

General information

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Relation to the course / learning topic

Contemporary History I – Estonia and the World in the First Half of the 20th Century, topic IV: WWII (Estonia in WWII – occupations, options open to Estonians)

Key words

the June coup 1940, occupation, mobilisation, Omakaitse (Home Guard), forest brothers (Estonian patriotic partisans), emigration

Study results

The pupil

- understands on the basis of sources the effect of the Second World War on the fate of people who lived in Estonia;
- explains what choices people who lived in Estonia made in the war and for what reasons;
- characterises the moral dilemmas of people who lived in Estonia during the Second World War.



Lesson plan

Choices of Estonians in WWII

At the beginning of the lesson, the pupils form an opinion axis where those who believe that Estonians had the chance to make choices in the Second World War are at one end and those who think that the available choices were either limited or nonexistent are at the other end. The pupil must be able to justify the position he has chosen. Thereafter the teacher asks the pupils to count off to six and hands six different sources out to the pupils (according to their number). Each pupil will peruse his source, which presents one person's choice in the war. The pupils who have received the same recollection gather into groups and discuss what they have read among themselves. The teacher forms new so called expert groups consisting of pupils who have perused different sources. The groups all work together to fill out a discussion web* relying on the previously read materials and formulate the decision of their group based on the arguments presented in the material – whether there was the chance to choose or not. The teacher asks representatives of the groups to read out the conclusion arrived at based on the sources and the grounds for that conclusion. The lesson ends with a discussion on what moral dilemmas accompanied different choices and decisions.

* The discussion web, or spider, is a diagram used for finding answers to questions that present dilemmas. The question is placed at the centre and arguments supporting one position are entered on one side of it (in this case: yes, it was possible to make choices). Arguments supporting the opposing position are entered on the other side (no, there was no possibility for making choices). The conclusion is written down in accordance with the accumulated arguments. The discussion web diagram is included as an appendix.

Recommendations for the teacher:

The selection of recollections presented in the worksheets relies on materials in the Eesti Muinsuskaitse Selts (Estonian Heritage Preservation Society) archive. The teacher should definitely explain that this does not provide a complete overview of the choices made by Estonians. Alongside conscious choices, choices also depended on chance and on the year when someone was born. The teacher should stress that cases and people differed and should pay close attention to prevent pupils from developing a black and white picture of events (for instance, everyone denounced their neighbours).



Evocation (6–7 minutes)

Formation of the opinion axis or opinion line. For instance, pupils who think Estonians had the chance to make choices in the Second World War gather at the door, and those who consider choices practically impossible gather at the window. It is a good idea to do this at the very beginning of the lesson to save time. The teacher may write the questions and arrows with points of view on the blackboard to speed up the choice of position by pupils on the opinion axis. Thereafter the teacher asks the pupils to count off from one to six.

Comprehension of meaning (13 + 15 minutes)

Stage I. Becoming acquainted with recollections

The teacher distributes worksheets to the pupils according to their number: no. 1 (worksheet 1), no. 2 (worksheet 2), etc. Independent reading phase. The pupils familiarise themselves with their source and write down their answers to the questions posed at the end. During this phase, the teacher forms so called expert groups consisting of six pupils, each of whom has been given a different source.

* While the pupils work, it is a good idea to write the new groups down on the blackboard or in a Google docs file (if facilities for projecting it on the wall are available). This way it is easier for pupils to orient themselves to how they should work. The teacher can form groups with equivalent capability.

** A simple way to speed up the process is to affix or draw coloured dots on the worksheets of study materials during preparations according to the number of pupils in the class. For instance, if there are 30 pupils in the class, 5 pupils share the same topic, meaning that 5 different coloured dots should be added to the five copies of Worksheet 1 and the same colours should be repeated with the other worksheets. In this case, the composition of the groups is random.

Stage II. Pupils introduce their topic to others, discussion web.

The teacher distributes a worksheet to each group (Worksheet 6). The pupils introduce their topics to each other and jointly fill out the worksheet given to them. The group's joint decision along with its justification is formulated on the worksheet in accordance with the arguments.

Reflection (10 minutes)

The teacher asks a representative of each group to read out the group's joint decision and justification. The teacher asks the class questions for oral discussion:

- 1) What options did people have as they made their decisions?
- 2) What happened to people as the result of different choices?



3) How do you assess decisions made during the war on the basis of sources?

4) What kinds of moral dilemmas did people face during the war?

The last question helps to develop the capacity of pupils for empathy and discussion.

As many pupils as possible should have the chance to present their viewpoint in front of the class.



Worksheet 1

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source A. Recollections of the June Coup

"Now about the events of 21 June 1940. It was a very beautiful sunny day. When I arrived at work, I wondered why nobody had changed into their work clothes or gone to their work posts. Workers stood in groups on the side of the street by the former schoolhouse (Primary School no. 27) discussing something. A female worker named Roots and a brick mason named Kõst were the more zealous speakers. Roots wrote my name down in a notebook she had in her hand. This was followed by an order: no work will be done today. We're going to overthrow the government instead.

I replied that I'm not going anywhere and that I was part of the opposition front (I remember to this day that I had heard that expression somewhere). In reality, I didn't know anything about politics. Then I was told in no uncertain terms that I had to go along with them, otherwise they'll see who gets fired. It didn't take much to frighten a boy who had just moved to the city from the country. I had to submit to keep my job. Roots, Kõst, Leesi, who was one of the bus drivers, and a few others whose names I can't remember anymore walked beside our "file" all the way to Liberty Square to keep an eye on us and make sure that nobody "deserts" on the way. Our group mixed in with the crowd that had already gathered at the square and I don't know if we were still being watched anymore. I remember that if not more, then at least one Red Army officer who was introduced as a "bringer of brotherly greetings" gave a speech. Then some sort of resolution was read out that probably could have appealed to overthrow the government and through a loudspeaker, the speaker asked who was in favour and who was opposed. I raised my hand with others who were against the resolution. At that moment, somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I was startled and when I looked around, I saw a young man beside me. He obviously sensed that I was startled and reassured me, saying he was glad that the Estonian spirit still persisted.

The crowd started going to Toompea. Through the crowd heading along Kaarli Street to the front of the castle, I saw a group of young men standing directly opposite us across the street. You couldn't get across the street since the crowd kept moving



towards the castle. Both groups somehow spontaneously started singing. Patriotic songs. I don't exactly remember but one of the songs was probably the national anthem of the Republic of Estonia. Naturally, I sang along, if for no other reason, then at least in protest against foreign and incomprehensible songs that were being sung in the procession. Nevertheless, we weren't allowed to sing for long."

Anonymous [Meenutusi Teisest maailmasõjast, juunipöördest, elust Punaarmee teenistuses (Recollections of the Second World War, the June Coup and Life in the Service of the Red Army). 1938–1941. pp. 2–4].

The author was born in 1920 in Viru County and arrived in Tallinn at the end of 1939, worked at the Steam Cleaning Works and later for the Tallinn Municipal Streetcar Company in facilities construction. He was mobilised in 1941 into a Red Army labour battalion. He did not sign his name to his memoirs in fear of repressions.

Questions

- 1) What choice did the author of the source make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make his decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other options did people have over the course of this event?



Worksheet 2

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source B. From the *Kaitseliit* (Defence League) to the *Omakaitse* (Home Guard)

"Everything went more or less normally until June of 1941. Some of the prominent figures from the bourgeois era were imprisoned. But one thing is incomprehensible to me to this day. Why was it necessary to carry out a campaign of imprisonment and forced resettlement a week before the start of the war? Was it because this was a border country that could easily end up in the hands of the enemy and was it meant to purge this territory beforehand of unreliable people? But people who were completely trustworthy were imprisoned in the course of this campaign and it is known that this action caused deep resentment among the people. It was exactly this reason that impelled many people to work against the Soviet regime. The history of our Estonian people, after all, has never considered the Russian people or other Slavic people our enemies, but according to history, we recognise Germans as the mortal enemy of our people. I am absolutely convinced that if the local representatives of the Soviet regime had treated the people better, it would never have even occurred to anyone to help the Germans.

The war began on 22 June and on 8 July we were already occupied by the Germans. The German Army had covered around a thousand kilometres in that short time. It follows that the Red Army was very weak. When the Red Army units and local communists had retreated from our country, it turned out that prior to that they had committed very appalling crimes. In our rural municipality in the hamlet of Panikovits, three men who weren't guilty of anything were murdered: Seemaa, Harite and Vösastik, all of whom were 30–35 years old. They were killed and hidden in sawdust near a sawmill. Many corpses of men and women who had died in horrendous torment were found in the sauna of the Petseri jail. Their tongues had been ripped out of their mouths, their eyes had been poked out with red-hot spikes, and the women's breasts had been ripped off. All the prisoners in the Tartu prison had been killed and thrown into the well in the courtyard. Apparently none of them had been political prisoners, they were all criminal prisoners. Naturally, these acts did not inspire respect for the perpetrators.



The first German army units that arrived in our area and that our population came in contact with behaved most politely and with propriety, which made people forget the fact that the Germans are our mortal enemies. Our local governments were formed entirely of local residents, subordinate to the German authorities, of course. All the former employees of the rural municipal government were returned to their jobs. The rural municipality mayor and his deputies were informed that since they had been elected to their posts by the people and that their term of office had not yet expired, they had to start fulfilling their duties. Thus I had to once again take up the post of deputy rural municipality mayor to which I had been elected in 1939. The former Kaitseliit was also re-established and was shortly renamed the Omakaitse. All former members of the Kaitseliit were automatically registered as members of the Omakaitse and new members were also recruited in addition to them. People who wanted to join as new members had to submit an application but no application was required of members who had been in the Kaitseliit. In point of fact, they were not even asked if they wanted to be members or not. I have never submitted an application or orally expressed the wish to be a member. I was simply included as a member from the beginning."

Vaarik, Peeter: *Elu keerises I (Life in a Vortex I)* [1914–1951. pp. 47–52].

Peeter Vaarik was born in 1914. He rose to the rank of junior non-commissioned officer in the army of the Republic of Estonia, and was a member of the Kaitseliit as of 1934. He was elected deputy mayor of his rural municipality in the autumn of 1939. The Soviet regime dismissed him from this post on 6 August 1940 on grounds of nonconfidence. He was returned to his post during the German occupation and was appointed a member of the Omakaitse.

Questions

- 1) What choice did the author of the source make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make his decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other choices could people make at that time?



Worksheet 3

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source C. On the Lodging of Political Accusations to the Omakaitse

"I know of quite a few cases where a person came and lodged an accusation against his neighbour on political grounds. Once even a 75 year old elderly man came to speak to me (I was at the town hall) and lodged a complaint against his neighbours, claiming that they were real communists and wondering why they hadn't been imprisoned. To keep the matter hushed up without any uproar, I escorted the man into a side room and started interrogating him. He didn't know that, of course. First of all, I asked: "Tell me all the crimes that your neighbours have committed against you." The old man started stammering: "Well, they haven't actually done anything to me but, well, they're still communists." I asked: "You mean to say they haven't done anything to you but they've done things to other people. What have they done and against whom in particular?" The old man became even more confused, realising that he had approached the wrong man. I chewed him out and sent him home, saying: "Don't come back to denounce your neighbours again, it isn't noble!" I haven't heard that he ever came to lodge accusations again. Perhaps people who will one day read my writings will get the impression that I want to absolve the Omakaitse and its members of all manner of accusations and to paint them as devoted defenders of communists. That nevertheless is not my intention. I know very well that the Omakaitse was not established to protect communists but rather the other way around, to expose them. I also know that in some places, members of the Omakaitse have committed serious crimes. Everything depended on what people were like in particular places."

Vaarik, Peeter: *Elu keerises I (Life in a Vortex I)* [1914–1951. pp. 58–59].

Peeter Vaarik was born in 1914. He rose to the rank of junior non-commissioned officer in the army of the Republic of Estonia, and was a member of the Kaitseliit as of 1934. He was elected deputy mayor of his rural municipality in the autumn of 1939. The Soviet regime dismissed him from this post on 6 August 1940 on grounds of nonconfidence. He was returned to his post during the German occupation and was appointed a member of the Omakaitse.

Questions



- 1) What choices did the author of the source make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make his decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other choices could people make at that time?



Worksheet 4

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source D. On Mobilisation into the German Army

"Lembit studied at the Avanduse School of Agriculture. He was a very serious and businesslike young man since he knew that he was on the way to becoming an educated farmer. He didn't drink or smoke, he was quiet, read a great deal and spoke little. He was 18 years old when in the autumn of 1943, the mobilisation of men born in 1925 was announced. Our father was a rather well-known figure, a member of the rural municipal government, etc. I remember that it was discussed at home that it would be possible to buy my brother's freedom. It was obvious how the war was going. Some boys hid in the woods. But my brother and his friends thought it necessary to defend Estonia against the Bolsheviks. Everyone was afraid of the return of the Russians. They were associated with injustice and falsehood. Our father also thought that the boys have to go. Our mother and grandmother were not so certain and they sensed woe in their hearts.

I remember the crisp autumn morning when Lembit went. Our father harnessed the horse in front of the carriage and we drove to the Avanduse town hall. There were a few lorries onto which the boys climbed dressed in their black confirmation suits from the spring with white shirts and blue, black and white ribbons on their lapels. They sang songs about Estonia, Remain free, Estonian sea, remain free, Estonian land, etc. When we drove home, we were silent. Mother was in a strange, stiff pose, as if she didn't hear or see anything. Father tried to talk about other things with me and my younger brother.

I still have my brother's letters. There are five of them, dated 16 November, 24 November, 29 November, 11 December and the last one, 24 December 1943 from Russia (Ukraine). No further letters came. As a 12 year old girl, I brought our newspapers and letters home from the postal farm. One lovely day in May, I saw a strange letter that I opened. It was Lembit's death notice in Estonian and German. I hid those letters since I was afraid for mother. Thus for a long time, I alone knew with my child's heart that Lembit was no more. Mother waited every day for a letter from her son and father comforted her. I knew the truth. It was the most dreadful secret of my life.



Spring turned into summer. The rural municipal government summoned father to come to the rural municipal government building concerning the death of his son. Thus my deceit and hiding of the letter came to light. Mother was in despair but nobody scolded me because they grasped why I hid the letter. On 8 September 1944, my brother's death certificate was issued at the Avanduse rural municipal government. Now I know that he was one of 500 Estonian boys caught in the Cherkassy pocket. Infinitely important and dear to his family and home, a toy in the hands of Hitler and Stalin, like our entire people."

Laos (Kuntor), Ester: [Venna Lembit Kuntori saatusest, sh. ära kiri surmateatest (On the Fate of my Brother Lembit Kuntor, including a copy of his death notice).1925–1944, pp. 1–5].

Questions

- 1) What choice did the author of the source make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make her decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other choices could people make at that time?



Worksheet 5

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source E. The Decision Not to Flee and its Consequences

"Then I took a job with Vändra's private shopkeeper Aleksei Koppel as a sales clerk. I was alone in the shop as the sales clerk since Koppel himself procured merchandise. His wife looked after their two little children, the housekeeping and making meals because they fed me as well. And now came another shock, that day of 20 September 1944. I went to work in the morning and they were already waiting for me. They had already loaded their bundles onto their vehicle and said they have to go away somewhere abroad. They asked, are you coming with us or staying here? I didn't know what to say. The merchandise was on the shelves and stayed there. I remember he also said, at least take something along for yourself. I was so shocked that I couldn't comprehend anything anymore. Then he packed a bundle for me himself and filled it with lambskin, saccharin and other odds and ends. We started going, I to my father's home and they to Virtsu. The war was still in progress. This time many people left Vändra. Koppel's two sisters with their families, Pastor Raudsepp and others. Koppel couldn't have stayed here because he was in the Omakaitse and his brother Erald together with two other Vändra schoolboys had hidden pieces of the monument to the Estonian War of Independence that the Soviets had destroyed. The boys were taken away and they remained missing. Everyone that left with the Koppels made it safely to Canada and they live well there. Everyone does his own work. Pastor Raudsepp is even the archbishop there. /-/

On 2 June 1945, the Russians had set up their army headquarters in my father's house. My home also became a jail. On that day, men were brought there for interrogation and were locked into one room. People came to denounce those men, those people waited their turn in another room. I saw the people who were there to lodge accusations through the door that was slightly ajar. Since our bedroom was beside the interrogation room, my mother listened through the wall to everything that was said there. The Russians had an interpreter and everything was said twice. My mother wept and said: "What bloody hags they are, they can drum up all sorts of lies about our men." And before evening the men were taken away. A horse was



brought over and the men put their bundles in the cart. They walked along behind the cart and the Russians were behind them with their guns. I tried to walk alongside them for a while to talk with the men but I was sent back."

Tekko (Kuldkepp), Amanda: Need aastad ei unune (Those Years Won't Fade from Memory)! [14 June 1941–1952, pp. 5–7].

Amanda Tekko's homestead was located along the Suurjõgi River. Her aunt's family was deported in June of 1941 while she happened to be visiting them. She was spared from deportation because she wasn't a child of that family. Her disabled father, who was a builder, was arrested and imprisoned in 1945 because the neighbours denounced him. Amanda was fired from work repeatedly over the course of the subsequent years since local residents were active writers of letters of denunciation concerning the daughter of a bandit.

Questions

- 1) What choices did the people introduced in the source excerpt make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make her decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other choices could people make at that time?



Worksheet 6

Choices of Estonians in WWII

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions.

Source F. About Forest Brothers and Deserters

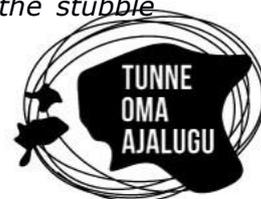
"I was eight years old then and I remember everything as if it were yesterday. Our farm was surrounded by woods on a bog island south of Klooga Lake. It was as if the war didn't find our farm since it was so hidden away. Yet several refugees and deserters passed through and forest brothers picked potatoes from our field by night.

Back then the forest brothers were not spoken of so negatively because life had proven to people that anyone could find themselves in that situation from grandmothers, grandfathers, wives, husbands on down to their children. The woods were a place of political refuge. But who were the political enemies of the people? They tended to be people who didn't want to fight on either side or retreat to Moscow or Berlin, to leave their homesteads behind according to the considerations of great powers or to allow themselves to be deported to Siberia. The woods were a form of remaining in one's Estonian homeland. The woods were the poor man's fur coat, the woods were shelter.

When I think back to how we, the four children of the two families there, and me with a big Wehrmacht bayonet hanging from my belt, so heavy that it was practically pulling my trousers down, went with the full permission of our parents to spy on the potato thieves at night, it was in retrospect an even condescending gesture, meaning that the forest brothers hadn't done anything strange in the surroundings.

Those two Estonians – German soldiers appeared in our yard on a hot sunny day and greedily drank icy water from our well. I remember that they were warned but they didn't listen. They said that one way or another they were done for in a matter of days. Their desire to live started to return over the week or two that they stayed with us. They asked the children to toss their rifles into the bog and asked the women to dye their mountain troops uniforms black. That succeeded. Then they worked for about a week as farm hands and hauled tame hay or mixed fodder from the haystacks, I don't exactly remember which.

One day I witnessed how a Bolshevik infantry regiment charged over the stubble



field shouting "hurraa" to capture our farm. They poked through all the haystacks and heaps of fodder with long rifle bayonets. A major stuck a Nagant revolver under the farm owner's nose and said: "Where's Fritz? I'll shoot you like a dog." Namely, the searchers had stumbled upon the knapsacks of the boys, cow's leather backpacks that were tossed on the kitchen table right away. There was no point in arguing."

Anslan, Viljo: [Kahe eesti noormehe, saksa sõduri saatusest (On the fate of two Estonian young men, German soldiers). 1944-...] *The young men and the farm owner succeeded in convincing the major that they were not soldiers. They were allowed to return home to Southern Estonia but it remains unknown if they succeeded under wartime conditions.

Questions

- 1) What choices did the people introduced in the source make?
- 2) Was the author of the source free to make his decision in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 3) What other choices could people make at that time?



Worksheet 6

Choices of Estonians in WWII**Assignment**

Briefly introduce your sources to one another in your group. Thereafter enter arguments that support one or the other position in the discussion web. Boxes may be added if necessary. Finally, formulate the group's joint decision along with a brief explanation of why you have arrived at this particular conclusion.

Estonians had choices
in WWII

A discussion web diagram with a central box and seven boxes on the left side. The central box is empty. The seven boxes on the left are arranged vertically and connected to the central box by lines. Each box is empty.

Estonians basically had no
choices in WWII

A discussion web diagram with a central box and seven boxes on the right side. The central box is empty. The seven boxes on the right are arranged vertically and connected to the central box by lines. Each box is empty.

Conclusion:

A large empty rectangular box for the conclusion.

