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THE GERMAN MARGARETE DEFENSIVE LINE FROM WORLD WAR II IN SOUTHWESTERN SLOVAKIA. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND HISTORICAL FACTS

NIEMIECKA LINIA OBRONNA MARGARETE Z CZASU II WOJNY ŚWIATOWEJ W POŁUDNIOWO-ZACHODNIEJ SŁOWACJI. DOWODY ARCHEOLOGICZNE I FAKTY HISTORYCZNE

Abstrakt: Research on field fortifications from World War II in Slovakia has led to the identification of the Margareten-Stellung, a German defensive line, a part of which has now been located east of the town of Šahy where the Soviets engaged the retreating Germans in mid-December 1944. The identification was based on references from written sources and LIDAR images of the woodlands near the town. A survey of this system has contributed insights into its technical design, tactical significance and the role it played in the battle of Šahy. Research on features of this kind brings them into the public eye, allowing them to be registered as archaeological sites and developed as historical heritage sites.

Keywords: World War II, trench, conflict archaeology, militaria, archaeological survey, Slovakia

Abstract: Badania fortyfikacji polowych z czasu II wojny światowej na Słowacji obejmują szereg zachowanych obiektów, głównie okopów wojskowych. Niemiecki system obronny Wehrmachtu znany jako Margareten-Stellung został zidentyfikowany na wschód od miejscowości Šahy dzięki źródłom pisanym i obrazowaniom LIDAR. Rozpoznanie tego systemu dostarczyło wielu ważnych informacji o jego projekcie technicznym, znaczeniu taktycznym i wykorzystaniu w walkach o Šahy pod koniec 1944 r. Badania takich obiektów mają także na celu uznanie ich za stanowiska archeologiczne i zabytki kultury oraz prezentację szerokiej publiczności.

Słowa kluczowe: druga wojna światowa, okopy, archeologia konfliktu, militaria, badania archeologiczne, Słowacja

INTRODUCTION

The idea of an archaeological survey of the preserved trench system, part of the German Margarete defensive line, in the area between the town of Šahy and the village of Vinica, near the current Slovak-Hungarian border (**Fig. 1:a**), was sparked by the discovery of an inconspicuous reference to it, recorded in documents of the German 6th Army headquarters

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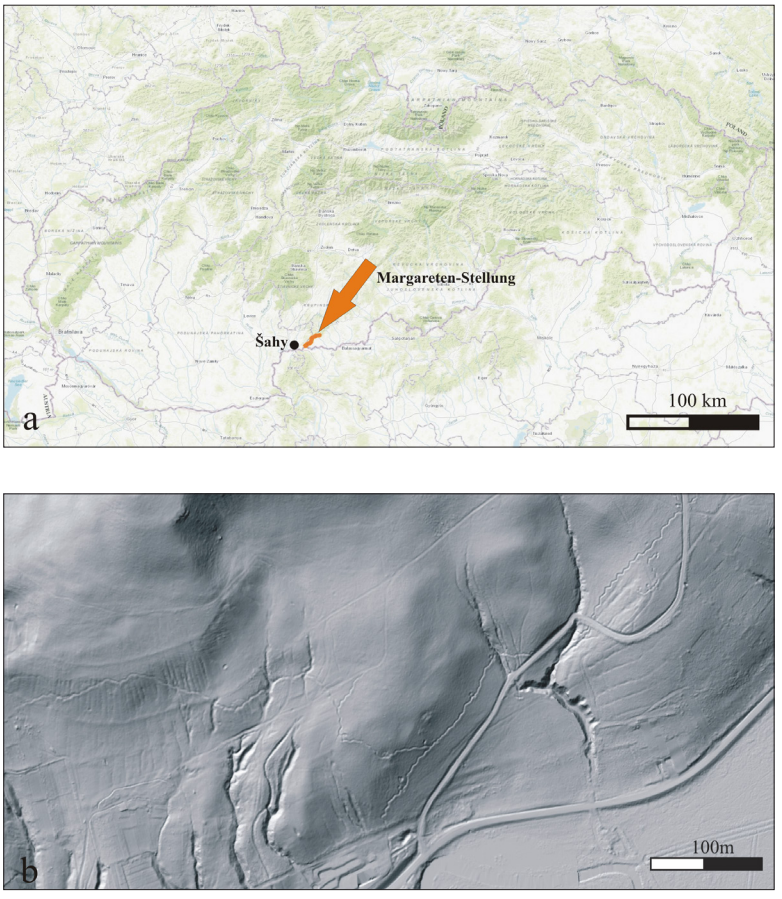

Fig. 1. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia: a – location on the map of Slovakia; b – LIDAR image of the western edge. The zigzag shape of the trenches and the rounded features (pillboxes, firing positions) are visible. After: ZBGIS®, Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic; graphic design by the authors.

Ryc. 1. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a – lokalizacja na mapie Słowacji; b – obraz LIDAR zachodniego jej krańca. Widoczny jest zygzakowaty przebieg okopów i owalnych obiektów (bunkrów, stanowisk ogniowych). Za: ZBGIS®, Urząd Geodezji, Kartografii i Katastru Republiki Słowackiej; oprac. autorzy.

dated to December 14 and 15, 1944. Its presence in the territory of Slovakia before that had not been suspected. LIDAR imaging of the wooded area between the Veľký vrch, Drienok and Vrabčia hills to the east of Šahy (**Fig. 1:b**) revealed a well visible, relatively well-preserved section of this defensive line (**Fig. 2:a**). Components of this line of trenches can easily be seen during the winter months.

The survey of these fortifications, identified as part of the Margarete defensive line (Margareten-Stellung) in the territory of present-day Slovakia, is part of an understudied field of archaeological research on World War II military remains in central Europe. Military

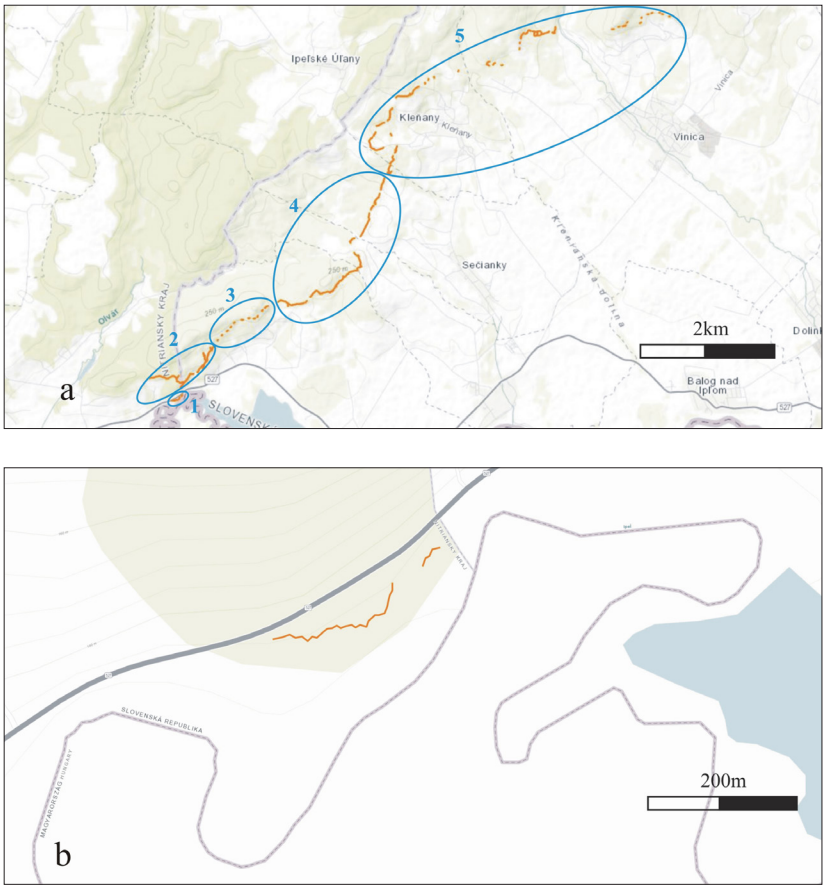

Fig. 2. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia: a – the line between Šahy and Vinica; b – a section at the Ipeľ river; 1 – section 1, forward position on the bank of the Ipeľ; 2 – section 2, main continuous trench line on the slope east of Šahy; 3 – section 3, intermittent trench line; 4 – section 4, parts of the trench system east of the Sečianky village; 5 – section 5, parts of the trench system at the villages of Kleňany and Vinica. After: ZBGIS®, Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic; graphic design by the authors.

Ryc. 2. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a – przebieg linii między miejscowościami Šahy i Vinica; b – odcinek nad rzeką Ipeľ; 1 – odcinek 1, wysunięta pozycja na brzegu rzeki Ipeľ; 2 – odcinek 2, główna, ciągła linia okopów na zboczu na wschód od miejscowości Šahy; 3 – odcinek 3, przerywana linia okopów; 4 – odcinek 4, część systemu okopów na wschód od wsi Sečianky; 5 – odcinek 5, część systemu umocnień wsi Kleňany i Vinica. Za: ZBGIS®, Urząd Geodezji, Kartografii i Katastru Republiki Słowackiej; oprac. autorzy.

sites are after all part of the history of peoples and cultures on par with architectural monuments, pictorial and written sources and collections in museums and galleries. World War II in the middle of the 20th century was a transformative event of this kind and the consequences of this conflict can still be observed 80 years later. The results of this work, ascertaining the tactical significance of these fortifications in the combat between the retreating

Germans and the advancing Soviets in the area of the town of Šahy, has contributed new data concerning previously not investigated territory.

The archaeology of modern conflicts currently presents a wide range of issues focusing on various aspects of, among others, World War II. It covers an equally broad territorial range. In central Europe, where the greatest conflict in history both began and ended, researchers have focused on the many remains of combat, as well as other events and processes that the war brought about. Recent published studies include work on prisoner-of-war camps in Poland (e.g. Kobiałka *et al.* 2023), interdisciplinary research on war graves (e.g. Malcherek, Więckowski 2023), and sites with unexploded ammunition (e.g. Waga *et al.* 2022). In Czech archaeology, the focus is on the numerous labour and prisoner-of-war camps, which can now be investigated, e.g. Rolava (Hasil *et al.* 2021). The territory of today's Czech Republic was the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and as such had a special position in the German Reich; fighting there, unlike in Poland which suffered the brunt of the war for six years, took place only at the very end of the war. The Czechs have investigated battlefields like the ones in the area around Opava (Juchelka, Klápa 2021), but have also ventured into the territory of Slovakia to study mainly battlefields and fortifications in the northeast of the country (Vojtas *et al.* 2023).

Military archaeology in Slovakia is a relatively recent development and interdisciplinary research, combining the fields of archaeology and history, is a must. The range of topics and sites is huge, but the number of specialists limited to a handful of enthusiasts and experts, and their focus is mainly on the western part of the country, where battles of strategic importance took place during World War II (Šteiner 2018; Šteiner 2019; Neumann 2020; Šteiner 2020a; Šteiner 2020b, esp. p. 572). Front-line combat in the relatively small territory of the modern Slovak Republic (49,035 km^2) took place with different intensity from 21 September 1944 to 3 May 1945. The most visible traces are where the frontline stood for weeks or months or where the fighting was connected with massive artillery or aerial bombardment. Significant interventions in the landscape include field fortifications built directly on the battlefields, presenting a broad typology related to the actual conditions at the time of their construction. Fragments of such features can still be located today, mainly in areas not used for economic purposes, and they often yield militaria such as cartridge cases, pieces of equipment and armour, as well as skeletal remains of the participants of the battles. According to Slovak legislation, militaria older than 1946 found *in situ* in the field are considered as archaeological finds and human remains are classified as war casualties. For these reasons, sites with field fortifications are considered as archaeological sites, while those that are directly related to significant combat operations deserve the status of a national monument.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research on the Margarete defensive line combined a study of written sources with field investigation of the remains using non-destructive methods. The historical part of the study was concerned especially with primary sources, an extensive array of documents from both

sides of the conflict, which are now digitized and available for research. These documents are found in foreign archives because while the actual fighting took place in Slovakian territory, armies of foreign powers were involved in the conflict. Most of the sources are on the Russian pamyat-naroda.ru website that collects and publishes material on the Red Army units. Wehrmacht documents from the last months of the war are rather rare. However, the reports of the German 6th Army (Army Group Fretter-Pico), from December 1944 in particular, are available on the website of the Russian-German project germansdocsinrussia.org. A comparison of the data from these documents is crucial to a reconstruction of military manoeuvres by both sides in the conflict, which helps in turn and to locate the places of fighting or defensive positions. On these grounds, the features of the German Margarete defensive line were identified and subsequently documented in the field. The underdevelopment of this sector of archaeological research in Slovakia was the reason why no results of previous research in the area were available for study.

The fieldwork consisted of a physical inspection of remains of the trench system observable in a wooded landscape. The authors' experience in investigating similar features determined the choice of a rather atypical time for such a survey, namely, early March 2023. The interval from November to April is actually the best possible time for surveying trenches and other related features in a woodland landscape because all kinds of features are more readily recognizable when the undergrowth is minimal. In addition to verifying the location of individual sections of the trench system, the survey also included photographic documentation and geo-location of selected points. This is essential for geo-referencing the identified features on the map. Searching for militaria with a metal detector did not yield satisfactory results.

WORLD WAR II FORTIFICATIONS IN SLOVAKIA: BACKGROUND

Despite almost 80 years having passed since the events that took place between December 1944 and April 1945, evidence of several large-scale frontline operations, often fought with intensive use of mechanized and armored forces (Šteiner 2020a, p. 87), can still be found in southwestern Slovakia. The more likely places where such remains have been preserved are the unused woodlands and fallow fields where LIDAR technology can filter out the vegetation to capture a clear image of the terrain, which can then be searched for structures with little visibility among the trees and undergrowth (van der Schriek, Beex 2018; Lieskovský *et al.* 2022, p. 1). No such remains can be expected in the meadows, pastures and cultivated fields where post-war clearing in preparation for resuming agricultural activities removed or filled any features of this kind.

Although fortification construction on the two sides of the conflict did not differ in principle, the final execution was subject to a number of factors: limited time, topography, construction under enemy fire, working tools, manpower, etc. (Rottmann 2007, p. 13). In addition, many features were constructed by civilians and noticeable differences depended on whether they were built under indirect or direct military supervision. It is known from written sources that local Wehrmacht commands began to build defensive

positions in the territory of southwestern Slovakia as early as the end of 1944 (Mičianik 2010, p. 131). However, beside this study, no extensive research has been carried out so far on the involvement of the civilian population in these works. Even the municipal chronicles do not provide accurate information because they were rewritten after the war for ideological reasons. Large-scale trench systems were constructed over several weeks; other features, related specifically to the battle that began in mid-December 1944, were added later by frontline units.

Written sources in the form of combat reports or diaries of individual units or commanders, ideally also maps and situational drawings, provide information on the battle action. Relatively little is known about field fortifications, that is, extensive trench systems as well as supporting facilities, such as firing positions, observation posts and pillboxes, mainly because of their fragmentary state of preservation overall. On the whole, however, we are dealing with defensive positions for a battalion or company able to function independently and not dependent on contact with an adjacent position or unit. They are actually a set of mutually supporting strongpoints covering each other with fire (Šteiner 2020a, p. 87). The most frequently preserved type are isolated trenches. These are relatively short, of a typical zigzag (ogival) shape, intended for smaller units, such as an infantry squad or a weakened platoon. Trenches of this kind were created as a contingency solution, when the German army was forced to defend a more extensive frontline with a shortage of manpower, which was the case quite often at the end of the war. Also, these smaller independent defensive positions were deployed in such a way that they provided firing cover for each other and could not be easily outflanked or encircled (Šteiner 2020a, p. 90).

A large number of other features can be observed in the field in addition to individual trenches and larger trench systems. These are most often solitary objects near the frontline, and their correct identification is much more difficult. They are likely to be mortar, cannon or howitzer emplacements, trenches for individual soldiers, machine gun emplacements, observation posts, anti-tank ditches or underground pillboxes, that is, shelters. Their relation to the frontline is also important for ascertaining their function. Therefore, it is necessary to assess them individually, establishing their affiliation and connection with military operations by means of an archaeological survey. The features are photographed, their geographical orientation established and any militaria on the surface collected. At the same time, the physical examination of the remains by archaeologists draws attention to the finer points of the tactics involved and the usage of these features. The documentation is a prerequisite for identifying these remains as archaeological sites, placing them under the protection of the law from, for example, mining or construction activities.

An important line of research, which is interdisciplinary in its nature, is the linking of individual fortification features with the military units that built or used them, and the specific military operations which they played a part in. Information from written sources, contemporary ones in particular, compared with archaeological field observations, gives insight into the function and history of individual elements of the fortifications, resulting in a comprehensive overview. Archaeological excavation of some of these features, following the non-destructive research (Lieskovský *et al.* 2022, p. 11), would add data on trench sections and depths, as well as yield small finds.

TYPES OF FIELD FORTIFICATIONS

The fortifications and defensive positions that the Wehrmacht, that is, the German unified armed forces, constructed in the territory of southwestern Slovakia from the second half of 1944, can be typologically divided according to different criteria. The first is building material with the division being into permanent and field fortifications. Permanent fortifications are mainly shelters, bunkers, gun emplacements or barriers or barricades, usually made of reinforced concrete. The construction of such features is quite demanding in terms of material, time and technical requirements. Skilled labour, technical support, a source of building materials and, ideally, access to a source of electricity, are usually required. Also, more time is needed as a rule (e.g. Sládok 2010). By contrast, field fortifications are typically built of natural materials and neither machinery nor any production equipment is necessary (or used as a rule). These are primarily trenches: oblong features dug into the ground, varying in depth, plan and section, providing shelter as well as firing positions for soldiers and light stationary weapons. Some trenches were equipped with wooden floors and walls. Entrenchments used as defensive firing positions for tanks or artillery guns served a similar role as the trenches for soldiers.

Pillboxes are another form of field fortifications. They take the form of partly or fully buried timber-framed buildings of various design, intended as either shelter from gunfire, sleeping quarters for soldiers or commanders, or field headquarters, that is, a kind of improvised office. Pillboxes could also be used as field hospitals, warehouses, etc. The Red Army made small, sunken buildings without a wooden structure, actually small earthworks in which the infantry slept (e.g. Fleischer 2004, pp. 22–30). Pillboxes were usually located further behind the defensive line. Wooden bunkers built on the frontlines also had openings for firing various weapons and thus served as firing positions. As a rule, they were interconnected by a network of trenches. Shallower circular or semicircular pits, usually connected with trenches, acted as firing positions for mortars.

Improvised observation posts may have been built on elevated sites with good visibility. Anti-tank ditches were also common. These were large trenches several metres wide and several metres deep, with converging walls, which could be several kilometres long. They served as a barrier, that is, an element of passive defence. Once a tank got stuck in one of these, it could not get out without outside help (Neumann 2020, pp. 39–40).

Field fortifications are not as durable as permanent fortifications and are usually built shortly before the beginning of hostilities. They tend to be constructed even during combat and are thus more flexible than permanent fortifications. Although military manuals exist for the construction of fortifications, in practice these features often differ from the prescriptive designs depending on a number of factors, such as those mentioned above, or simply the need to adapt them to the momentary needs of a given military unit or the current situation (Šteiner 2020a, p. 90).

Field fortifications, of which there is a great typological diversity, are the most common find in the territory of southwestern Slovakia, but few have been preserved in a relatively good condition. This is partly because field fortifications were often built as needed, near transport nodes, in fields, or near the intramural areas of villages and towns, and most of them were deliberately removed shortly after the war for practical reasons. Some

of the buildings have survived in remote locations or in forests, but the level of preservation is noticeably worse than that of the permanent fortifications. This is because field fortifications, due to the material and method of construction, naturally undergo degradation processes more quickly and simply disappear over time, which is another reason why they should be documented and studied while they still exist (Sládok 2010).

FIELD FORTIFICATION FEATURES

The smallest and most basic field fortification is a trench for an individual. It is a small hole in the ground that can accommodate one or two people. Sometimes called in English a fox-hole, it served as a shelter and firing position for individual soldiers. They used to be built as needed, usually shortly before contact with the opponent, or even while battles were underway. Their advantage is that they required less time and manpower to build than larger or extensive trench lines. Among the minuses was that, not being interconnected, they did not allow safe movement along the defensive line like standard trenches. Both sides used them, and their general simplicity makes their typology extremely varied (Fleischer 2004, pp. 83-89).

Trenches, or battle trenches, and the associated auxiliary, so-called connecting trenches are similar in form but more extensive. They were one of the basic and most common elements of defensive lines. Their role was similar to that of single-man trenches, but they were designed to accommodate larger numbers of infantry and to allow relatively safe movement of troops within the trench network. Trenches, or entire networks of trenches, were constructed by all sides in World War II. Typologically, they are distinctive for the army that built them using the available military manuals available. In practice, however, they demonstrate a similar variety as the trenches for individual soldiers (Šteiner 2020a, pp. 89–90). They served as shelters and firing positions for the infantry. Similar earth shelters/positions (of adequate size) prepared for combat equipment and stationary weapons are called tank, artillery or mortar dugouts. This helped to camouflage this equipment and provided better protection from enemy fire. For example, a tank in a dugout had only the gun turret protruding from the trench to be able to fire. In the case of artillery guns, the partial embedment in the ground provided increased protection for the crew, especially from enemy artillery fire (Neumann 2020, pp. 37–39).

Other forms of field fortifications include various kinds of wooden shelters and pillboxes designed for different purposes. Some served as short-term shelter from enemy artillery fire, others were used to house men, and still others were used as field hospitals or command headquarters. Buildings of this kind consisted of an excavated pit, most often square or rectangular in shape, which was covered with wooden logs to form a solid ceiling. The wooden covering was then covered with a layer of earth, which improved the building's resistance and thermal insulation capacity, while also masking it. Occasionally, a metal sheet was inserted between the logs and the soil layer (Fleischer 2004, pp. 72–73).

Some of the features may have had timbered walls, wooden floors or even wooden front doors. Sometimes a stove was installed in the pillboxes. In this case, the building had to

be equipped with a chimney or other flue opening. Features that served to accommodate the men or as shelters from artillery fire were usually built directly on the defensive line and were integrated into the combat trenches so that the entrance to them led directly into the trench. Bunkers that served as field headquarters tended to be built at a greater distance from the defensive line and were not directly connected to the combat trenches. In many cases, connecting trenches allowed relatively safe movement between them and the combat trenches (Fleischer 2004, pp. 68–70).

Anti-tank ditches were the largest and most extensive feature of the field fortifications. In shape, ditches of this kind resembled the infantry trenches, but were much larger, usually 5 m wide and about 3 m deep. To be effective, the ditch had to have straight walls converging in the centre, that is, a V-shaped cross-section (Banny 1985, p. 80; Fleischer 2004, pp. 108–109).

THE MARGARETE DEFENSIVE LINE

The existence of a defensive line in the general area of the town of Šahy and its identification as part of the Margareten-Stellung was suggested by a detailed analysis of written sources from both sides of the conflict, concerning the battle of Šahy in mid-December 1944.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: MILITARY OPERATIONS ON THE MARGARETE DEFENSIVE LINE AND THE BATTLE OF ŠAHY

In the final stages of World War II, the Red Army advanced across Eastern Europe, pushing back the retreating armies of the German Third Reich. By the autumn of 1944, Soviet troops had penetrated into the territory of Poland, reached the borders of eastern Slovakia, entered Hungary and were advancing into the Balkans. In the autumn of 1944, the German army command ordered extensive construction work on a defensive line crossing the territories of Hungary and southern Slovakia, then occupied by Hungary (Ungváry 2003, pp. 1–2), in order to stop the advance of Soviet troops through Hungary and prevent their advance into Austria. The main purpose of this line was to defend Budapest, which was the main point of German defence in Hungary and the main strategic objective for the Soviet Red Army in this stretch of the frontline. Adolf Hitler declared the city a Festung or fortress in November 1944. It was to be fortified, defended and never surrendered. The defensive line was also to secure the northern and southern flanks of the frontline against a flanking manoeuver encircling the city (Számvéber 2013, p. 9). Charged with this task was the Army Group South under the command of Colonel-General Johannes Freißner. At this time it was suffering from shortages of personnel, heavy weapons, ammunition, and supplies (Friesner 1956, p. 167).

Soviet troops near the Ipeľ started to move in the first ten days of December, but their advance was hampered by bad weather conditions, waterlogged terrain and muddy roads

that made especially wheeled transport difficult. Fog frequently grounded the air force. The first to cross the Ipeľ in this area were units of the 13th Guards Cavalry Division, supported by the 8th Guards Cavalry Division. On December 9, they reached the pre-war border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the area of the town of Balassagyarmat (13. Gv. Kd. 1945).

Realizing where the enemy breakthrough was planned, the German command started hastily to reinforce the defences around the town of Šahy. On December 7 the Hungarian 2nd Tank Division was ordered to move into Šahy. The division, which had only a few, mostly obsolete tanks of the Turán or Toldi type, had to be reinforced by three battalions of the German 24th Tank Division (Számvéber 2013, pp. 10–11).

The Soviet 6th Guards Tank Army was also on the move. On December 13, its 5th Guards Tank Corps reached the village of Nagyoroszi without encountering the enemy and dug in to prepare for the advance. On the same day, units of the 9th Guards Mechanized Corps took up position for an attack on Šahy. The 18th Guards Mechanised Brigade managed to cross the Ipeľ river and capture the village of Tešmák, which facilitated the approach to Šahy from the southeast (6. Gvard 1945a). The town was defended by the 24th Tank Division and the 228th Assault Gun Brigade on the left wing and Army Group "Rintelen", belonging to the 357th Infantry Division, on the right flank. This unit comprised the 2nd Hungarian Tank Division, units of the SS Brigade "Dirlewanger" and several others (Šteiner 2018, p. 24).

By December 14 the battle for Šahy was in full swing. Soviet troops reported intense contact with the enemy on the line from the village of Nekyje, Sečianky through Preseľany nad Ipľom to Hrkovce. The scattered and weakened units that put up a resistance were the German SS Brigade "Dirlewanger", remnants of the 24th Tank Division and units of the 2nd Hungarian Tank Division (according to reports from Soviet soldiers, this division had no tanks in the area, see 6. Gvard 1945b; Friesner 1956, p. 161). Part of the SS Brigade "Dirlewanger", namely, its 1st and 3rd battalions, was sent to occupy positions to the southeast of Kleňany and the area southwest of the village. In his daily report, the Army Chief of Staff, Major-General Ludwig Heinrich Gaedcke, stated explicitly: *Das aus dem Raum F.-Tur und Palast mit I. und III. Btl. nach südosten angreifende SS. Rgt 1 der Brig. Dirlewanger erreichte Margaretenstellung am Südostrand von Kelenye und südwestl. davon* (Armeegr 1944a). A report from the same officer on the next day confirmed this: *Im Waldgebiet nordostw. Ipolysag befand sich am Nachmittag ein SS-Btl. in gut fortschreitendem Vorgehen zur Besetzung der Margaretenstellung südwestl. Kelenye* (Armeegr 1944b).

It is clear from this report that the trench system in question was part of the German Margarete defensive line. This line does not seem to have ever been precisely drawn or defined. According to Krisztián Ungváry, it ran between the city of Budapest and the Balaton lake (Ungváry 2003, p. 7). He also mentions its continuation as the "Karola" defensive line between the Cserhát, Matra and Zemplín Hills. It is thus possible that the German command used the term "Margaretenstellung" to refer to the entire, albeit incomplete, defensive system from Budapest to Košice. The Army Chief of Staff's report leaves no doubt that it was the "Dirlewanger" Brigade that manned this particular section near Šahy on December 14, although it is not clear whether it actually held the entire line or only part of it. In the following days, some units from this Brigade held positions in the vicinity of the village of Kleňany, but their defence gradually collapsed due to Soviet attacks and frequent

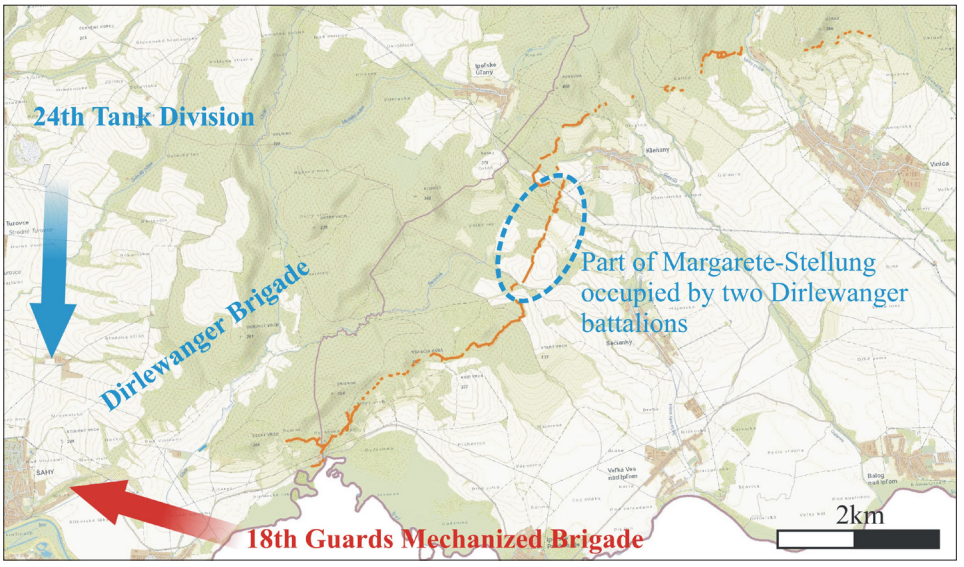

Fig. 3. Diagram of the battle situation at Šahy (Slovakia) on 14 and 15 December 1944. After: ZBGIS®, Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic; graphic design by the authors.

Ryc. 3. Schemat sytuacji bojowej pod Šahy (na Słowacji) w dniach 14 i 15 grudnia 1944 r. Za: ZBGIS®, Urząd Geodezji, Kartografii i Katastru Republiki Słowackiej; oprac. autorzy.

desertions from the brigade (A. O. K. 6). Indeed, the German command was well aware of the seriousness of the situation and that their forces around the city were depleted (Šteiner 2018, p. 27).

The Soviets encircled Šahy from the northwest, occupying the crossroads north of the city. At 3 pm they turned south and joined in the attack on the town (Šteiner 2018, p. 26). The Germans deployed an infantry force of several hundred men and four tanks, but this attempt to break the encirclement was unsuccessful. Units of the Soviet 31st and 18th Guards Mechanized Brigades captured the town at about 6 pm (6. Gvard 1945c); (**Fig. 3**). Units of the 24th Tank Division and the SS Brigade "Dirlewanger" attempted an unsuccessful counteroffensive from the north and northeast.

On December 16, the Soviets conquered the village of Túrovce and reached the village of Plášťovce during the day. Meanwhile, the Germans launched another unsuccessful counterattack from the south. They held their positions in several villages around Šahy in an attempt to stop, or at least slow down, the Soviet advance. On 16 December, however, they lost the villages of Tupá and Preseľany nad Ipľom, from where they were pushed back by advancing Red Army units (6. Gvard 1945c). It was then most probably that the "Dirlewanger" battalions left the Margarete defensive line. Fighting shifted to the area north of Šahy. On December 20, Soviet tanks reached the Hron River and continued southward. On December 26, they captured Parkan (now Štúrovo) and Esztergom, thus definitively closing the encirclement of Budapest (Šteiner 2018, p. 46). The Margarete defensive line obviously failed to serve its purpose.

REMAINS OF TRENCHES BETWEEN ŠAHY AND VINICA AND THE TACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PART OF THE DEFENSIVE LINE

The studied part of the system lies in the cadastral territory of the municipality of Ipeľské Predmostie. The line extends from the west to the northeast, respecting the natural barrier of the hill slopes. The location of the trenches on the slope guarantees a good view and field of fire without excessive exposure and making it difficult for the enemy attacking from the east to reach the line. The trenches all look out to the south or southeast, their back to the north and northwest, respectively, showing that the features have a military purpose.

Trenches are an average width of 160 to 180 cm; the diameter of circular firing positions is approximately 200 cm. The preserved depth of the features ranges from 30 to 40 cm over most of the area, reaching 50 to 60 cm in some sections.

A section of the trench, which starts about 10 m to the right of the main road from Šahy to Ipeľské Predmostie, directly on the bank of the meandering Ipeľ river, runs parallel to the road for approximately 150 m. Several small subsidiary trench lines, each several meters long, branch off from the main trench (**Fig. 2:b**). This section down by the river, where machine-gun positions have been preserved at just 131 m above sea level, the lowest point in the system, seems to have been of special importance. It is not as well preserved because of flooding (**Fig. 4:a**), but it shows that Germans were aware of the necessity of positioning some of their troops next to the water in order to prevent the Soviets from a surprise crossing of the Ipeľ (**Fig. 4:b**). At the eastern edge, part of the trench has been destroyed by an unpaved access road to the river. Beyond this road it turns north and ends at the main road, continuing again on the other side. Overall, this section of the trench system can be considered as a forward position, built to block the passage where the Ipeľ stream approaches the slopes of the Drienok hill. Attacking Soviet troops could easily have crossed it otherwise, unobserved in conditions of reduced visibility.

On the other side of the road the trench system continues in a northeasterly direction (**Fig. 5:a**). After about 170 m, a minor branch turns off from the main line. The main branch runs northeast, while the minor branch extends northwest along the slope of Veľký vrch hill, where another, short minor branch branches off from it. The longer part heads west and the shorter one northeast. The total length of this branch is about 800 m; this part is situated further north on the hillside and is higher up than the rest of the line. The highest point in this section is at 216 m above sea level. The main branch of the trench continues to the northeast and is interrupted after 220 m by a wide gully. A few metres further on, the feature is again disturbed by a forest track cutting it. Beyond the road, the trench continues in its natural direction, branching off again after about 120 m. A secondary trench runs southwards down the slope, curves westwards for about 50 m and ends after about 50 m. It is probable that this trench also served as a forward firing position in front of the main trench.

The main branch of the trench continues for about 80 m and then branches off again, at which point it is again disturbed by the forest track. The secondary trench in this case extends northwards along the hillside and ends after approximately 170 m. Beyond the road the main branch continues again, still running northeast. After about 220 m, a minor branch runs off to the north, with one small branch running west, the remainder of the minor branch ending in an arching curve in an easterly direction. The main trench continues

Fig. 4. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia: a – partly preserved shallow trench in the section near the river; b – a view of the Ipeľ river from the lower section of the trench system. Photo and graphic design by P. Šteiner.

Ryc. 4. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a – częściowo zachowany, płytki okop na odcinku w pobliżu rzeki; b – widok na rzekę Ipeľ z dolnego odcinka systemu okopów. Fot. i oprac. P. Šteiner.

for about 70 m from this point and then further to the northeast, but not continuously. The intermittent section of the trench system is approximately 1400 m in length and is made up of 12 sections ranging in length from 15 to 40 m (**Fig. 5:b**). The individual sections are spaced approximately 50 to 100 m apart. This is clearly an unfinished section of the fortification, or one completed in the first phase of construction. From a temporal and tactical point of view, the trench could have been constructed in the form of shorter individual trenches at a distance of up to 150 m from one another, enabling each to cover the others with fire and thus forming in practice a more or less continuous line of defence. If necessary and assuming there was time for it, these trenches could have been joined together to form a continuous unit.

Fig. 5. The German defensive line Margarete in Slovakia: a – the most complete, western section, east of Šahy; b – an intermittent, unfinished section. After: ZBGIS®, Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic; graphic design by the authors.

Ryc. 5. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a – najbardziej kompletny, zachodni odcinek, na wschód od miejscowości Šahy; b – przerywany, niedokończony odcinek. Za: ZBGIS®, Urząd Geodezji, Kartografii i Katastru Republiki Słowackiej; oprac. autorzy.

Beginning 215 m beyond the described section the trench forms a continuous line (**Fig. 6:a**), apparently bypassing a large erosion gully even though it looks as if it were eroding the feature. From there it continues steadily in an easterly direction, branching off after 135 m. A minor branch runs southwards for about 50 m until it is disturbed by a woodland track. At the point of branching, the main line is also interrupted or damaged by another forest road and after about 40 m it is again interrupted by the next forest road. After 300 m the trench ends at another large erosion gully. Beyond the gully, the trench continues uninterrupted, but after approximately 660 m it ends again at the erosion gully and continues beyond it. After 100 m, a small spur line leading northwards, about 15 m in length, becomes disconnected. After about 260 m from this point, the continuous trench

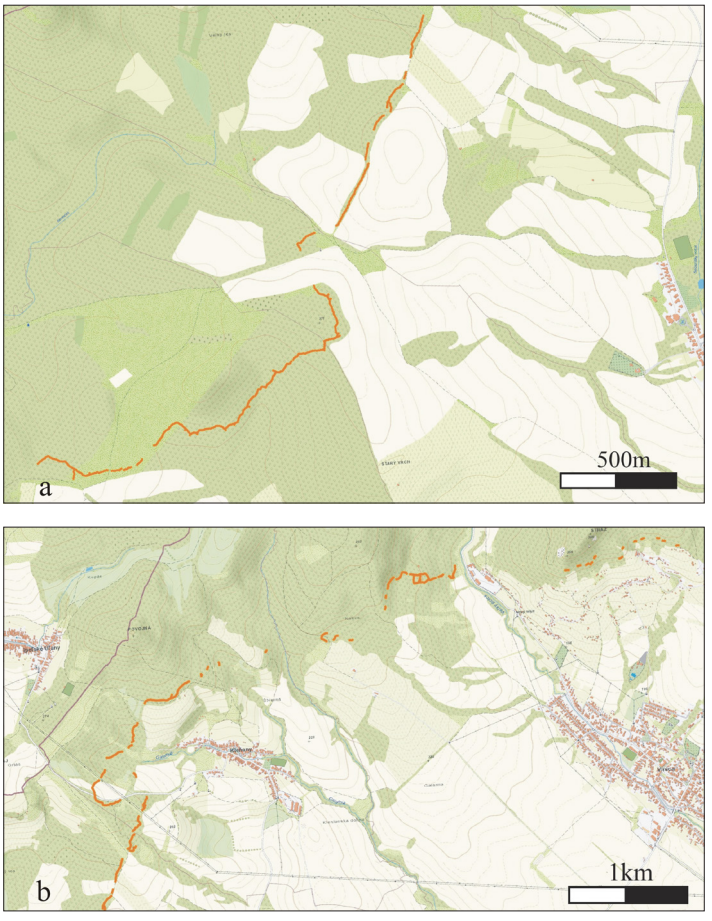

Fig. 6. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia: a – section west of Sečianky; b – eastern edge at Kleňany and Vinica. After: ZBGIS®, Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic; graphic design by the authors.

Ryc. 6. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a – odcinek na zachód od miejscowości Sečianky; b – wschodni skraj w miejscowościach Kleňany i Vinica. Za: ZBGIS®, Urząd Geodezji, Kartografii i Katastru Republiki Słowackiej; oprac. autorzy.

begins to curve markedly northwards and continues in this direction for about 390 m. The ends of the trench have been observed to end in cultivated fields, obviously destroyed by regular ploughing considering that a shallow feature resembling a trench runs beyond the field for roughly 100 m. Given its state of preservation, it is uncertain whether it was a trench at all. Agricultural cultivation further east and north has diminished the likelihood of a continuous trench line surviving. The continuation of the trench in its immediate vicinity is not clearly visible on the LIDAR images and most likely consists of short trenches following a north-northeasterly direction for approximately 1.5 km.

The next closest trench was located in the vicinity of the village of Kleňany. This section is located northeast of the part of the system covered by the project and is about 2 km away.

Fig. 7. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia: a–b – current state of the trench line in its western part; c – one of the circular positions (left) behind the trench line (right). Photo and graphic design by P. Šteiner.

Ryc. 7. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji: a–b – aktualny stan linii okopów w jej zachodniej części; c – jedno ze stanowisk okrężnych (po lewej) za linią okopów (po prawej). Fot. i oprac. P. Šteiner.

It is likely that this trench, due to its location and orientation, was part of the same defensive line as the part under observation. Ultimately, the trench system ends on the southern slopes between the Povojná and Stráž hills in the cadastral territories of the municipalities of Kleňany and Vinica. It consists mostly of short sections, with the exception of a roughly 600-m-long continuous section northwest of Vinica (**Fig. 6:b**).

The length of the main trench in the first continuous section is approximately 1000 m, the length of the intermittent section approximately 1400 m and the length of the second continuous section approximately 1550 m. The total length of the main branch is approximately 3980 m. The trench has five sub-branches with an aggregate length of 1270 m. The total full length of the surviving trench system is approximately 5250 m.

Fig. 8. The German Margarete defensive line in Slovakia. Part of the trench system and a circular firing position above. Photo and graphic design by P. Šteiner.

Ryc. 8. Niemiecka linia obronna Margarete na Słowacji. Część systemu okopów i okrężne stanowisko ogniowe powyżej. Fot. i oprac. P. Šteiner.

The question that arises is whether this trench system was used at all during the fighting for the town of Šahy. The shape of the line was a typical ogival (zigzag) form along its entire length (**Fig. 7:a**, **b**). The main (battle) trench, as well as some of the subsidiary (connecting) trenches, was equipped with small sunken features on a circular or oval plan, about 2 m to 3 m in diameter (**Fig. 7:c**), connected to the battle trench by a short trench of their own, no more than a few metres in length. These are most likely firing positions for machine guns, mortars or light artillery (**Fig. 8**). Most of these positions are situated behind the battle or connecting trench, thus facing the rear area. These are highly likely to be mortar emplacements. A few of these features, however, project in front of the trench, that is, in the direction from which the enemy is expected to advance (Rottmann 2004, p. 47). These are likely to be emplacements for direct-fire weapons, such as light field guns or automatic cannons or

machine guns mounted on a stable tripod. For any larger weapons, the positions in question are too small and do not correspond in location or shape to positions for heavy artillery or rocket launchers (Rottmann 2004, p. 47). In total, the trench system contains eleven such emplacements.

It is evident that this part of the defensive line was not completed before events in mid--December 1944 at the latest changed the situation. The advancing Soviets obviously had no use for it. Some sections were evidently only built in the first phase in the form of an intermittent trench line. Various branches that were presumably intended to serve as connecting trenches do not lead to any other line of defence, meaning that they do not connect the main battle trench with any other trench. It does not appear from the field survey or from the LIDAR images that there is another line of defence behind the trench in question, as the connecting trenches end in the same woodland in which the whole site is located. However, there is a distinct possibility that these presumed connecting trenches were intended and used in practice as escape routes, allowing a relatively safe retreat from the battle trench in the event of a breach of the defences. This theory is supported by the fact that these trenches generally lead northwards, that is, to the rear. In particular, the first described branch, 800 m long, which leads up into the hills and into the ravine between the Veľký vrch and Šomoš hills, may have been intended as a retreat route. No positions for heavy weapons, battle equipment or features such as pillboxes, headquarters, infirmaries, shelters or ammunition depots were found along this branch.

Overall, it seems more than likely that the surveyed section of the defensive line never saw any action. During the field reconnaissance, metal detector surveys were carried out on selected sections with negative results. No militaria were found. During the inspection, no signs or traces of battle, such as craters from the impact of artillery ammunition, were evident in any part of the site. Such signs would have been present had the trench been shelled. The form and character of the feature was not visibly damaged anywhere with the exception of damage from road construction and other recent activities mentioned above.

THE MARGARETE DEFENSIVE LINE AS A HERITAGE SITE

A growing public interest in military history, especially with regard to World War II, is conducive to the development of sites, like the Margarete defensive line, as part of classic outdoor tourism in Slovakia today. The involvement of local authorities and civic associations in making this site (and other similar ones) available to tourists would certainly contribute to a better awareness of wartime events in the region. The well-preserved trench system is authentic evidence of the fighting in World War II in a section of the front-line where Soviet troops first successfully penetrated into the territory of western Slovakia.

At the same time, it is the most extensive surviving part of the WWII field fortifications in southwestern Slovakia. It needs appropriate legislative protection in order to keep it from being destroyed in the future. At the very least, it should be registered as an archaeological site, enabling first a full documentation with non-destructive methods and subsequently archaeological field exploration in search of answers to certain questions, such as did it

actually play a role in the fighting of December 1944. Once this part of the investigation is completed, a selected part of the trench system could be restored and reconstructed to its original form, creating an open-air museum of military history. The restored trenches could be furnished with information boards giving visitors information about the historical events related to the site.

Access is easy to the site because the lower part is located just off the road, while the larger, upper part lying above the road to the north is well accessible to a pedestrian visitor. The grade of the slope on which the trench system is located is moderate, hence the climb is not difficult. For even easier access, a forest road running parallel to the site on the eastern side can be used. The fact that most of the system lies on private land does not constitute an obstacle because, according to the law, everyone has "the right to enter forest land at his own risk and responsibility [...]" (Act 326 2005).

Overall, the condition and state of preservation of the trench system is good. It is broken by forest tracks in several places and discontinuous beyond the Vrabčia hora hill to the east where agricultural activities have destroyed it. Deforestation and traces of recent work with forest machines have been observed in the western part, near the Ipeľ river. In addition, there is a cabin in the close vicinity of the trenches in this area and the fencing around it cuts through the trench remains in several places. The cabin is not recorded on the cadastral map of the area, that is, it was put up without the necessary permits. Any future construction on this lot of land could damage or destroy the part of the trench in this location.

CONCLUSION

The project to archaeologically identify and evaluate the Margarete trench system east of Šahy is the first comprehensive research to be done in Slovakia on field fortifications or battlefields from World War II. The study has clarified the historical events that took place at the site as well as the tactical significance of the system as a whole and its parts. Despite the difficulties, namely, significant understaffing of this branch of archaeology and lack of time for research of this kind, the investigation of the German Margarete defensive line as a one-of-a-kind preserved trench system has been thorough and its completion has highlighted the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, linking information from written sources with archaeological evidence of combat observed in the field.

The Margarete defensive line, the existence of which was confirmed by comparing fairly exact information on the location of trenches found in the battle reports of German units with LIDAR data and archaeological documentation of the trench remains in the field, was installed by the German army and already manned in part by soldiers from the "Dirlewanger" brigade in December 1944. As it turns out, however, it did not play any significant role in the battle of Šahy between December 14 and 16, 1944, because the main fighting took place at the town itself as indicated by both German and Soviet sources. This explains the general absence of militaria in and around the trenches.

The results of the project have shown the high potential of this kind of historical and archaeological research in preserving sites connected with the military history

of the region. Developing sites of this kind as classic outdoor tourism answers a growing interest of the public in military history, especially related to WWII, and will contribute to a better awareness of wartime events in the region.

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STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie niemieckiej linii obronnej Margarete (niem. Margarete-Stellung) wybudowanej w południowo-zachodniej Słowacji w 1944 r. oraz przybliżenie jej znaczenia taktycznego i działań bojowych, których miała być częścią w czasie drugiej wojny światowej. W badaniach tego kompleksu defensywnego zastosowano podejście interdyscyplinarne, polegające na szczegółowej analizie dostępnych źródeł pisanych oraz identyfikacji i zadokumentowaniu jej pozostałości w terenie, przy użyciu nieniszczących metod archeologicznych. Naszym zamiarem było też powiązanie obiektu z konkretną jednostką, które je budowała lub użytkowała, a także z operacjami wojskowymi, w których został wykorzystany.

Plan przeprowadzenia badań archeologicznych zachowanego systemu okopów, będącego częścią linii obronnej Margarete, zrodził się po odkryciu niepozornej wzmianki na ten temat zawartej w dokumentach dowództwa 6. Armii wojsk niemieckich z 14 i 15 grudnia 1944 r. Do tego czasu nie było bowiem wiadomo o jego istnieniu na terytorium Słowacji.

Badana część fortyfikacji znajduje się na terenie gminy Ipeľské Predmostie. Linia rozciąga się z zachodu na północny wschód, wzdłuż zboczy wzgórz, stanowiących naturalne bariery. Usytuowanie okopów w tym rejonie gwarantowało dobrą widoczność i możliwość prowadzenia ostrzału, jednocześnie zapewniając osłonę obrońcom. Z kolei dostęp do nich dla przeciwnika, atakującego od wschodu, był utrudniony. Zasięg ostrzału z obiektu skierowany był (odpowiednio) na południe i południowy wschód, natomiast obszar od tyłu (odpowiednio) na północ i północny zachód. Takie rozmieszczenie wykopów świadczy o ich przeznaczeniu do celów wojskowych.

Chociaż podstawowe zasady budowy fortyfikacji w czasie drugiej wojny światowej zasadniczo były zbliżone u obu walczących stron, to ich wykonanie zależało ostatecznie od wielu czynników: warunków terenowych, presji czasu, budowy pod ostrzałem wroga, stosowanych narzędzi, dostępnej siły roboczej itp. Różnice w powstających obiektach mogły też wynikać z tego, że wiele umocnień wznosiła ludność cywilna pod pośrednim lub bezpośrednim nadzorem wojska.

W tym przypadku, w wyniku przeprowadzonej wizji lokalnej oraz badań nieinwazyjnych stwierdzono, że średnia szerokość okopów tego systemu obronnego wynosiła od 160 do 180 cm, a w okrężnych stanowiskach ogniowych – około 200 cm. Zachowana głębokość wykopów wahała się od 30 do 40 cm na większości obszaru, w niektórych miejscach osiągając od 50 do 60 cm. Wykop tworzący opisywaną linię obronną miał typowy, ostrołukowy (zygzakowaty) przebieg na całej długości. Obok okopu głównego (bojowego), a także niektórych okopów pomocniczych (łącznikowych), zaobserwowano tu szereg niewielkich, zagłębionych obiektów okrągłych lub owalnych w planie, o średnicy od 2 do 3 m. Z głównym wykopem bojowym łączył je okop o długości do kilku metrów. Były to najprawdopodobniej stanowiska strzeleckie dla karabinów maszynowych, moździerzy lub lekkiej artylerii. Większość z nich skierowana była na tyły, ale kilka wysuniętych było przed okop, w kierunku, z którego spodziewany był atak.

Ustalono, że niektóre odcinki tej linii fortyfikacyjnej zostały zbudowane tylko w postaci przerywanej linii okopów, a odgałęzienia, które prawdopodobnie miały służyć jako okopy łączące, nie prowadziły do następnych, tj. nie łączyły głównego okopu bojowego z żadnym innym.

Pewne jest, że opisywane okopy nie zostały ukończone po ustaniu walk w tym rejonie; byłyby bezużyteczne, nawet dla nacierających Sowietów. Najbardziej prawdopodobne wydaje się, że badana, zachowana część umocnień w ogóle nie została wykorzystana w bezpośrednich działaniach bojowych. Wskazują na to rezultaty rekonesansu terenowego. Na wybranych odcinkach przeprowadzono badania wykrywaczem metali, które dały wynik negatywny; nie znaleziono tam żadnych militariów. W poszczególnych częściach obiektu nie stwierdzono też skutków walk, takich jak kratery po uderzeniach amunicji artyleryjskiej. Takie ślady byłyby obecne, gdyby okop został ostrzelany. Generalnie forma i charakter obiektu nie zostały nigdzie w widoczny sposób uszkodzone, z wyjątkiem zniszczeń spowodowanych budową drogi i innymi, niedawnymi działaniami.

Jak wyglądała sytuacja militarna w 1944 r., gdy okop powstał? W pierwszej tercji grudnia wojska radzieckie znad rzeki Ipeľ zaczęły się przemieszczać. Było to uciążliwe dla żołnierzy i sprzętu, zwłaszcza kołowego, z powodu złych warunków pogodowych; teren był podmokły a drogi błotniste. Częste mgły utrudniały też rozmieszczenie sił powietrznych. Pierwszej penetracji na tym terenie dokonały jednostki 13. Gwardyjskiej Dywizji Kawalerii, wspierane przez 8. Gwardyjską Dywizję Kawalerii. Dnia 9 grudnia przedarły się one w rejon miasta Balassagyarmat i tym samym dotarły do przedwojennej granicy pomiędzy Czechami a Węgrami.

W tym czasie niemieckie dowództwo zapewne zaczynało zdawać sobie sprawę, że siły przeciwnika planowały dokonanie przełomu właśnie w tym rejonie. Dlatego pośpiesznie postanowiono wzmocnić obronę miejscowości Šahy i okolic. W dniu 7 grudnia węgierska 2. Dywizja Pancerna (dysponująca tylko kilkoma, w większości przestarzałymi czołgami, takimi jak Turán i Toldi), otrzymała rozkaz wkroczenia do Šahy. Jednostka została wzmocniona przez trzy bataliony niemieckiej 24. Dywizji Pancernej.

Tydzień później (14 grudnia) toczyła się bitwa o Šahy. Do licznych starć bojowych dochodziło daleko od miasta. Wojska radzieckie atakowały na linii: od wsi Nekyje, Sečianky, przez Preseľany nad rzeką Ipľ, aż do Hrkovc. Opór stawiały im rozproszone i osłabione jednostki armii niemieckiej i węgierskiej, zwłaszcza Brygada SS „Dirlewanger", resztki 24. Dywizji Pancernej oraz jednostki 2. Węgierskiej Dywizji Pancernej; chociaż – według relacji żołnierzy radzieckich – dywizja ta nie dysponowała czołgami w tym rejonie.

Podczas, gdy jednostki 9. Korpusu Gwardii zdobywały Šahy, pierwszy i trzeci Batalion Brygady SS „Dirlewanger" zostały wysłane do zajęcia pozycji wokół wsi Kleňany. To tę linię defensywną Niemcy w swoim raporcie nazywali „Margareten-Stellung". Wynika stąd, że raport wspomina o tym odcinku okopów, który został przez nas zadokumentowany. Zatem to wyżej wymienione oddziały niemieckie były odpowiedzialne za obronę tego odcinka dnia 14 grudnia. Nie ma pewności, czy zajęty został cały badany przez nas obiekt, czy tylko jego część. W kolejnych dniach część wspomnianej Brygady SS zajmowała pozycje w okolicach wsi Kleňany, ale stopniowo jej obrona załamywała się na skutek ataków sowieckich i częstych dezercji z oddziału.

16 grudnia 1944 r. nadal trwały lokalne walki. Sowietom udało się w ciągu dnia zdobyć wieś Turowce i dotrzeć do wsi Plášťovce. Tymczasem Niemcy rozpoczęli kolejny, nieudany kontratak z południa. Utrzymali swoje pozycje w kilku wioskach wokół wsi Šahy, próbując zatrzymać lub przynajmniej spowolnić sowieckie natarcie. Tego dnia stracili jednak wsie Tupá i Preseľany nad rzeką Ipľ, skąd zostali wyparci przez nacierające oddziały Armii

Czerwonej. Najprawdopodobniej wtedy bataliony niemieckiej Brygady „Dirlewanger" opuściły linię obronną Margarete. To przesunęło punkt ciężkości walk na obszar na północ od wsi Šahy. Wkrótce (20 grudnia) sowieckie czołgi dotarły do rzeki Hron i ruszyły dalej na południe, a następnie (26 grudnia) zdobyły Parkan (obecnie Štúrovo) i Esztergom, tym samym definitywnie zamykając okrążenie Budapesztu. Kompleks obronny Margarete nie spełnił zatem funkcji, dla której go wzniesiono.

Cały opisywany tu system obronny zasługuje na status narodowego zabytku kultury, albo przynajmniej powinien zostać zarejestrowany jako stanowisko archeologiczne poprzez wpis na krajową listę, aby podlegał ochronie prawnej, zabezpieczającej go m.in. przed działalnością górniczą lub budowlaną. Linia umocnień ma także potencjał z perspektywy archeologicznej. Po zbadaniu i zadokumentowaniu obiektu metodami nieniszczącymi, w przyszłości mogłaby być przebadana wykopaliskowo. Prace takie dostarczyłyby dodatkowych danych umożliwiających ostateczne potwierdzenie lub zanegowanie hipotezy o braku bezpośredniego bojowego wykorzystania okopów podczas walk w grudniu 1944 r. Po zakończeniu badań inwazyjnych okop lub jego wybrana część mogłyby zostać odrestaurowane i zrekonstruowane. W ten sposób powstałby historyczny skansen wojskowy. A w wyniku podobnych prac, jak przez nas podejmowane, mógłby powstać kompleksowy wykaz słowackich obiektów fortyfikacyjnych i ich historii.

Tłumaczenie Magdalena Bis

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