

Archaeology of Conflicts

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Possibilities of archaeological research on the World War II battlefields in Slovakia

Pavol Šteiner¹

In 1944 and 1945, the territory of Slovakia turned into the scene of front-line fights of World War II. Like in any other country affected by the war, these events left both well visible and less distinct traces in our landscape. Their intensity is indicated by the fact that the fights for the relatively small area of present-day Slovak Republic (ca. 49,000 km²) lasted 241 days in total (from 21 September 1944 to 3 May 1945). The war clashes in Slovakia encompassed the fights within the so-called small war with Hungary in March 1939 as well as the military operations during the Slovak National Uprising in September and October 1944.

The war events of the largest spatial extent have taken place in Southwest Slovakia, more precisely in present-day districts of Levice, Komárno and Nové Zámky. These clashes between the armies of the Axis (German Wehrmacht and Hungarian Honvédség) and the Allied forces (Red Army, Romanian Armed Forces) involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers, hundreds of armoured fighting vehicles and airplanes, even the Danube Fleet of the Soviet Union!

Despite the above facts, professional literature paid so far only little attention to these events. The lack of literature about the fights on the lower reaches of the rivers Ipel', Hron, Nitra and Váh is caused by multiple reasons. Firstly, the post-war Czechoslovak and Slovak historiography paid only marginal attention to these events. However, there also might have been another reason, never admitted by anybody, namely that the liberation was not that easy as the communist ideology has presented. The fights for Šahy, Komárno, the Südwind operation and even the Bratislava-Brno Offensive, successfully conducted by the Red Army, remained in the shadow of "selected chapters".

The complex research on the given period cannot be regarded only as a solitary topic of military historiography. The complete knowledge of the problem demands an interdisciplinary approach, above all the employment of archaeological methodology. Material evidence of these fights from the time of the World War II thus, after more than seventy years, finally comes into the view of archaeology.

Historical context

The first phase of fights in this territory dates back to the second half of December 1944, when the armies of the 2nd Ukrainian Front of the Red Army crossed the river Ipel' and conquered the town of Šahy

¹ The publication is one of the outputs of the project APVV-17-0199: Cultural product of a regional museum in the context of objective social need: The life in the totalitarian regime of 1939–1945.

on 14 December. The fights in the following two weeks took place between the rivers Ipel' and Hron, stretching from the foothills of Štiavnické Mountains as far as what is now the Slovak-Hungarian frontier. The Soviets launched an attack on 20 December, during which they captured the town of Levice almost without a fight, reached the river Hron and even crossed it near Kalná (Šteiner 2018, 21–34).

The German reaction was as quick as lightning. The command of the Army Group South immediately redeployed three tank divisions to Šahy and launched a vigorous counterattack on 21 December. The result was the seizure of the villages Tupá and Chorvátice, which virtually cut off the whole Soviet 6th Guards Tank Army from the rear. The Soviet counteraction consisted in a quick turn of tank and mechanised brigades to the south in order to break free. Apart from this, the staff of the 2nd Ukrainian Front redeployed another mechanised corps and an entire cavalry-mechanised group to the battlefield at Šahy. As a result, these manoeuvres repelled the German offensive and enabled to launch a counterattack (Šteiner 2018, 35–44).

The situation between the rivers Ipel' and Hron began to change in favour of the Red Army around the Christmas of 1944. The pressure of tank and mechanised brigades from the north was at this moment already strengthened by rifle divisions of the 7th Guards Army, who in the meantime fought their way through the Börzsöny Mountains on the left bank of Ipel' River and encircled the German and Hungarian divisions (Šteiner 2018, 45–46).

The Germans finally got the major part of their forces over the river Hron in a relatively organised way, but the Soviets crossed the river immediately afterwards. The Soviets then kept the German defence occupied with fights for the village of Kamenný Most until the New Year's Eve. A bonus for the Soviets was the seizure of Štúrovo and the nearby village of Nána, thanks to which they created a sort of small bridgehead on the right bank of Hron River and therewith an ideal starting point for further advance to the west (Šteiner 2018, 46–52).

At the beginning of January 1945, the centre of military operations has shifted to the right bank of the river Hron and the adjacent left bank of the Danube. On the New Year 1945 already, the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht launched the first one of a series of "rescue" operations intended to loosen the encirclement of Budapest. The operation got the code name Konrad (I) and its main force should have been the IV SS Panzer Corps, which set out for an attack from the area east of Komárno (Šteiner 2018, 58–60).

On 6 January, units of the 6th Guards Tank Army went on the counterattack to cut off the divisions of the IV SS Panzer Corps from the rear. The Soviet offensive was directed towards important traffic junctions in Komárno and Nové Zámky. During the first two days of Soviet pressure, their tanks reached the immediate neighbourhood of both towns. However, in this area, the German commanders succeeded in concentrating their chaotically retreating corps and stopped the Soviets. The centre of fights stabilised east of Komárno, on the left bank of Váh River nearby its confluence with the Danube, in the neighbourhood of former brickworks. In this area, severe clashes between the Soviet tank and mechanised brigades and the German defence have taken place in the following week (Šteiner 2018, 60–75).

The situation began to radically change in favour of the German party since the 9 January. On that day, a mighty flood wave rushed down the river Hron. The water washed away all Soviet bridges on the river and virtually cut off all units of the Red Army on its right bank. The Germans at the same time managed to deploy the 20th Panzer Division, which launched a lightning attack on the village of Svätý Peter from Nové Zámky. Herewith they drove a wedge deep into the enemy's array and at the same time threatened from behind the Soviet brigades attacking Komárno (Šteiner 2018, 75–84).

The troops commanded by Malinovsky were forced to abandon the original idea and began to struggle for their own survival or for defence of the seized territory. Chaotic fights full of tank clashes and fire exchanges along the river Danube between Komárno and Štúrovo then lasted more than one week and concentrated mainly in the surroundings of Modrany, Svätý Peter, Búč, Bátorove Kosihy and Kravany nad Dunajom. After the 20 January, the Germans eventually had to redeploy their best combat-ready units to other sectors of the front line, so that the Soviets were able to stabilize their

defence approximately on the line Čata – Bruty – Svodín – Bátorove Kosihy – Kravany nad Dunajom. This situation gave rise to a small enclave on the right bank of the Lower Hron, which the post-war professional literature referred to as “Hron bridgehead” (Šteiner 2018, 84–92).

The Germans regarded this area as a threat of further Soviet advance to the west. Therefore they organised an extensive tank offensive called by the code name Südwind (Šteiner 2019, 7–13).

The German attack started early on 17 February with a mighty assault on the northern part of the bridgehead. From the first hours of the operation already, severe fights have been fought in Svodín and in its neighbourhood. Later on that day they shifted to the valley of the Paríž Stream near Gbelce. Within the following two days, German troops reached the Danube near Štúrovo, whereby they cut the Hron bridgehead in two halves. The divisions of the 25th Guards Rifle Corps in its western part were confronted with the threat of encirclement and destruction, so that they had to fight their way across the Hron River on their own hook and with severe losses (Šteiner 2019, 16–31).

After the 20 February, the fights for the Hron bridgehead were reduced to its eastern half with a centre between the villages of Biňa, Bruty and Kamenín. In this area, the Soviets could rely on the left bank of Hron occupied by their own troops, which is a little higher than the right bank. This allowed them to fire effectively on the advancing enemy corps. The Germans therefore began to conduct the most of their redeployments and attacks after dark, by night and early in the morning (Šteiner 2019, 31–36).

Finally on 24 February, after one week of efforts, German forces managed to launch a concentrated attack from three sides and erased the Soviet Hron bridgehead from the map by the nightfall. The last troops of the Red Army went to the right bank of Hron River near Kamenín and fixed their position in this area (Šteiner 2019, 37–40).

On 25 March 1945, the units of the Soviet 7th Guards Army started the mighty Bratislava-Brno Offensive, which was intended to force the German and Hungarian troops definitely out of Southwest Slovakia. The primary area of this military operation was represented by an about 20 km long segment of the river Hron north and south of Levice, where the Soviets concentrated a huge contingent of infantry, artillery and engineer corps. They were opposed by considerably reduced German and Hungarian infantry divisions, secured in deep defence by two newly formed tank divisions of high combat value. However, the several times stronger Soviet superiority in the numbers of infantry and artillery diminished this advantage (Šteiner 2019, 66–71).

Such an extensive Soviet offensive of course needed an armoured fist. This function was originally meant for the Romanian 2nd Tank Regiment. Its attack east of Bardoňovo on 26 March ended in a fiasco when the Allied tanks, among them many obsolete pre-war types, encountered a tough German defence (Šteiner 2019, 71–72).

The time has come to deploy the 1st Guards Cavalry-Mechanised Group. Both of its cavalry corps crossed the river Hron at the night before 27 March and attacked the German positions near Bardoňovo and Plavé Vozokany early in the morning. The greater experience of the Soviet Cossacks in combination with a mighty firing power of the Red Army's artillery and aircrafts achieved success and the Soviets have fought their way to the valley of Žitava River by the evening of the same day (Šteiner 2019, 73–76).

On the next day, the Allied forces continued their pressure on the defence of Axis troops. They managed to cross the river Žitava and at several places even the river Nitra. Thereby they created a good starting point for further actions. The German response to these manoeuvres was limited to mere delaying actions and to blowing up of bridges on all rivers. Although the Feldherrnhalle divisions had more armoured vehicles, even in a higher quality than its opponent, it was only able to cover the retreat of its own infantry corps to spare them from being captured during quick Soviet incursions. The German command was no longer capable of organising their armoured forces into formations that could change the balance of power on the battlefield. On the contrary, the tanks, self-propelled guns and armoured fighting vehicles of the Wehrmacht appeared in the field only in groups of three or two, or even isolated, to cover their own retreating infantry.

Another line where the German divisions planned to hold on were the lower reaches of Váh River. The crux of the matter was whether the Germans would be able to withdraw their troops to beyond the river earlier than the Soviets cross the watercourse. The Soviets decided to do so in the vicinity of Šaľa. In this area, more precisely in Trnovec nad Váhom and Veča, new clashes between tanks and infantry have taken place (Šteiner 2019, 97).

After relocation of fights to the other bank of Váh River, the military operations within the Bratislava-Brno Offensive literally changed into a man-hunt, where the attacking party mainly strived to keep contact with the quickly retreating enemy. The advancing and retreating troops have often intermingled. In the morning on 1 April, such a skirmish broke out not far from Vlčkovce, where the tanks of the Feldherrnhalle 1 Division, moving forward from Sered' to Trnava, encountered a Soviet anti-tank brigade which has overhauled them during the night (Šteiner 2019, 103).

The tempo of advance of the Soviet corps was intensified. Malinovsky's armies needed more than one week to overcome the distance of about 30 kilometres between Hron and Váh rivers, but the following sectors were already captured by them very quickly: Trnava was seized on 1 April, Bratislava on 4 April, and on 6 April, the Soviets already crossed the river Morava in Záhorie region and moved to Lower Austria.

From the above-mentioned facts follows that within four months of fights in the discussed region, a huge amount of militaria must have been accumulated and a high number of installations must have been built which can now be studied within archaeological field research. Apart from this, seen from the perspective of heritage protection, the numerous memorials, commemorative plaques, war graves or cemeteries also should be regarded as visible reminders of the war.

Legislative base of research

Definition of modern militaria as archaeological finds

The World War II militaria were paid so far only marginal attention in Slovak professional archaeological literature. With the exception of sporadic excavations and surveys of shot-down aircraft crash sites, no specialised research was made on this type of artefacts and sites. The current legislation of the Slovak Republic fortunately reflects the fact that modern militaria which are still located in open terrain, no matter if movable or immovable, should enjoy the same degree of protection as "standard" archaeological finds. The Act No. 49/2002 Coll. on the protection of monuments and historic sites, Section 2, paragraph 5, talks in plain language:

"Weapons, munitions, ammunition, parts of uniforms, military equipment or other military material found in the earth, on the earth's surface or under water and dating from before 1946 shall also be considered archaeological finds."

This definition takes account not only of the fact that modern militaria represent an equally important part of the national cultural heritage as, for example, the prehistoric or medieval artefacts, but also of the necessity to protect them from unprofessional, illegal retrieval, possession or trading.

Code of criminal procedure on illegal excavations and metal detecting

The 2011 amendment (No. 262) of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Slovak Republic added two more paragraphs to Section 249, which are related to the above-mentioned citation from the Act on the protection of monuments and historic sites:

1: *"Anyone who commits unauthorized archaeological survey, excavation or some other retrieval and transfer of finds from the original site, who illegally possesses archaeological finds or who damages or destroys archaeological heritage, shall be punished by imprisonment for up to two years."*

2: Imprisonment for one to five years shall be imposed if the offender has committed the offence under paragraph 1

- a) with a metal detector or other detecting device,*
- b) for a special purpose,*
- c) on a larger scale, or*
- d) even if the offender was punished for similar act within the preceding twelve months or was sentenced for such act within the preceding twenty four months."*

The reason why the Slovak heritage legislation pursues one of the most rigid legal solutions in Europe is mainly based on the experiences of our archaeologists and heritage protectors. Every year we encounter hundreds of illegal digs on archaeological sites. We know about the existence of many private archaeological collections. We also know that many finds are exported to abroad (Šteiner 2019, 112, 113).

Illegal collections

In the case of criminal activity which directly regards the World War II militaria, there are regions, mainly in the north-eastern part of Slovakia, where the forested mountainous terrain and low population density offer ideal conditions for illegal treasure hunters. These individuals and groups, often from abroad, boast about their "booty" mainly on the internet, thanks to which we know that this activity already is well-organised (Šteiner 2014, 98).

This is the way how illegal militaria collections arise and develop. Unlike illegal collections of other archaeological artefacts, the owners of these collections often present themselves to the public as respectable researchers and collectors and many people have not the slightest idea that they contravene a law.

An especially illustrative example of such acting, also with unexpected overlaps to other legislative areas, is known from the studied region. In the municipality of Pohronský Ruskov (Levice District), in a region where intensive fights have taken place from the end of December 1944 to the end of March 1945, a local entrepreneur owns a private collection and sometimes makes it accessible under a bombastic but inappropriate name "Military historical museum". From a strictly professional museological perspective, there can be no talk of a museum because it lacks most of the basic attributes of a museum: it does not perform organised collection-making activity, does not make proper recording of collection items, does not employ professional staff, does not perform professional protection of objects, it is not included in the museum network etc. Many objects exhibited in this collection were acquired by illegal excavations using metal detectors (Fig. 1).

A particularly serious threat is the fact that this collector enjoys the support of state authorities because he officially acts as a partner of the Institute of Military History (IMH), whose founder is the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic. The IMH even permanently lends exhibits to him.

This is unfortunately not the only example of such activity of IMH. Publicity in this regard was given recently to another case of a "collector" from Dolná Krupá, by coincidence likewise an entrepreneur, who inappropriately used armoured fighting vehicles borrowed from the collections of the Museum of Military History in Piešťany, whose founder is of course the IMH (www.domov.sme.sk/c/20874394/techniku-zo-zakladne-v-dolnej-krupaj-ziada-ministerstvo-vratit.html, 31 Jan 2020).

From the above-mentioned facts follows that despite a high-quality rigid heritage act, which correctly regards modern militaria as archaeological artefacts, a classical "gap in the law" occurred. Moreover, this gap is filled, supported and extended by the activity of an institution which is directly subordinate to one of the Slovak ministries. Unfortunately, since the discussed problem of using and misusing the World War II militaria has constantly been on the periphery of media interest, no social pressure exists to draw the attention of general public to this problem and to start a process targeted at liquidation of such undesirable and utterly deleterious phenomena.



Fig. 1. One part of the private collection of militaria in Pohronský Ruskov (photo by author).

We of course only estimate the real extent of illegal collections. It can generally be said that their scientific value, exactly like the value of other illegal private archaeological collections, decreases to almost zero because their retrieval was not properly documented.

This is the fundamental methodical problem. Many detectorists, who consider themselves amateur researchers, are of course oriented on artefacts. The find itself is a goal for them and its retrieval in any possible way means that their task is fulfilled. Many of them are even honestly sure that they did a meritorious thing: they saved an object. Lacking the basic knowledge of archaeological methodology, they thus do not realize that they do more harm than good. They have absolutely no idea of documentation, stratigraphy, contexts, circumstances of finding, find assemblages etc.

However, some of these collections definitely have an appreciable museum value and they might be transformed into proper museums or at least museum facilities. This would of course require to take some necessary measures:

1. an agreement with owners
2. legalization of collections
3. proper museum records
4. transformation of collections into regular museums or museum facilities.

It might seem drastic, but the mere existence of illegal collections of modern militaria in Slovakia is not the greatest evil. Much worse is the trade in them, mainly their export to abroad. Serious problems, apart from the activity of foreign detectorists on Slovak battlefields, are also caused by the activity of domestic treasure hunters who take the militaria out of the territory of Slovakia. Under the current state of (non)control of Schengen borders, the only passable way seems to be a purposeful cooperation between archaeologists, police and board of customs, which should be focused on particular cases of suspicious activity of this kind (Šteiner 2012, 55, 56).

We can currently apply a relatively simple method of tracking and discovering the offenders of the above-mentioned criminal activity, using their feeling of being unpunishable. With regard to their intensive internet promotion and communication, it suffices to oversee the publicly accessible web pages and discussion forums to reveal the identities of individual persons and to obtain the available evidence for their prosecution. Infiltration of such communities also is possible but it demands personal and legislative provisions from the side of law enforcement authorities.

Specifics of archaeological research on modern battlefields

Basis: analysis of written sources

In comparison with research on sites from earlier periods, the research on the World War II battlefields has a significant advantage that it can rely on a wide spectrum of written materials. Regional and specialised archives store a huge amount of documents including details on the accurate location of individual battlefields. An important source of complementary information is the memoir literature. Paradoxically enough, the vast majority of hitherto published works in the category of professional literature do not contain such information because they are mostly focused on relatively large areas, whereas details are mentioned only sporadically.

As regards the research on battlefields in Southwest Slovakia, the most reliable source currently is the internet portal *pamyat-naroda.ru*, which makes the documents of the Red Army available to the public. There are vast numbers of situation reports of Soviet troops, often with a detailed description of their position on a given day. Each of these military units of course produced documents of different quality. Some of them are quite superficial, whereas others provide many detailed data or even situation maps. Especially the documents of tank, mechanised and cavalry corps were usually elaborated in minute detail and with maximum precision.

The study of documents of Soviet troops also partly fills the information gap caused by the absence of German primary sources. At the end of the war, several months before capitulation, the staff work of Wehrmacht troops has not been as accurate as earlier. Moreover, many documents were not preserved due to the turbulent end of the war. The data on the position and array of enemy troops, obtained from the Soviet reports, are therefore particularly important. Thanks to interrogation of captives, the military intelligence services of divisions, corps and regiments of the Red Army were relatively well informed about the German or Hungarian forces whom they encountered.

However, the acquirement of information from staff documents is not as easy as it might seem at the first glance. This work demands the knowledge of not only Russian language but also historical Russian military terminology, abbreviations, map symbols, permanent confrontation of information in detection of mistakes, typing errors etc.

That might be the reason why this type of military historical research has been conducted so far by only very few Slovak experts. We can only hope that the illegal militaria hunters will not take the trouble to examine these publicly accessible documents.

Maps

The analysis of written documents and maps enables to very accurately localise individual battlefields and to suggest the methods of their archaeological exploration. The Soviet military cartography during the World War II had a very high quality. The hitherto examined staff maps are more detailed than the available pre-war Czechoslovak maps. Although their texts are written in Cyrillic alphabet, the toponyms correspond to Slovak names, which implies that the source materials for creation of these maps must have originated from Czechoslovak sources. However, it is not known whether the

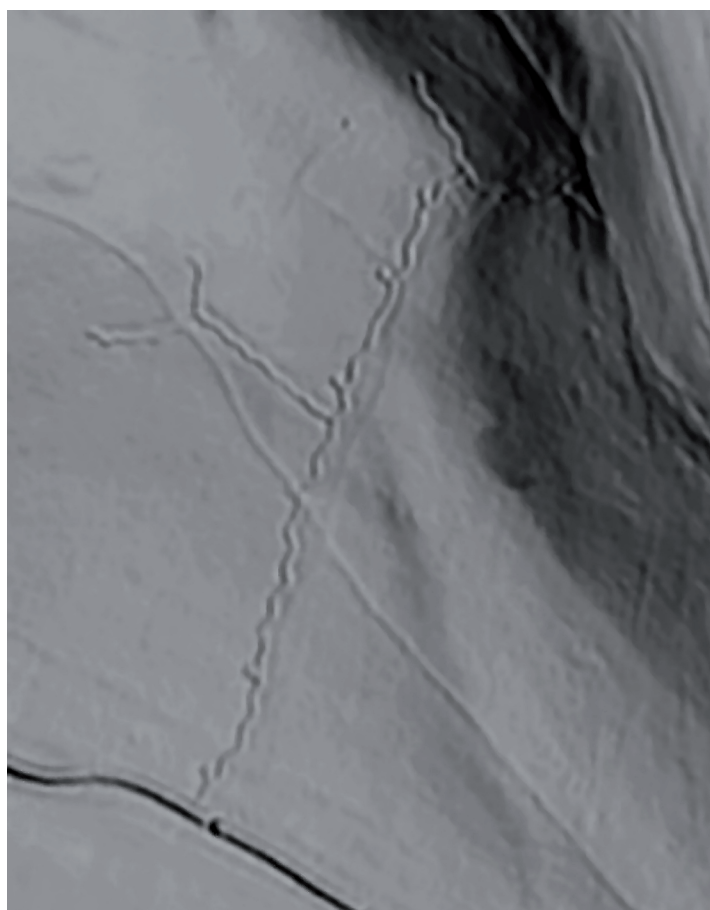


Fig. 2. LIDAR image of a newly identified system of trenches on the lower reaches of the Hron River.

Soviet authorities acquired them in cooperation with Czechoslovak exile authorities, or in some other way (espionage). Anyway, we have preserved testimonies of Slovak insurgent officers from the time of the Slovak National Uprising, who were surprised that the maps shown to them by Soviet partisan commanders were more detailed than their own special military maps (see e.g. Zubal' 1997, 196).

Thanks to this similarity of Soviet staff maps, it is relatively easy to exactly identify the locations of battlefields or military features (trenches, obstacles, emplacements, minefields etc.).

The maps can be primarily confronted with aerial or satellite images, as far as large features are concerned. However, in Slovakia we currently already have the first examples of LIDAR images at our disposal. These data mainly help identify field fortifications (trenches, defensive fighting positions, evidence of aerial bombing), which are more or less preserved. However, the specifics of the researched terrain on the lower reaches of the rivers Hron, Ipel', Nitra or Váh (intensive agricultural use) cause that the possibilities of LIDAR are limited to the predominantly forested areas, which were not modified within the past seventy five years. Despite this handicap we already obtained some results by using this method (Fig. 2).

Identification of battlefields and its verification on site

The simplest type of archaeological research might be the surface survey. I can confirm by my own experience that the most World War II battlefields can be identified in this way. In places of intensive fights, remnants of militaria are still lying on the ground surface, confirming the localisation of the battlefield. In case of their scarcity we can use a metal detector, since the majority of preserved militaria are made of metal or at least contain metal components and are situated at a shallow depth

below the surface. Fixing the position of surface finds of militaria is important, even though it is of course their secondary position. However, it is useful to follow up the areas with largest concentrations of these artefacts, exactly like in the surface survey of older sites.

This surface survey should be subsequently ideally extended by another geophysical methods, which can detect the location of particular features (defensive fighting positions, trenches, bunkers, etc).

Other possibilities of field research

In the case of positive identification of a site, providing that the site can indeed be explored, the next phase of research can involve small-area excavations of detected features (see e.g. Rak 2011, 279–288; Rak 2013, 115–137).

Of key importance in this phase should be the detection whether or not any explorable features are preserved. The vast majority of military operations in Southwest Slovakia have taken place in agricultural land. Most of the defensive positions were therefore filled with earth after the war and since they usually reached shallow depths, they were almost completely destroyed by deep ploughing or by other agricultural works. Many military features in the vicinity of watercourses were certainly destroyed by post-war amelioration projects (straightening of watercourses, filling up the dead stream branches, build-up of flood barriers, etc.).

This is also associated with another factor of field research on modern militaria, namely their presence at shallow depths below the surface. This fact implies that potential excavation should not begin with mechanical removal of topsoil because this uppermost layer is supposed to contain a large amount of objects.

Risks

There is also a specific group of finds that bring opposite problems. This group is represented by wrecks of crashed planes, whose engines or other parts usually penetrate much deeper into the ground.

Another types of expectable finds are ammunition and skeletal remains of soldiers. In these cases we must abide by relevant acts and regulations, which exactly define the sequence of steps to be undertaken (e.g. Act No. 130/2005 Coll. on war graves; Bordáč 2019).

From the perspective of heritage protection, we must reckon on finds from organic materials (textile, leather, paper, wood, etc.), which must immediately be professionally treated, conserved. However, similar treatment is also inevitable with inorganic materials, above all metals buried in the ground, which constantly lose their integrity in the course of time.

Taking it all round, the main point of the whole process is to register the World War II battlefields as archaeological sites. Their identification and enlisting in the CEANS database (Central Register of Archaeological Sites in Slovakia) automatically grants them legislative protection.

Survey of a battlefield – deserted estate Bibit puszta, cadastral district of the municipality of Bruty, Nové Zámky District

In November 2018, by joint effort of the Department of Museology, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra and Department of Archaeology, Comenius University in Bratislava, a first attempt was made to verify the methods of identifying a battlefield in open terrain, using the knowledge acquired by the study of Soviet staff documents.

The selected goal of our effort was the deserted estate Bibit puszta in cadastral district of the municipality of Bruty, Nové Zámky District. It is one of the many isolated estates that were built in

Southwest Slovakia since the 18th century in the effort to colonise the areas depopulated during the Ottoman wars. In the fights at the end of the World War II, these estates or granges were used by both parties as strongpoints in defence. The slightly corrugated flatland terrain of the region did not offer many other possibilities of how to conceal own troops from the reconnaissance patrols of the enemy.

Military-tactical significance of the location

Bibit puszta became the scene of extensive tank battles during the German Südwind operation on 17–24 February 1945. It has been defended by Soviet troops for a few days, successively against the attack of three German divisions and two tank battalions. The estate consisted of three large masonry buildings in U-shaped arrangement and was situated amid the fields between Bruty, Svodín and Kamenín, about 2 km away from the nearest estate Kamenínska pustatina. It was only accessible through field roads. The Soviet tank crew members mentioned it in their memories as a “*group of buildings*” or a “*farm*”. In the reports by Soviet troops we can only find its abbreviated name “*Bibit*”. This oddly sounding name probably comes from the name of the founder or one of the first inhabitants of the estate.

The importance of Bibit puszta is reflected in preserved documents and memoirs of both opponent parties. The location oversaw a relatively wide area and the German troops could not miss it in their advance towards Kamenín, that is, towards the Hron River. Therefore, they strived to seize it virtually from the first day of the operation.

The main credit for the defence of Bibit puszta belongs to a three-tank platoon of the 36th Guards Tank Brigade, commanded by the second lieutenant I. S. Deputatov. Despite the enemy’s distinct superiority in the number of armoured fighting vehicles, his three tanks T-34/85 managed to effectively repulse all attacks by manoeuvring between prearranged camouflaged positions in terrain. However, Deputatov’s tanks were not alone in the Bibit estate. They were accompanied by artillery of the 115th Guards Anti-Tank Regiment and most probably also by infantry of the 72nd Guards Rifle Division, in whose sector the Bibit puszta was located.

On 21 February, during attack of the Feldherrnhalle Heavy Panzer Battalion, the tank of lieutenant K. P. Tulupov was hit and the whole crew, except the driver, was killed. On the last day of defence of the Hron bridgehead, the tank of the second lieutenant I. F. Borisov also was destroyed and the surviving crew members reached the opposite bank of the Hron River near Kamenín on the hull of Deputatov’s vehicle.

For the merits in fight for Bibit puszta, nine tank crew members (commanders, drivers and gunners, two of them in memoriam) were awarded the highest Soviet military decoration, the Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union, and the remaining crew members (radio operators and loaders, two of them likewise in memoriam) were decorated with the Red Banner Medal. Such examples in the Red Army during the World War II were not very numerous, which testifies to the extraordinary significance of the fight for this inconspicuous location, at least from the perspective of Soviet propaganda, because the soldiers were awarded for merits in fight during a lost battle (the story of Deputatov’s platoon in detail: Šteiner 2013).

Source materials for identification

After the war, the ruined Bibit puszta remained uninhabited and gradually vanished from the earth’s surface. The study of historical maps has revealed that the location was not recorded in each of the accessible cartographic sources. It was only depicted on a special 1:75 000 pre-war Czechoslovak military map and on a 1941 Hungarian military map (Fig. 3).

Very helpful were the preserved staff maps of the Soviet 4th Guards Mechanised Corps and the 72nd and 81st Guards Rifle Divisions, on which Bibit puszta also occurred. They depicted it in full



Fig. 3. Localisation of Bibit puszta on a 1941 Hungarian military map (www.mapire.hu, 14 Oct 2019).

accordance with the above-mentioned Czechoslovak and Hungarian cartographic sources. These data were at the same time the most accurate ones. The maps testify to high precision and professionalism of Soviet staff officers at the end of the war. Besides a detailed topography, they also contain lines occupied by Soviet infantry, firing weaponry (machine guns, anti-tank rifles, artillery guns, mortars, rocket launchers, armoured fighting vehicles in the hull-down position) and even the course of the line occupied by the enemy. The sketches also allow to generalize the system of Soviet defence that was used in the Hron bridgehead.

Survey of the site and its surroundings

These maps and location sketches enabled to exactly identify the coordinates of the location of the Bibit puszta estate. The only thing to do was to verify the assumptions on site. We started the pedestrian survey in a right-angled bend of the road Kamenín – Bruty, where the preserved sources localise the spot height 153, on which the Soviet firing weaponry was positioned (after 20 February, the 292nd Guards Self-Propelled Artillery Regiment was positioned here, armed with self-propelled guns SU-76, Šteiner 2019, 32). Already the first, more or less accidental and unplanned, preliminary inspection of the site in 2016 has yielded in immediate neighbourhood of the road multiple fragments of armour plates with a thickness of about 4–5 mm and a fragment of a heavily corroded shell case, whose calibre can be estimated as 76.2. This calibre was also used with the above-mentioned self-propelled guns SU-76 (Fig. 4).

The organised systematic survey of the site was conducted by five persons. Immediately after we entered the field, we began to find remnants of militaria: deformed shell cases, stabilizers of mortar projectiles, armour plating fragments, even one fragment of a Soviet mess tin (Fig. 5). Interesting was



Fig. 4. The find of a 76.2 mm artillery shell case in the area of Bibit puszta, 2016.

that the farther away from the road we walked up the moderate slope to the southwest (the height difference was more than 10 metres), the lower was the density of finds. Most probably, it is so because metal militaria, due to their relatively high weight in comparison to other finds (ceramics, bones, stone, etc.), have a stronger tendency to slide down as far as the terrain allows, as a result of erosion and ploughing.

As soon as we approached the location of the estate as shown in the maps, the number of surface finds increased again. Moreover, we recorded an intensive occurrence of brick and mortar fragments, which provided evidence that this was a place where once masonry buildings were standing. Herewith we achieved the goal of the survey – we stood in the place of what was once the Bibit puszta (Fig. 6).

Our following effort was focused on the spot height 190 southeast of the nearby municipality of Svodín. In February 1945, the Soviets built here a strong anti-tank node consisting of several batteries of anti-tank cannons. The German attack with heavy Königstiger tanks on 17 February 1945 completely smashed the obstacle but we have expected that the remnants of militaria will help us identify the position of above-mentioned batteries. However, after arriving at the place, we found out that the mentioned spot height actually represents an elongated elevated ridge, several kilometres long. A brief surface inspection did not notice any traces of fighting positions. That means that the follow-up survey must encompass a much larger area than the first one.

Using the memoir sources in field research

At this point it is necessary to remark that we have worked not only with maps but also with other written sources, whose significance increased when we looked at the battlefield directly on site through the eyes of the participants in fights. These sources are represented by memories of the Soviet tank man L. S. Loginov (driver in the tank of the second lieutenant Borisov) and the German tank man K. Volleth (commander of a PzKpfw IV tank from the 208th Tank Battalion), who fought against one another at the given time:

“...The crews sat in hastily dug dugouts, and the tanks were camouflaged in old trenches. In front of us, thirty metres away, parallel to the front line, there was a road lined with fruit trees, and farther towards the Germans there was a field with sparse bunches of corn stalks. (...) In front of the tank towered the roof of a solid cellar and behind it were the white walls of a recently destroyed building. (...) Behind the cellar, a flat white field stretched for about four hundred metres. Farther away there was a gully in which German tanks were concentrated.” (Loginov; www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=737, 18 Feb 2020).



Fig. 5. Finds from the area of Bibit puszta collected during a survey in 2018 (photo by author).



Fig. 6. The place of what was once the Bibit puszta is located on an indistinct elevation in the background behind the field road (photo by author).



Fig. 7. The gully of Krovina Stream (photo by author).

The mentioned road still exists and some old trees are still standing along it, probably the rest of those which Loginov has seen. The author very precisely describes the camouflage of tanks between the ruins of the estate. Very important is the mention of a “gully”. This feature is also remembered by K. Volleth:

“We launched a night attack on 19 February. At the dawn of the new day, five of our vehicles were hit. We got stuck in a gully and regardless of whether we moved forwards or backwards, we came under fire of anti-tank cannons and mortars.” (Di Giusto 2010, 201).

This gully, more precisely a small valley of the periodical stream Krovina, remained unchanged to this day. Its area is not used for agriculture and it is overgrown with vegetation (Fig. 7). We can therefore suppose that it might still contain evidence of combat activities of German tank and infantry troops.

Conclusions

It is beyond any doubt that the World War II battlefields represent an important target area for archaeological research and survey in the future. The significance of this activity can be seen at two levels:

1. The identification of battlefields itself will help specify the knowledge of historical research based on written sources. Military historian, however perfect his knowledge of preserved documents may be, must also take into consideration the material and geographic aspects of the problem. Direct inspection of the battlefield on site often gives the written information a third decisive dimension, which enables to better understand other specifics of terrain, tactics, etc.

2. A second, not less important, significance consists in the protection of battlefields from illegal retrieval of militaria. After identifying a battlefield, we class it among archaeological sites which are given legal protection. The mere enlisting in the register of sites of course does not protect the location, but if an illegal activity, mainly with a metal detector, is disclosed, the offender cannot defend himself in a “standard” way.

The preliminary surface survey of battlefields in cadastral districts of the municipalities of Bruty and Svodín has yielded a positive detection, namely that nowhere on the surveyed sites we found traces of the activity of militaria hunters. The relatively frequent occurrence of large pieces of metal militaria indicates that this area has not yet been visited by such individuals or organised groups, at least not intensively. This gives us hope to not only overhaul the illegal treasure hunters in their effort, but also carry out a more extensive future research on relatively unharmed sites.

However, in the fight against illegal retrieval of modern militaria we must also take a wider spectrum of measures, which will cover, so to speak, the side streams of the problem. Absolutely fundamental seems to be the fact that some of these quasi-collectors, more precisely detectorists, are covered up by official state institutions. The Act on the protection of monuments and historic sites must apply to all fields and its violation must not be tolerated on the basis of contacts between individuals and the management of institutions, which in this case fall within the field of defence. One of fundamental problems in this regard is the (in)activity of law enforcement authorities which, however, applies to the whole society. Much more practical is the question of ability of the field of defence to administer the collection-building organisations (Institute of Military History – Museum of Military History). This is also linked with another protracted problem of our museum sphere, namely the absence of a truly representative museum of military history with nationwide competence.

We can only hope that some institution will take such a project under its wing and will help to revive the stagnant research on the liberation of Slovakia. This will finally pay off the imaginary debt of our discipline towards this essential period in the modern history of Slovakia.

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