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Obsotelje – the South-Eastern Border of the German Reich (1941–1945)**

Introduction

Following Germany's attack on Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia's capitulation in April 1941 and, consequently, the division of the Slovene territory by the occupying forces,¹ new state borders came into being. The border of the German Reich shifted to modern-day Slovenia's eastern border or to the south-eastern border of the former Austrian land Styria, where it bordered on the newly established Independent State of Croatia (NDH). In its southern part, it was bounded by the Sotla river basin (Obsotelje)² that stretches over five natural geographic units on the Slovene side of the border: the hills Boč and Macelj (the headwater region of the river Sotla), the Upper Sotla hills (the river's upper reaches), the Middle Sotla hills (Sotla's middle reaches, beneath the confluence with Mestinjščica), the Bizeljsko hills and the Krško plain (Sotla's lower

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1 Repe et al., *Mejni kamni*, 9–10.

2 Natek, *Posotelje*, 168.

reaches) towards the south.³ This chapter will provide an in-depth presentation of the border in the first two areas.

Jože Hederih, who spent his childhood in Dekmanca, a few metres from the river Sotla,⁴ the future border between Germany and the NDH, said:

“I remember the Germans arriving, the road was full of cars, motorbikes, carts, pedestrians. They were accompanied by German planes. They flew so low that I was afraid they might hit my head. I squatted near the cross at the end of the garden out of fear.”⁵

The New Borders and Border Areas

The borders between occupied territories were planned as future state borders. They were outlined on location by intergovernmental commissions up to the autumn of 1941.⁶ Hitler's guidelines, which were given on 3 April and published on 12 April 1941, served as the instructions for the partition of Yugoslavia, as did the subsequent intergovernmental agreements.⁷ Four border areas and borders came into existence, one of which was the border between Germany and the NDH. There were different regimes on these borders and, consequently, life along them was different as well. Some borders were much more fortified than others, they featured minefields, wire obstacles, etc. To enable better control of the border, all buildings were demolished in its proximity and wooded areas were cleared. This was done predominately with forced labour using the local population.

German-Occupied Slovene Štajerska

Hitler divided the occupied Slovene territories into two temporary administrative units. The eastern administrative unit Lower Štajerska (Lower Styria, *Untersteiermark*, for a while referred to as *Unterland* or *Südsteiermark*) encompassed the entire Slovene Štajerska, a small part of Prekmurje, a part of Dolenjska (Inner Carniola) and the Municipality of Zagorje ob Savi (a total of 6,782.12 km²). The western administrative unit consisted of Gorenjska (Upper Carniola), the river Meža valley and Jesersko (referred to as the Occupied Areas of Koroška (Carinthia) and Kranjska

3 Perko, *Geografija slovensko-hrvaške*.

4 At the present, a settlement in the Municipality of Bistrica ob Sotli, situated along the river Sotla and immediately next to the border.

5 An interview with Jože Hederih.

6 Celar, *Slovenija*, 37.

7 Colić, *Takozvana*, 115.

(Carniola) or *Besetzte Gebiete Kärntens und Krains*). The *Gauleiters* or district leaders of the NSDAP Štajerska and Koroška helmed the civil administration and were at the same time *Reichsstatthalter* or Reich governors. Nazi-oriented district commissioners from Austria were subordinated to them.⁸

A New Border on the River Sotla

With the introduction of the border, Obsotelje became a border area once again. This had been a border area in the period of the Roman Empire, when the border between the provinces Noricum and Pannonia ran in its northern part. From the High Middle Ages onwards the river Sotla constituted the border of the Holy Roman Empire, and within the Habsburg Monarchy Sotla was the border between Styria and Croatia or Hungary. Sotla was also a border river in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (subsequently the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), when it delineated the border between the Drava Banovina and Sava Banovina (subsequently Banovina of Croatia) and in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, when this river was the border between the Socialist Republics of Slovenia and Croatia.⁹ At present, this river constitutes the state border between Slovenia and Croatia, which is an internal border of the European Union regulated by the Schengen Border Code.

Owing to the foundation of the NDH and the expansion of Germany's state territory, the border between these two states had to be defined. Its course was outlined in an intergovernmental agreement that included a small-scale map on which the border was outlined.¹⁰ Article 1 of this agreement features the approximate course of the border:

“The Croatian–German border is defined by a line that runs from the tripoint: Croatia–the German Reich–Italy as far as the tripoint: Croatia–the German Reich–Hungary, which coincides with the former administrative border between the Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia on the one hand and the Austrian lands Carniola and Styria on the other. The envisaged course of the border is indicated by the blue line on the enclosed map that is a constituent part of this agreement.”¹¹

The course of the border between Germany and the NDH was also addressed by periodicals, e.g. *Štajerski gospodar* from Maribor:

8 Ferenc, *Okupacijski sistemi*, 59–62.

9 Bajt, Vidic, *Slovenski zgodovinski*.

10 Hrvatsko-njemački državni ugovor, 13 May 1941.

11 *Međunarodni ugovori*, 24.

“In the presence of *Poglavnik*, an agreement about the delimitation between both states was signed by representatives of the Reich and the Independent State of Croatia in Zagreb on 13 May. This is the first agreement that the new Croatia concluded with the Reich. On behalf of Germany, the agreement was signed by the German Ambassador Siegfried Kasche and the Legation Councillor Kamphoesener, and on behalf of Croatia by the State Secretary Dr. Mladen Lorković and General August Marić. The new German-Croatian border is about 100 km long. In the east, the border begins at the tripoint near Varaždin and runs westwards to the south of Rohitsch Sauerbrunn [Rogaška Slatina, author’s note] and Windischland-berg [Podčetrtek, author’s note] along the Sotla as far as its river mouth into Sann [German for the river Sava, author’s note]. From here the border runs westwards along the shoulder of the Gorjanci hill range as far as a few kilometres before the settlement of Kalje; here begins the Italian demarcation line.”¹²

The Germans and Croats stipulated in two other articles that the final course of the border would be outlined by a Croatian-German commission that would take into consideration, first and foremost, economic factors. In accordance with the provisions stipulated in the agreement, a German-Croatian delimitation commission set off towards the border on the river Sotla on 14 May 1941, a day after the agreement was signed, to address minor border-related disagreements and make decisions about the final corrections and to conclude the delimitation (Fig. 1).¹³ The commission was headquartered in Rogaška Slatina, in the hotel Štajerski Dvor, where members of both delegations held meetings between late May and 30 October 1941.¹⁴ At the end of October the Croatian delegation relocated to Zagreb and Klanjec. The members of the German delegation remained in Rogaška Slatina, where all German-Croatian border-related questions were resolved up to 28 July 1942, barring that of the exact location of the tripoint of Germany, the NDH and Hungary.¹⁵

12 *Meja med Nemčijo in Hrvatsko*, 8.

13 *Določitev državnih meja*, 1.

14 PA AA Berlin, R 105127; HR-HDA-227.

15 PA AA Berlin, R 105131, Bericht Nr. 5, 1; PA AA Berlin, R 105131, 9 July 1942, 1.

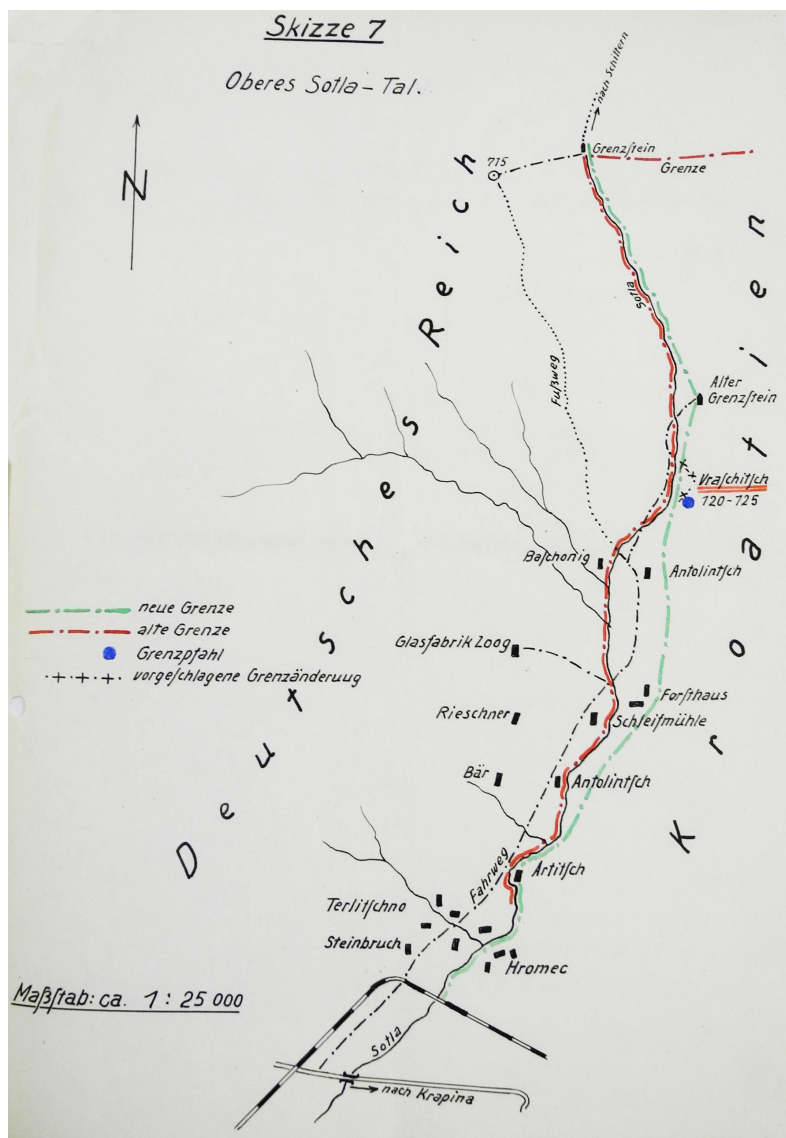


Fig. 1: A sketch produced by the German border commission showing the course of the border between Germany and the NDH between Dobovec pri Rogatcu (south) and Macelj (north) in a scale of 1:25,000.¹⁶ It shows three courses of the border: the “new border” (*neue Grenze*; green line), the “old border” (*alte Grenze*; red line), and the “proposed change of the border” (*vorge-schlagene Grenzänderungen*; black crosses). Additionally, the sketch includes three border markers: *Grenzpfahl* (blue dot) and two markings for “old” boundary stones (*Alter Grenzstein*), that delimited the Austrian and Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy (Fig. 2).

16 PA AA Berlin, R 105131, Niederschrift.



Fig. 2: An Austro-Hungarian boundary stone (right), separating two entities of the Habsburg Monarchy, and an occupation border stone (left; no. 18–7, marked also in Fig. 8), delimiting Germany and the NDH, standing next to each other near the spring of the river Sotla on Macelj. These boundary stones face Styria and Germany, where the Austro-Hungarian boundary stone features the letters “S D” (for *Styriae Ducatus*) and the occupation boundary stone the letter “D” (signifying *Deutschland* or Germany).

On the German side, the border regime had been introduced before the intergovernmental agreement was reached and the final course of the border defined. The border police posts began their operation as early as on 17 April 1941.¹⁷ On 18 April, during his visit of Maribor, Heinrich Himmler ordered that the gendarmes also be tasked with guarding the border with Croatia. Border guards did not begin to guard the border until the beginning of May, when district customs commissariats were formed, and the commissariats in Kozje and in Brežice were responsible for the area.¹⁸

Niko Pečnik wrote the following about the arrival of border guards in Bizeljško:

“The NDH border guards and soldiers (on the river Sotla) began frequenting the inn. The majority of them were Austrians from the proximity of Graz or Leibnitz. They were older, probably unfit for the front.”¹⁹

17 This date refers to the post in Brežice; it guarded the border crossing in Dobova and (for some time) in Velika Dolina. Ferenc, *Tragedija Slovencev*, 387–388.

18 Ferenc, *Nemška okupacija*, 257.

19 Jogan, Kržan, *Bizeljško*, 81.

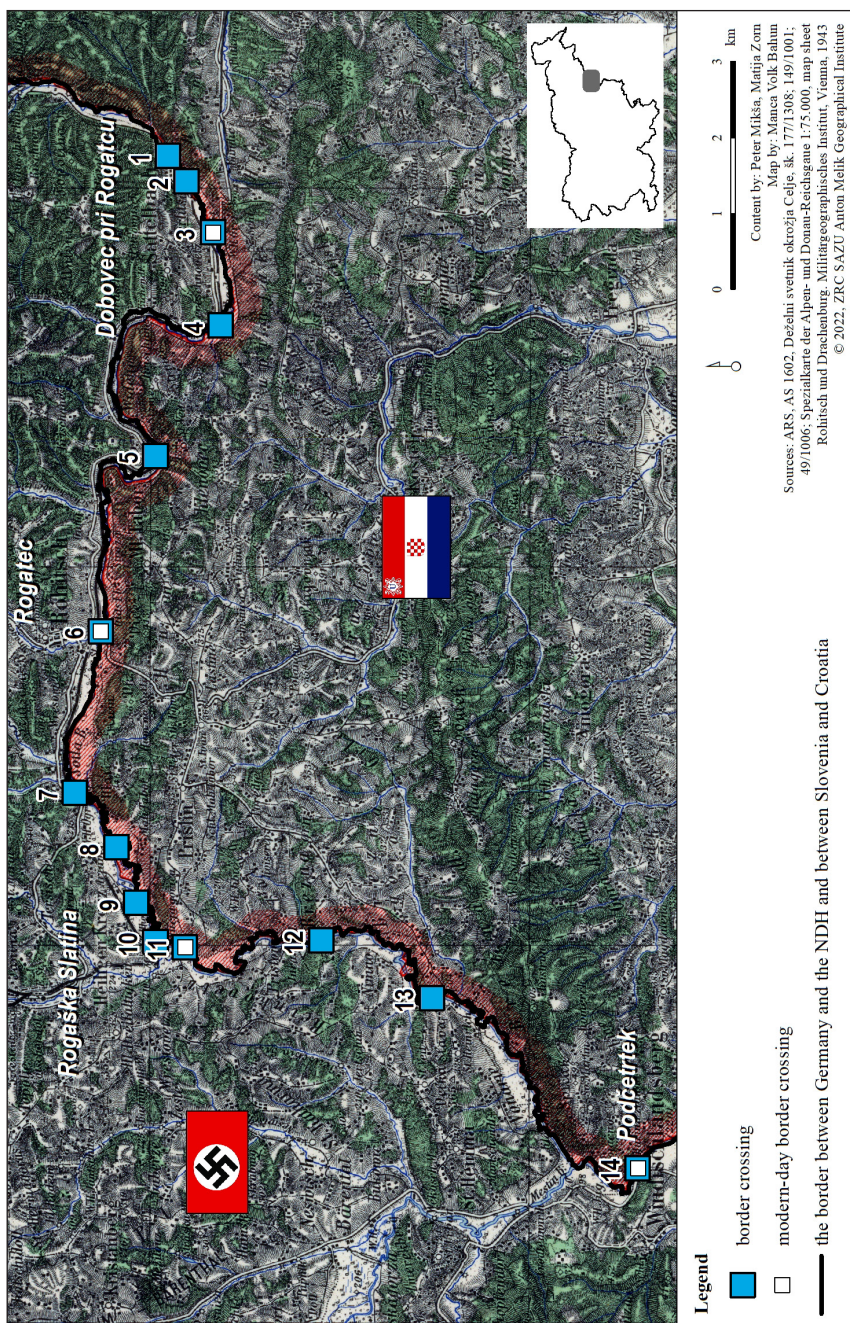


Fig. 3: A German map from 1943, produced by the Military Geographical Institute in Vienna. The map shows the border between Germany and the NDH on the river Sotla, between Dobovec pri Rogatcu and Podčetrtek. Along with WWII border crossings, the map shows also the location of modern-day ones.

There were six border posts between Sv. Peter pod Sv. Gorami (modern-day Bistrica ob Sotli) and Dobova, namely in Sv. Peter, Bizeljsko, Župelevec, Kapele, Podvinje, and Dobova.²⁰ Border guards were stationed mainly in vacant presbyteries and public buildings, such as schools or different cultural centres, and were often billeted in the locals' houses.²¹

At some places the border crossings were set up relatively densely. Along the upper reaches of the Sotla, i.e. on the 33-kilometre-long border section between Dobovec pri Rogatcu and Podčetrtek, there were 14 border crossings,²² while today there are only four (Figs. 3 and 4).



Fig. 4: The border crossing near Harine Zlake (Podčetrtek; no. 14 in Fig. 3). A German border guard in the foreground and a Croatian one in the background. This photograph was probably taken in 1941 or early 1942, when the border was still not protected with wire fences. The current border crossing stands in the same location.

20 ARS, AS 1851.

21 An interview with Jože Hederih.

22 Mikša et al., *Rogaška Slatina*.

Germans Protecting the Southern Borders

Germans fortified the borders with minefields, wire fences, watchtowers and bunkers.²³ Branko Mikša²⁴ said the following:

“I remember sitting on my uncle’s lap, looking towards the guarded border and the German Reich was on the other side. Germans installed wire fencing and planted mines on the border.”²⁵

Germans demolished all buildings²⁶ and cleared wooded areas²⁷ in a 50-metre-wide strip of land, which gave them better control of the area.²⁸ This was done mostly with forced labour using the local population (Fig. 5).²⁹ A two-metre high wire mesh fence was installed in more prominent spots (Fig. 6), the fence was topped with three strands of barbed wire. Strings of barbed wire measuring two to three metres in width were installed unevenly on the ground behind it (Fig. 7), and infantry mines were planted in the width of a few metres. These mines were laid by the army, while other work was done by the forced labourers.³⁰

Jože Zbil from Imeno said the following:

“There was wire on the border. It was 1.2 to 1.8 metres high. Higher in some places, lower in others. It was certainly higher than the modern-day one [nowadays, wire fencing stands approximately in the same spots, author’s note]. The wire was four metres wide. The posts were set four metres apart. The wire was stretched from the top of one of these to the ground and from a second top to another post, forming a pattern of several intersecting strands. It was criss-crossed from both directions. There was a coil in the middle as well. The coil was stretched in the middle, between these posts. Barbed wire was stretched above the coil, between posts, as well. The area was mined and mines were hidden.”³¹

23 Mikša, Zorn, *Rapalska meja*, 626.

24 He was born in Zalug near Prišlin, in the Maganat homestead, next to the border.

25 An interview with Branko Mikša.

26 A story from the Polhov Gradec hills on the German-Italian border is well known. The delimitation commission outlined the border across a farmyard, which would mean that the homestead and its auxiliary buildings would be demolished as well. The family shifted the border somewhat lower and thus saved their homestead from being demolished. Nartnik et al., *Življenje Polhograjcev*, 102.

27 Owners could remove the lumber and use it for their personal needs. If they did not, it was removed by forced labourers and used by the Germans. They were not allowed to form piles with the lumber, and the branches had to be spread as widely as possible to prevent the undergrowth from growing. An interview with Milan Košir.

28 Germans installed wire and planted mines in accessible spots in the high mountains as well. An interview with Anton Hosner.

29 Mikša, Zorn, *Rapalska meja*, 626.

30 An interview with Albina Gobec.

31 An interview with Jože Zbil.



Fig. 5: The German defence line was built mostly by forcibly mobilized locals. The photograph shows a bunker that is being dug at Vonarje near Rogaška Slatina.



Fig. 6: Fences measured upwards of two metres in height on the German side of the border. Nevertheless, goods were smuggled across the border. A rare photograph depicting goods being smuggled across the border. It was taken in the proximity of Rogaška Slatina, probably in 1944.



Fig. 7: Nowadays, it is easy to imagine what the fortified border on Sotla looked like. The photograph shows a former border crossing (no. 9 in Fig. 3) between Germany and the NDH at Rjavica near Rogaška Slatina with a modern-day wire fence (the photo was taken in January 2020).
Crossing the border is not allowed here.

A 30-metre high tower often stood next to the border, consisting of four double-logged posts topped with a roofed observation area measuring about three-by-three metres. It could be accessed with a ladder or wooden stairs. A bunker was built next to the watch-tower and a telephone line was installed.³²

“They had tall watchtowers, they were as tall as those used by hunters ... There were probably two or three spots in Rjavica, far from the railway tracks, they looked from there to see if anyone was coming.”³³

The delimitation commission divided the entire length of the Croatian-German border into two sections. The Croatian part of the commission controlled the marking of Section A (83 km; the southern part) and Section B (*Abschnitt B*; the northern part) was controlled by the German part of the delimitation commission.³⁴ There were 595 boundary stones standing in the former and 1,524 in the latter section.³⁵ Their numbering was officially concluded by December 1942, when the marking of the Croatian-German border was officially finished and a total of 2,119 boundary stones had been installed (Fig. 8).³⁶

Before having placed the boundary stones, the border was marked out with stakes.

The NDH complained: “The German authorities began to drive stakes into the ground for the wire fence, not precisely on the border, but these stakes are hammered in on the Croatian state territory as well. Wooded areas are being cleared and wheat is being cut down on both sides of these stakes, to a width of 60 metres, and great damage is being done to our people.”³⁷

The border could be crossed only at the official border crossings (Figs. 3 and 4), and the other, former local border crossings were encircled with wire.

“There was a bridge to the Croatian side on our house. There were a mill and a sawmill on the other side. The Germans demolished them when they fortified the border. If you wanted to cross the border, you had to go to Bistrica ob Sotli, Imeno or to Kumrovec on the Croatian side. There was no official border crossing between them. I don’t know if there was a bridge between them. They were probably demolished,” said Jože Hederih.³⁸

32 Mikša, Zorn, *Rapalska meja*, 626.

33 Mikša et al., *Rogaška Slatina*.

34 PA AA Berlin, R 105131, Bericht Nr. 4, 2; Bericht Nr. 5, 1–6.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Izvještaj Kotarske oblasti, 932.

38 An interview with Jože Hederih.

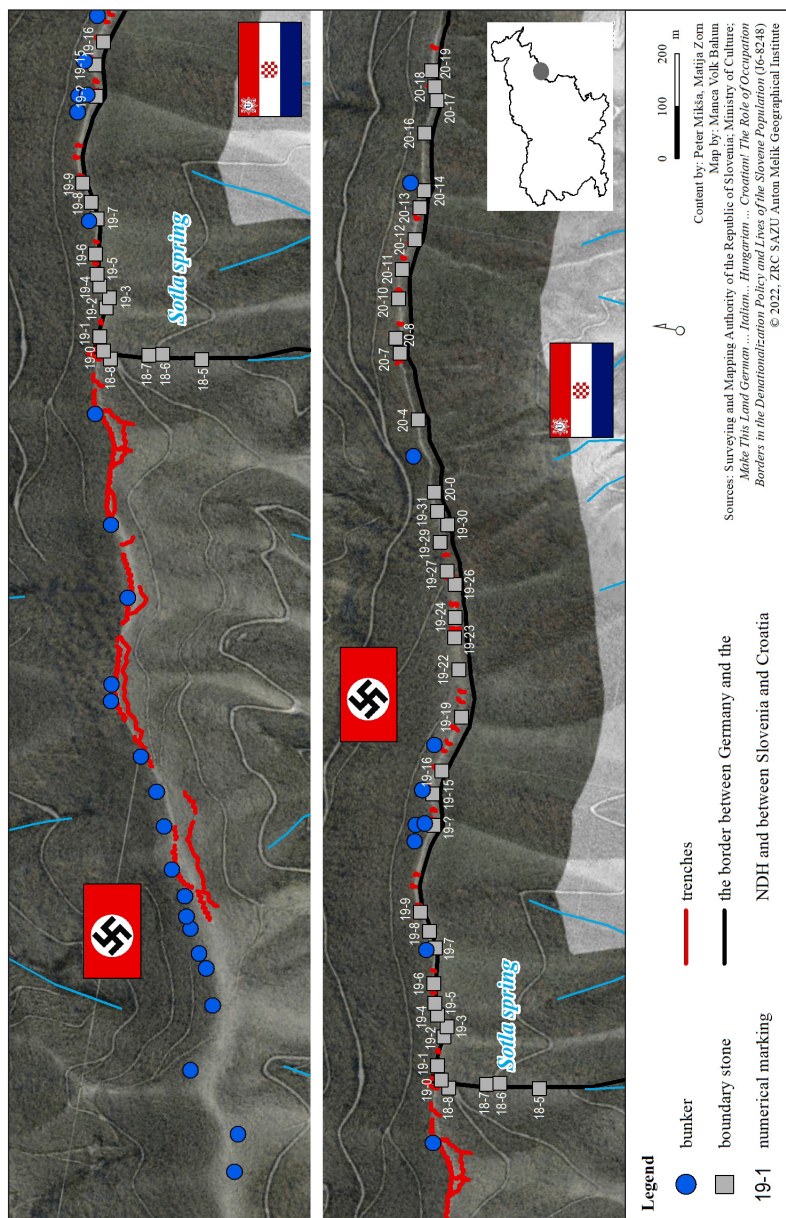


Fig. 8: On the ridge of Macelj there are numerous preserved boundary stones between Germany and the NDH. At the present, these boundary stones are the only boundary markers between Slovenia and Croatia. On average, these boundary markers stand about 50 metres apart. We can also see that trenches were dug and bunkers built on the German side of the border. The depicted section measures 3,140 m, with trenches totalling 2,450 m in length. We can see that, on average, bunkers were built 100 m apart, although in some instances the distance between them equalled merely a quarter of this length.

All of a sudden it was quite difficult to cross the border. “I remember crossing the border on my bicycle in 1942,” said Marjana Unverdorben from Rogaška Slatina, who lived on the Croatian side of the border as a child, in Zalug near Prišlin.

“I was with my uncle, who was from the Croatian side of the border. We had an agreement with the border guards to use the wooden bridge 500 metres from our house to cross the border. The bridge was guarded, we needed documents to cross it. My uncle removed the bicycle seat and took out a piece of paper.”³⁹

The construction work along the occupation border, i.e. between Macelj and Brežice, was begun in late October 1942. The fencing and other infrastructure was erected by the construction company Illner.⁴⁰ Within a year, the border was protected by a two-metre-high wire fencing (Fig. 6) in the proximity of settlements, or with a two-metre-high razor wire. Border guard posts stood in spots that required particular control. Vjekoslav Petek from Poredje remembers the beginning of the border’s fortification:

“I was there. How was the border fortified? They transported pointed spruce logs (some people pointed them, others sawed), they cut them down in the forest. Where there were no forests, they brought them in. This was done by the locals. Our people. Entire forests were cut down. The logs were hammered in and the wire was stretched out.”⁴¹

Jože Hederih said the following about the protection of the border:

“German soldiers, border guards, were stationed in Polje ob Sotli. They walked past our house as far as the village of Ples. That was their district. Then they came back. They walked slowly, in twos, every day and night. They always stopped by our house. They liked stopping there. At night, they would sit on the bench adjacent to the house. During the day they came in, especially in the wintertime. They stayed outside in the summer.”⁴²

Jože Zbil told us the following about the border guards:

“The bulk of these soldiers were on the Russian front. They came to Rogaška Slatina to convalesce in the hospital. They changed their uniforms and made

39 An interview with Marjana Unverdorben.

40 Siter, *Reka Sotla*, 151.

41 An interview with Vjekoslav Petek.

42 An interview with Jože Hederih.

them border guards. They were unfit for the war, they were severely injured or had to have surgery and were no longer sent to the front. That is why they were sent here, to the border. They walked past our house repeatedly, they patrolled the nearby hills to be able to see far. In doing so, they had the border under control, they saw if anyone tried to cross it illegally. The guards worked in twos. I think they had a 12-hour shift. I don't remember any watchtowers. But there were guard posts. They were relocated from one settlement to another to prevent them from making friends with the local population."⁴³

Mines were planted next to the barriers. A warning sign with a menacing inscription that read "Caution! Mortal danger" measuring 20-by-30 cm stood at every 500 metres.⁴⁴ Workers who laid explosive devices were involved in accidents:

"I remember when the Germans were planting mines one of them exploded and they brought in a German soldier, holding him under his arms. He said: '*Herr Kommandant, ich kann nicht sehen.*' His eyes were dug out or torn out by the explosion. I saw that, down there near Straža [Straža pri Rogatcu, author's note]. We played there as children and I remember this happening."⁴⁵

Wooden pillars, made mostly of spruce and beech wood, were sunk every two metres along the riverbed and the German Army stretched galvanized barbed wire between them.⁴⁶ In March 1943 decisions about the urgent construction of watchtowers were announced.⁴⁷

Large gates were a constituent part of the wire fencing at border crossings, in some places also a liftable wooden ramp. Mirko Halužan from Hum na Sutli recounted the following:

"The right guard would let you pass. Sometimes you had to bribe them a little. He would ask for two pounds of meat or bread, wine ... Then he would point to his watch, showing you when to come back so that he would be there again."⁴⁸

Life along the Border

"Ever since the introduction of the border we had no access to the Sotla. We had a well immediately next to it, cold drinking water. We couldn't use it, we

43 An interview with Jože Zbil.

44 ARS, AS 1602, 1–2.

45 An interview with Emil Kranjc.

46 An interview with Vjekoslav Petek.

47 Siter, *Reka Sotla*, 152.

48 An interview with Mirko Halužan.

had to carry water from the village for four years. We couldn't even use it for washing. I longed for the Sotla, I wanted to go swimming and fishing. We lived with the river, doing laundry, washing things in it," said Jože Hederih about the difficulties caused by the border.⁴⁹

His words are indicative of the problems that the local population had to face due to the border. The new border rendered swimming and fishing impossible, they had no access to water or drinking water, they could not do their washing and could not irrigate arable land during dry spells in the summertime.⁵⁰ Livestock was affected by it as well. Vineyards fell into ruin because they could not be sprayed with sulphuric acid to a sufficient degree.⁵¹

It was hard to cross the border for daily migrants travelling to work from Croatia to Germany. They were subject to constant and unpleasant border controls. Attendance of funerals and services in churches, visits of relatives and friends across the border were not valid reasons for being issued a permit to cross the border.⁵²

"I remember my grandmother's funeral, my father and I stood on the Slovene side of the border that was protected by wire and mines. We had to stand in the meadow and watch over the fence. This was in 1943. We watched the funeral with sadness. We were unable to sprinkle holy water on the deceased. A few people attended the funeral in Croatia and a few people stood with us on our side of the border," said Marjana Unverdorben.⁵³

Naturally, people crossed the border illegally as well. They smuggled various goods across the river, particularly those living next to the border.

"Our house was somewhat hidden, and goods were smuggled all the time, tobacco and salt, from one state to the other one. Exchanges took place. This happened between the house and the barn because it was somewhat hidden. Salt was pushed beneath the wire and tobacco was thrown over it because it did not weigh much. A small footbridge standing next to the mill was used to cross the river. The Sotla froze in the wintertime, and it was crossed on ice. In the summertime it was only ankle-deep and easy to wade," said Jože Hederih.⁵⁴

49 An interview with Jože Hederih.

50 An interview with Jože Hederih; an interview with Branko Mikša.

51 An interview with Ivan Ivić.

52 An interview with Branko Mikša; an interview with Marjana Unverdorben.

53 An interview with Marjana Unverdorben.

54 An interview with Jože Hederih.

Gabriela Krumpak, who was 21 when the war began, had a hairdressing salon in Rogaška Slatina. The shortages were acutely felt, and she smuggled goods herself:

“Goods were smuggled along the entire course of the Sotla. [...] I had a sister in Croatia – we bought tobacco in the black market, gave it to border guards along with a bottle of schnapps and they let us cross the border at a certain time. I had a hairdressing salon, I could not charge for my work, for instance, women paid for a perm with a cup of lard. Tobacco was smuggled, salt and sometimes bread. We got tobacco in Croatia. Smokers would do anything to get their hands on tobacco.”⁵⁵

Planks and ladders were used to walk through minefields (Fig. 6).⁵⁶ Wire fence was cut with hedge shears. Having successfully gone past barriers, people still had to cross the river Sotla. It was waded using pig scalders⁵⁷ by smaller groups and large groups of people swam across it in most cases.⁵⁸

The Sotla was crossed by the partisan 1st Battalion of the Zagorje Detachment in the winter of 1943:

“They had to swim across Sotla. Our combatants who could not swim were carried by other partisans, tying them with a rope to their backs, and pulled across the river so that not a single combatant drowned.”⁵⁹

In situations that called for a swift retreat they stormed bridges (e.g. Figar Bridge in Stara Vas) and crossed the border.⁶⁰

Casualties on the Border

Mines posed the greatest threat for the local population. They made it difficult or even impossible to access their fields or forests, and it took them considerably longer to reach shops, doctors or the church. Livestock could not be taken to pasture near the border. “A hen or a cow rummaging for food or touching the wire was blown up during the war,” said Jože Hederih.⁶¹

However, it was, first and foremost, people who fell victim to mines.

55 An interview with Ela Krumpak.

56 An interview with Jože Hederih.

57 A pig scalding is a tub used by farmers to scald pigs and remove hair from their skin.

58 Kostevc, *Bizeljsko*, 27, 33; Teropšič, *Štajerska*, 253.

59 *Izveštaj politkomesara Zagorskoga NOP*, 16.

60 Kostevc, *Bizeljsko*, 33.

61 An interview with Jože Hederih.

“My uncle made a passage there because the border was fenced off and mines were planted along it. He cut the wire and made sure that there were no mines. He used this passage to go across the border on several occasions, mostly in the evenings. In 1944 – it was Easter – he wanted to cross the border again. My mother asked him not to go because it was a feast day. He replied that it did not matter, he was going anyway. Later that evening they were frightened by an explosion because they suspected what had happened. A guard must have noticed the passage and planted a mine there. While my uncle was crawling through the wire, he hit a mine with his arms and it exploded. He cried for help, he had injuries on his arms and his face. He was blind. My family brought him home and he lived for four days. They could not take him to the hospital. The remnants of my uncle’s clothes hung on the wire until the wire was removed after the war. Nobody dared to remove it before that. We, the children, looked at my uncle’s clothes for a long time and we remembered the incident well,” said Branko Mikša.⁶²

Jože Hederih said the following:

“When the war was coming to an end, boys were curious. A 16-year-old boy wanted to unearth a mine and he died. [...] His dead body hung on the wire for some time. I was terrified for a long time after that, I saw his image in my mind all the time. It happened near our house.”⁶³

Explosive devices that the Germans had placed next to the border were often removed by partisans and used in their campaigns. This is attested by a report from the area of Varaždin:

“...villagers living along the Croatian-German border pick up mines that had been laid by the Germans to fortify the border and hand them over to partisan groups [...]”⁶⁴

The Fortification of the Reich’s Southern Border in 1944

Anticipating a possible landing of the Allies in Istria and due to victories of the partisans and the Red Army in Serbia, the Germans began an extensive fortification of the southern border in the second half of 1944. It was heavily fortified with trenches, pillboxes and bunkers. The digging was done mostly by prisoners of war, and the local

62 An interview with Branko Mikša.

63 An interview with Jože Hederih.

64 *Izveštaj Kotarske oblasti*, 118.

“I remember them building anti-tank ditches along the road, parallel to it. They dug trenches as well. (Fig. 9). The digging was done by the Germans, the Gottschee Germans and other locals had to dig as well, even my cousin. She stayed with us occasionally. I was too young for that. This was around 1943, 1944. These ditches looked like a cellar, enclosed with timbers. I do not know where they got them. They used trucks, carts, even horses for transporting them. They used logs to make seats in ditches, a bench was made as well. My schoolmate and I used to walk along these ditches after school,” said Jože Hederih about the fortification of the border near Bistrica ob Sotli.⁶⁶

The ditches’ depth varied between 1.5 and two metres, a two-by-two-metre pillbox stood every 50 metres (depending on the terrain), and a large bunker was dug at a distance of approximately 100 metres (Fig. 10). It could accommodate 12 to 16 people and was covered with layers of timber and soil to prevent the interior from being damaged by an explosion. All these structures were fortified with logs. Timber was obtained from the nearby forests, and their owners were not recompensed for the damage.



Fig. 10: The remnants of a German bunker on Macelj. Bunkers on Macelj measured between five-by-five metres to seven-by-seven metres.

66 An interview with Jože Hederih.

Jože Zbil said the following:

“They simply came and took vast quantities of beech trees and spruce trees (other trees as well, as long as they were thick enough) and other kinds of timber for bunkers. They did not pay for it, they just took it. Each bunker consisted of three layers of round timber laid on top of each other, depending on the bunker’s size or length. Very thick timber was used, and soil was placed between individual layers so that a bomb lost its power. The bunker was not made of concrete. However, it was quite large. It could accommodate 16 to 19 soldiers. They had bunk beds. You can still see a pit in the bunker’s location. The trenches ran in a zigzag pattern”⁶⁷ (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: A trench on Macelj.

Life along the Border after the War

Wire fencing and mines remained on the border after the end of the war. The wire was of high quality and the local population used it for their own needs.

⁶⁷ An interview with Jože Zbil.

“We went to the border to fetch wire and took it home so that we could fence in our homes. [...] Every farmer went to fetch it, it was beautiful, galvanized. Nothing like our brown wire, which was utterly useless.”⁶⁸

Soon after the liberation the Yugoslav Army arrived in the area to clear the border. The soldiers removed the border infrastructure and mines.

“Our army arrived and did away with the border. The posts were extracted, the wire coiled, a special team dealt with the mines. They had special instruments for detecting mines. The instrument was on a stick a metre and a half long, a detector,” said Jože Hederih.⁶⁹

Not all mines could be removed, however, and these were a constant cause for worry for the local population.

Jože Hederih’s account continues:

“In some places they did not find all the mines, some of them remained and accidents occurred later on. I was afraid to go around the house as far as the Sotla, I was worried until this was forgotten.”⁷⁰

Branko Mikša’s account is similar:

“A squad of the Yugoslav Army came soon after the war. [...] They arrived with long spears, step by step, like a Greek phalanx. Their spears were four metres long and had a metallic tip at the end, it was approximately 40 to 50 cm long. They sank the tip in sand and looked for mines. Their food came from Rogaška Slatina and bread was baked here.”⁷¹

Clearing mines claimed many lives among the soldiers, and Emil Krajnc witnessed one of these accidents:

“A young man was killed near the glass factory in 1945, while he was clearing the border. Coal ash was beneath Straža, about five to six metres away from the Sotla, he was walking there when he was thrown in the air.”⁷²

Branko Mikša remembered how his father dealt with this predicament:

“Even though the soldiers had cleared the mines, some of them were not removed from the fields along the border. Even nowadays, people come across

68 An interview with Emil Kranjc.

69 An interview with Jože Hederih.

70 An interview with Jože Hederih.

71 An interview with Branko Mikša.

72 An interview with Emil Kranjc.

them when they dig there. We had land on the Slovene side of the border, and after the war the odd animal was killed when it stepped on a mine. My father bought a harrow to till the soil. He had it remodelled – a blacksmith made long knives and attached them to the harrow. He weighed it down and cows pulled it across meadows and fields on a long chain. I remember two instances when a mine was activated. Later on, it was still very dangerous. Many people got hurt because they found a mine. They lost an arm or their eyes. One of the neighbours stepped on a mine near Bajta and died tragically. Our mother was very afraid for us, the boys, after the war because there were still a lot of weapons in forests.”⁷³

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73 An interview with Branko Mikša.

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Fig. 11, Archive of the project Make This Land German ... Italian ... Hungarian ... Croatian! The Role of Occupation Borders in the Denationalization Policy and Lives of the Slovene Population, Photo by Matija Zorn.

Summary

Peter Mikša, Matija Zorn

Obsotelje – the South-Eastern Border of the German Reich (1941–1945)

The present-day border between Slovenia and Croatia was the south-easternmost border of the German Reich during World War II. The course of the border between Germany and the newly formed Independent State of Croatia was roughly determined in May 1941 in an intergovernmental agreement, while a German-Croatian Delimitation Commission was set up to determine the border on site. The Germans protected the border with a wire fence and minefields. In the most exposed spots, a two-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire was installed. Behind the fence, they laid a concertina fence, measuring two to three metres in height, built guard towers and bunkers, and dug trenches, whose remnants are still identifiable in the landscape. Border posts were also located in places where particular control was needed. The fortification of the border began in October 1942 and was further enforced in the second half of 1944. The defence line was built mostly by forcibly mobilized locals. The border was marked by a total of upwards of 2,000 boundary stones. These are still well preserved on the Macelj ridge, where they can be seen every 50 metres, representing the sole demarcation between Slovenia and Croatia in this area. Crossing the border was only possible at the border crossings, which posed a major problem for the local population, many of whom owned land on both sides of the border. In some places these crossings were numerous, e.g. there were 14 border crossings on the river Sotla between Dobovec pri Rogatcu and Podčetrtek. By contrast, only four border crossings are located on this section of the border at present. On the German side, older, mostly Austrian soldiers served as border guards, patrolling in twos. In Obsoletje, the border prevented access to the river Sotla, and thus to drinking water – both to people and livestock – it could also no longer be used for washing, fishing, and irrigation during dry-spells in the summertime. The fact that border permits could not be taken for granted indicates that attending funerals and religious ceremonies, or visiting churches, relatives and friends on the other side of the border, were not valid reasons for obtaining one. Even though the border was protected, smuggling was widespread as a result of severe shortages. The passage through the minefield was mostly made possible by boards and ladders, while the barbed-wire fence was cut with hedge trimmers, and border guards were often bribed. Mines posed the greatest danger to the local population. They made it difficult to access fields and forests, while routes to shops, doctors and churches were significantly longer. Grazing in the border zone was also hindered. On the other hand, mines were a source of armament for the partisans, although many lives were claimed by mines even after the war ended.