

ÁRPÁD FORTIFICATION LINE, AS A HORTHIST HERITAGE OF THE EASTERN CARPATHIANS AND CAPITALIZATION OF THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF ILVELOR VALLEY FROM BISTRITA-NĂȘĂUD COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The fortified system Árpád, which bears the name of the former Hungarian dynasty set up during World War II, mainly by the Hungarian horthist, stretched for more than 600 kilometers, one third being on the territory of Romania, and the rest on the territory of Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland. In developing this article, I applied the case study as a research method, which allowed me to inventory and evaluate these Horthy fortifications, but also to collect certain data related to their impact on the life of the local community and tourists visiting the area. Throughout the investigations and the documents studied, I found that the Hungarians built in the Rodna Mountains, right in the heart of the mountains, dozens of casemates for defense and attack and, although they had to be destroyed by those who ordered their arrangement, the hasty withdrawal of the Horthyists left some of the bunkers almost intact. The case study shows that the bunkers here were smaller and slightly stiffer. The Hungarians were inspired by the French and Belgian fortifications occupied by the Germans, and the concept was rethought and adapted to the natural conditions in the Carpathians. Following the study, I found that the horthyst defensive system in Transylvania was planned to have 5 types of casemates, depending on their role: surveillance or firing nests or depending on what they housed: ammunition, soldiers or officers. The entire northern group of the Eastern Carpathians bear the traces of armed conflict. Such arrangements can be found in the territories of Rodna, Ilva Mică, Ilva Mare and Mureșenii Bărgăului, areas with a rich natural tourism potential, which, exploited to its true value, could attract many curious and eager tourists to know the history of the places.*

Keywords: fortified system, bunkers, armed conflicts, tourist potential

1. The Árpád fortification line, as a component of the Horthyst defensive system in Transylvania

The Árpád Line was a line of fortifications built in 1941-1944 in the northeast and east of the Carpathian Mountains, along the border of the Kingdom of Hungary. It was named after Árpád, the chief of the Hungarian tribes. The main function of the line was to protect Transylvania, Székely and Eastern Kárpátalja. The line of defense was the Árpád line, and the Hunyad and Prinz Eugene lines stood in front of it [5].

It stretched for more than 600 kilometers, a third being located on the territory of Romania, and the rest on the territory of Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland. The Hungarians were inspired by the French and Belgian fortifications occupied by the Germans, and the concept was rethought and adapted to the natural conditions in the Carpathians. The bunkers here were smaller and slightly stiffer. Basically, they were casemates made in the ground, with high-quality concrete, the only one of that time that withstood temperatures below -5 degrees Celsius, with gravel brought from

northern Hungary and stone obtained right on the spot. When everything was ready, the bunkers were covered with a layer of 30-40 centimeters of ground for camouflage. Some of these bunkers still exist. The concrete was prepared by hand by the forced laborers, the material being climbed on the slopes either with the help of a system based on winches or with the wagons on the mining railways. The bunkers also had armored doors, and once they closed, each soldier had 4 cubic meters of air, enough for four hours of parking. Upstream of these bunkers, on the passage corridors, a kind of concrete pyramids were displayed, called "dragon teeth", which had the role of blocking the advance of the tanks [6]. The workers who arranged these bunkers did not know much about these constructions, this being a precautionary measure of the Hungarians. Workers were obliged to make a verbal and written commitment that they would not provide anyone with data on the activities carried

out for these purposes. Dozens of such bunkers have been set up in the heart of Transylvania.

The horthyst defensive system in Transylvania was planned to have 5 types of casemates, depending on their role: surveillance or firing nests or depending on what they housed: ammunition, soldiers or officers. The entire northern group of the Eastern Carpathians bears the traces of armed conflict. Such arrangements can be found on the territories of Rodna, Ilva Mică, Ilva Mare and Mureșenii Bârgăului localities. On the territory of Ilva Mare there were 18 such fortifications, most with defensive role and a bunker with tactical role was arranged. In addition to the bunkers, a system of trenches, a tunnel and a series of barracks and buildings meant to house soldiers were built. Underground shelters were to be used as a shelter only in case of threat [3].

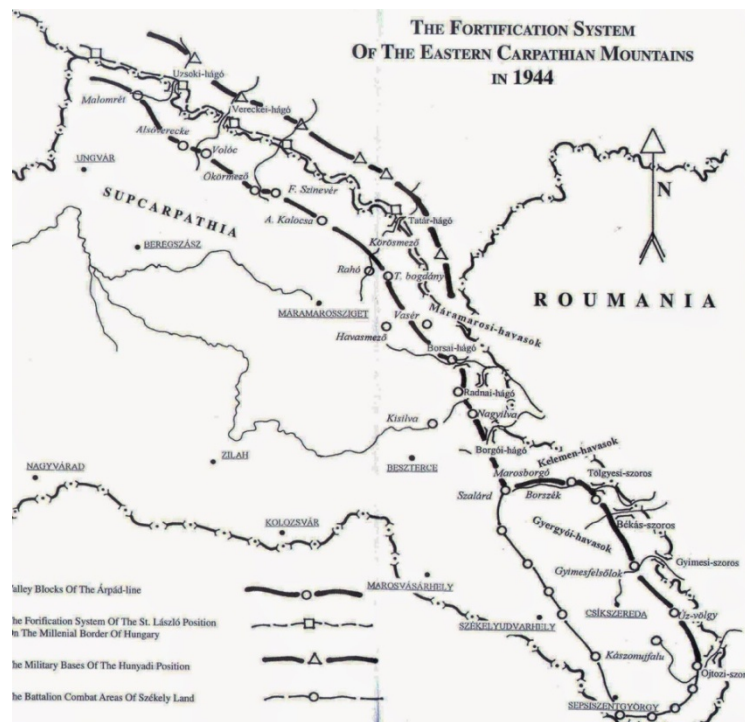


Figure 1: The system of fortifications in the Eastern Carpathians in 1944[6]

The Árpád Line was based on small fortified areas of circular defense, rather than a continuous line of impenetrable fortress. Most of the roads were destroyed in the forested, mountainous and swampy areas between the forts. Therefore, the task of the defenders was to protect the obstacles and not to fight against the main Soviet forces.

The main method of fortifying this field was to close potential transport and attack routes by means of blocking the route with several anti-tank trenches, hedgehogs, dragon teeth and minefields. These obstacle areas are followed by a rather small but very complex system of barbed wire ditches and obstacles, which protect the anti-tank barrier against diggers, bridge tanks and teams of engineers [2].

The main line of defense is usually on a hilltop at the edge of a forest and divided into independent circular defense sectors.

All buildings, excavations and obstacles are adapted to the landscape and there are no large objects easy to aim at, while Maginot-like bunkers were impossible to camouflage enough. Therefore, the enemy is forced to attack the defensive trenches with a conventional infantry attack (as during the First World War) at the cost of terrible losses, without the assistance of armored forces or firearms [6]. It is a type of "flexible" line of defense, because soldiers are not stuck in bunkers, defensive platoons could be grouped between open firing positions (wooden firing positions and digging) and independent sectors. Moreover, soldiers can easily carry out a

counterattack (optionally supported by heavy line weapons).

2. Testimonies of the Horthyst fortifications in the Ilva Valley area

2.1. The Rotunda Pass and the Ilva Valley Ensemble

In the area of the Rotunda Pass, on the watershed between Someșul Mare and Bistrița Aurie, there are numerous traces of trenches, anti-tank dams or reinforced concrete casemates.

In Ilva Mică, in Bistrița-Năsăud County, as well as in the whole northern and eastern part of Transylvania, the so-called "munkaszolgalat" - forced labor detachments, made up of Romanians and Jews, were set up by the new Hungarian administration. With their hands, the Horthyists built what is called the Arpad-Vonal line, a network of underground galleries, bunkers, casemates and sites for heavy artillery, a network that stretched about 600 km from the bend of the Carpathians in the south to Slovakia and Poland in north [6].

Upstream of these bunkers, on the passage corridors, were arranged a kind of concrete pyramids, called "dragon teeth", which had the role of blocking the advance of the tanks. The workers who arranged these bunkers did not know much about these constructions, this being a precautionary measure of the Hungarians. Workers were obliged to make a verbal and written commitment that they would not provide anyone with data on the activities performed for these purposes.



Figure 2: Ruins of the fortifications in Pasul Rotunda [6]

Hungarian sources indicate that in the Ilva Mare area there were about 18 fortifications of this kind, most of them with a defensive role, to which is added a bunker with a tactical role from where the military command could supervise the entire theater of operations. Only one of these casemates was equipped with embrasures, the one located somewhere near the confluence of Ilva and Someșul Mare [3].

2.2. The bunker on the Strâmba Hill (Ilva Mică)

The commune Ilva Mică is located at the meeting point of the Ilva and Someșul Mare rivers, having a more than strategic location downstream of the communication routes facilitated by the course of the two waters. Considering the fact that in the area of this commune the confluences of Ilva with Strâmba Stream and Leșul take place, and the roads are directed on these secondary valleys, the importance of the respective perimeter in the military tactics of the one who controls the heights becomes more and

more obvious. Strâmba Hill has an altitude of about 684 m and is part of the compact, low and smooth back, which advances like a peninsula between Văile Lupului and Strâmbei. We are talking here about a low extension to the west, then to the north, of the Mountain (Dealului Măgurii, approx. 1226 m), in turn this being an altimetric landmark of the huge sub-volcanic body called Heniul Mare, a real "wall" impenetrable of the Bârgău Mountains, a guarantee that an eventual aggression from the South (Dornelor and Suceava Road) is excluded. A clear testimony about the last World War is the presence of the bunkers in the immediate vicinity of Ilva Mică commune, especially southeast of it [4]. At a closer analysis of the determined territory as well as of the landscape conditions in the area we can draw an accurate picture of the complex of factors that led to a strategy of building a military shelter on the respective hills.

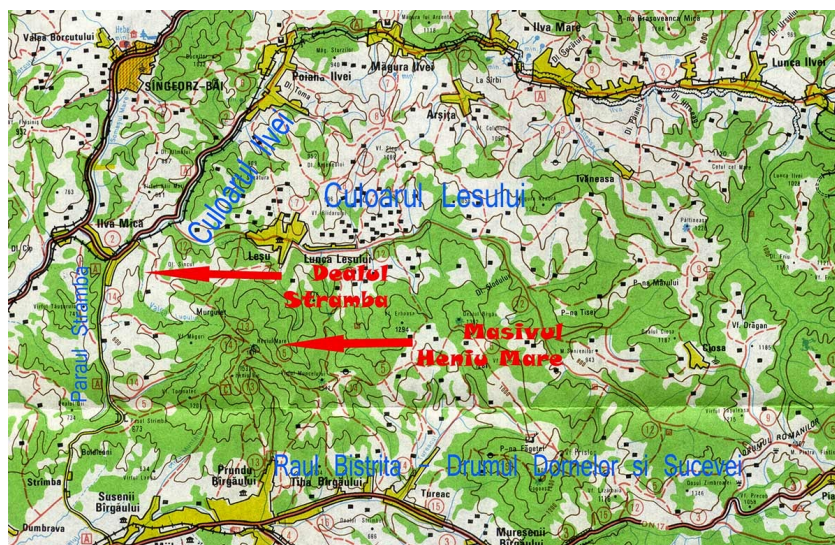


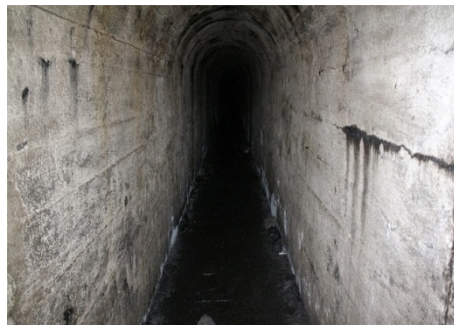
Figure 3: Strâmba Hill, Heniul Mare Massif and its surroundings [6]
(processing after a map by Traian Naum)

About 30-40 minutes away from Ilva Mică, climbing slowly on the slopes of the hills near the settlement, we come out in a plateau area, grassy, animated from place to place by haystacks, but also by huge pieces of concrete seeming randlomly thrown there, in the bucolic landscape of smooth ridges. The possibility of expanding the

visual field revealed at this altitude of less than 700 meters is another defining feature that gives us the measure of its integration into the suite of military reinforcement points along the mountains. We have here a very wide panorama that climbs both to the Heniului Mare Peak, and to the upstream of the Leș and Ilva corridors, as well as to the

Strâmba Creek Basin, which advances from the South, from the pass area with the same name, and beyond this pass, among others, the settlements of Suseni and Prundul Bârgăului come into sight [6]. Towards its river mouth, the gentle bed of the Ilva river (West) allowed for the settlement of the commune we admire from above, and, militarily speaking, the surveillance of a small downstream portion of the Someșul Mare corridor (which separates the Rodna Mountains from those of Bârgău) it can be done very easily from where we are. However, the situation at the time meant that the entire effort to build this building was aimed at counteracting the danger from the east, which had two ways to enter the area, namely Ilva and Leșul. The bunkers

here, including a tactical shelter for officers, are included in what is called the "second line of defense," while supporting a battalion of Mountain Hunters stationed in the valley. In addition to the bunkers, a trench system, a tunnel and a whole series of barracks were built, as well as buildings to house soldiers, and the underground shelters will be used as a refuge only in the event of an open threat of Soviet artillery. The line of defense in the perimeter of Ilva Mică was put into use in the first part of 1944 allowing the Horthysts to focus on the last component of the fortifications in the area, namely the one near Rodna commune, on Someșul Mare, at about 10-12 km upstream of Sângeorz-Băi [8].



a



b

Figure 4 (a, b): Bunkers in the Ilvelor Valley area [6]

From place to place there are rooms for stationing troops or for storing supplies and armaments. A number of at least 4-6 exits can be identified towards the ends of the corridors, some of them partially blocked, others totally of boulders and pieces of concrete resulting from explosions, certainty of the fact that the respective bunker was intentionally damaged by the horthyst troops in retreat, so as not to leave the specific infrastructure in the hands of the enemy [3].

3. Evacuation of the fortification lines and the possibilities of tourist capitalization of the area

The Hungarian intervention of deliberate destruction of infrastructure of any kind, including underground shelters, which

could support enemy operations is also confirmed by the attempt to blow up the spectacular and strategic railway line between Ilva Mică and Vatra Dornei, about 34 works of art (bridges, viaducts, tunnels), as well as other adjacent buildings on this railway route falling prey to this military "burning" tactic. The "self-destruct" devices used German technology specific to the era. Regarding the casemate on Strâmba Hill, the damage observable only near the exit mouths, as well as the lack of other damage, cannot question the rapid withdrawal and the lack of large military collisions in the respective perimeter [6]. In the first half of 1944, the entire population of Ilva Mică was evacuated, and craftsmen brought from all over Transylvania were asked to sign and give a

verbal statement that they would never talk about the fortifications they were to build here. Although they withdrew in a hurry, for fear of being surrounded, the Horthyists took with them all the archives in the commune, including the complete plans of the Arpad-Vonal line, but also the list of those who lost their lives carrying ballast or rock digging.

4. Conclusions

The valorization of the Arpad Line in the Oriental sector by the local authorities becomes a delicate aspect in terms of the negative emotional load it has for the majority population, although the tourist potential of the area is rich and varied and could attract many Romanian or foreign tourists.

In conclusion, we can see with certainty that if we could manage and direct the affective factor to a neutral level, we could be dealing with some tourist attractions that can bring added value to the economies in this area. And the investment in the access and arrangement infrastructure would constitute a more than feasible effort, as the overall condition of the Ilva Mică bunker, as well as of other similar buildings, is good and does not involve major repairs. Thus, both in Ukraine and in Romania the de facto situation demonstrates that the "tourism of frustration" related to the Arpad Line must meet certain conditions to become feasible on the long-term, one of them being the reconciliation with the history of those who constitute the dominant flow of visitors.

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