructure well ahead of the onset of occupation. Modern commercial and military technologies enable decentralized command and control over resistance forces from a distance and at scale. These technologies also provide opportunities to integrate information operations in a multinational context to actively illuminate misinformation, disinformation, human rights violations, sexual violence, and other hallmarks of Russian occupation. Collocation at the military headquarters of other NATO member states will help exiled resistance leaders synchronize information operations and leverage regional resolve rather than being forced to face the fate of the Forest Brothers of decades past.

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*Main Image: Forest Brothers relaxing and cleaning their weapons after a shooting exercise in Veskiaru, Estonia, 1953. (Photo via [Wikimedia](#))*

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