

*Blaž Štangelj\**

## The Italian Army's Closure of the Border with the Independent State of Croatia\*\*

### Introduction

Italy was one of four occupiers in Slovene ethnic territory during World War II. By installing barbed wire, building bunkers, fortifications and guarded border crossings beneath the Gorjanci hill range and in Bela krajina, the Italian Army sealed the border between the Italian-occupied Province of Ljubljana and the Independent State of Croatia. This project was entitled Closure of the Croatian Border (*Chiusura della frontiera Croata*). This paper is based on Italian (the 11th Army Corps and the Isonzo Division) and partisan intelligence records found in archives. This Italian project is only briefly mentioned in the bibliography dealing with World War II in Dolenjska and Bela krajina. It was Jože Penca who dealt with this subject the most, writing three newspaper articles about the topic.<sup>1</sup> They served as a basis and provided the starting point for this paper. Remnants that remind us of this border are identifiable on location to this day. Barring the older generation of locals, we can argue that the project has disappeared from the historical memory. This paper does not aim to point to the efficiency of the occupier's engineering military units, it seeks to call to mind one of the occupation borders in Slovene ethnic territory and inconveniences resulting from it.

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1 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Parts I-III, 17.

## Plans for Sealing the Border with the NDH in 1942

In 1942, the Italian Army devised a plan to close the border with the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) that would be fortified with bunkers, military posts and wire fencing. This fortified demarcation line would run from the tripoint of Germany, Italy and the NDH, to the south of Gadova Peč, along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range, via Trdinov Vrh. To the west of Trdinov Vrh the border would turn southwards as far as the railway bridge across the river Kolpa, in the vicinity of the village of Rosalnice near Metlika.<sup>2</sup> Based on a letter penned by Mario Robotti, the Commander of the 11th Army Corps, Jože Penca wrote that the following was envisaged to fortify the border corridor:

“a) a solid corridor of barbed-wire fencing, measuring 7 metres in width, clearing wooded areas in order to make the route surveyable, passable and controllable; b) a path that is passable at least for pack animals will follow the fencing; c) a system of solid structures that would accommodate the troops, allowing them to control the border and enable an efficient defence in the event of an attack; d) a telephone line between garrisons and between the superior command, as well as between the command and the nearest garrison.”<sup>3</sup>

The erection of 33 fortified structures was planned on the demarcation line, between the tripoint near Gadova Peč and along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range.<sup>4</sup> The demarcation line would be divided into four sectors, whose commands would be stationed behind the border, in the villages of Veliki Cerovec and Gabrje, in the Pleterje Carthusian Monastery, and in Kostanjevica. The headquarters of officer commands, of which 13 were planned along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range, would be subordinated to sectorial commands. Respective officer commands would be in charge of the fortified structures on the border.<sup>5</sup>

## Sealing the Border with the NDH beneath the Gorjanci Hill Range

The planned blockade of the border along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range was not realized. It was decided that the fortified border would run along the foothills of the Gorjanci hill range, where they would make use of the existing communications and posts. In doing so, it would be easier to maintain and defend the demarcation line. The main purpose of the fortified border was to prevent the passage of partisans from Žumberak and the Gorjanci hill range to the villages beneath them, and thus prevent them

2 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part I, 17. Pavlin, *Petnajsta brigada*, 25.

3 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part I, 17.

4 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part I, 17.

5 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta 24. pehotnega polka, 14 April 1942.

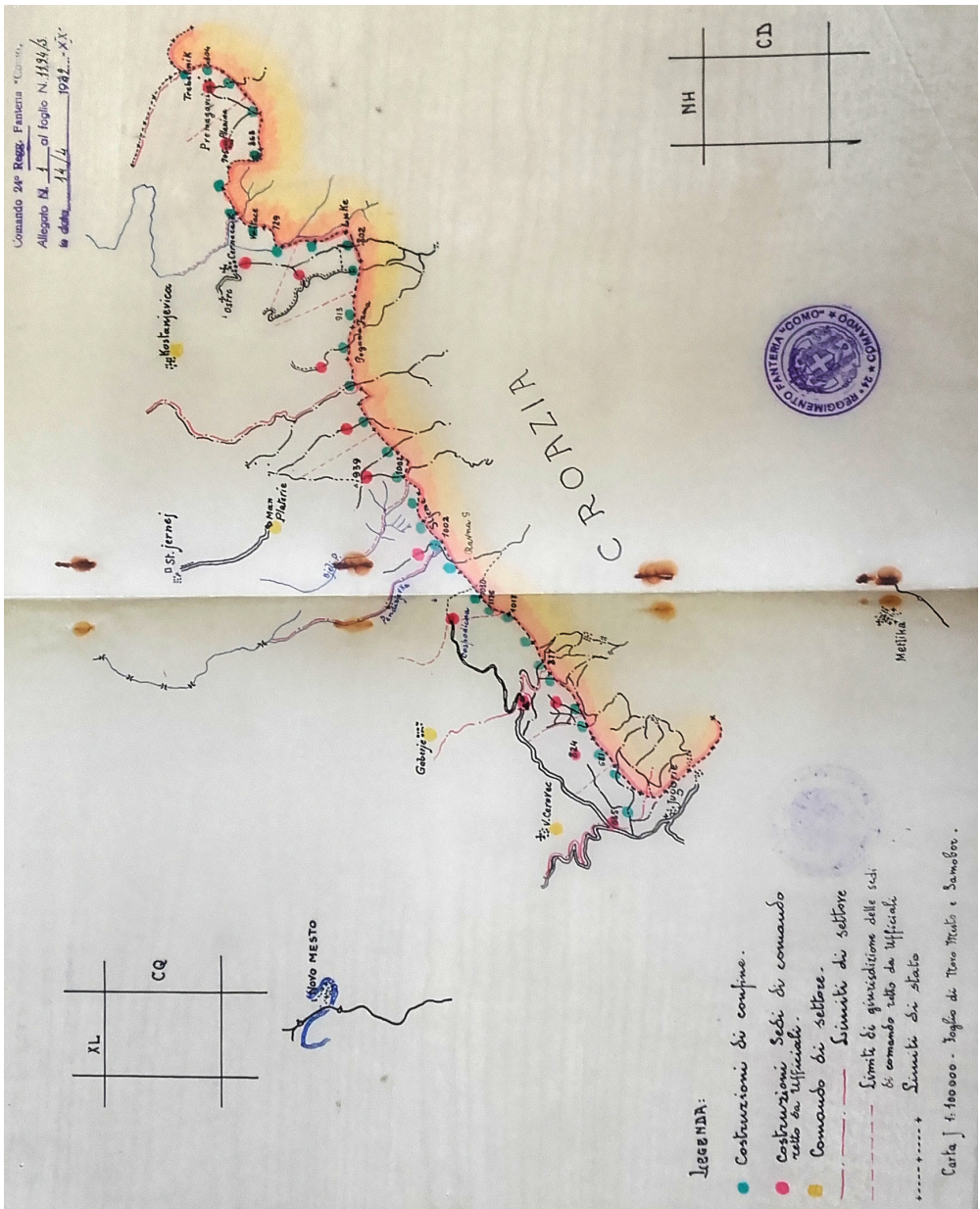


Fig. 1: A map depicting the course of the Italian blockade of the border with the NDH along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range, 14 April 1942.

from obtaining food in these villages.<sup>6</sup> The closure-related work on the border was done by the engineering unit of the Isonzo Division and by the mobilized locals.<sup>7</sup> The locals' oral sources and a few partisan documents attest that those mobilized were paid a few lire for their work.<sup>8</sup> The construction was protected by units of the Isonzo Division and of the Anti-Communist Volunteer Militia (MVAC).<sup>9</sup>

The fortified demarcation line consisted of barbed wire, bunkers, solidly built fortifications, houses that were turned into fortifications and border crossings or checkpoints.<sup>10</sup> The barbed-wire fence measured 5.5 to 6 metres in height, between 1.8 and 2 metres in the middle section, and had the shape of a trapezoid. Barbed wire was stretched around wooden stakes, measuring 15 to 20 centimetres in diameter, and pegs with a diameter of 15 to 18 centimetres. This is how the barbed-wire fencing is described in the Italian and partisan documents.<sup>11</sup>

Stanislav Sluga was mobilized by the Italian army to erect barbed-wire fencing in the Šentjernej valley. He remembers that barbed wire was installed in the following manner: six stakes were driven into the ground, forming a circle. Barbed wire was wrapped around them. The stakes were removed, and the wire was stretched, forming a 50-metre-long tunnel. Two barbed-wire tunnels were laid on the ground, one was placed on top of them, and all three tunnels were connected.<sup>12</sup>

Wooded areas had been cleared out before barbed wire was installed. The envisaged cleared-out strip of land measured about 300 metres in width, 50 inside and 250 outside the barbed-wire fencing. Since the clearance of wooded areas on the route of the barbed-wire fencing is mentioned throughout the construction of the fortified border, we can assume that they had not cleared the entire area before they installed barbed wire or bunkers and that forests were also cleared after the erection of barbed-wire fencing.<sup>13</sup>

6 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part I, 17. Pavlin, *Petnajsta brigada*, 25.

7 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Dopis poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria, 15 June 1943. Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 1 February 1943, 30 July 1943, 14 August 1943. Stanislav Sluga, Šest kolov se je zapičilo, <https://youtu.be/j7qZi027gVU>, 0:07-0:45, 1:02-2:10. Oral source: Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019. SI AS 1851, t. e. 10, p. e. 284, Poročilo OK VOS Bela krajina za CK VOS, 12 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321 Poročilo VDO za GŠ NOV in POS, 5 August 1943. Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part II, 17.

8 Stanislav Sluga, Šest kolov se je zapičilo, <https://youtu.be/j7qZi027gVU>, 1:02-1:20, 2:55-3:23. Oral source: Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019. SI AS 1851, t. e. 10, p. e. 284, Poročilo OK VOS Bela krajina za CK VOS, 12 August 1943.

9 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part II, 17.

10 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943. Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17.

11 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 22 January 1943 and 1 February 1943. Poročilo divizije Isonzo, 3 March 1943. SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Skica situacije žične pregrade z bunkerji v šentjernejski dolini, merilo 1: 25000, VDO, 10 July 1943.

12 Stanislav Sluga, Šest kolov se je zapičilo, <https://youtu.be/j7qZi027gVU>, 1:05-1:55.

13 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Napoved načrta poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja za gradnjo bodeče žice na meji, konec februarja 1943. A communication by the Commander of the Isonzo Division Maccario about

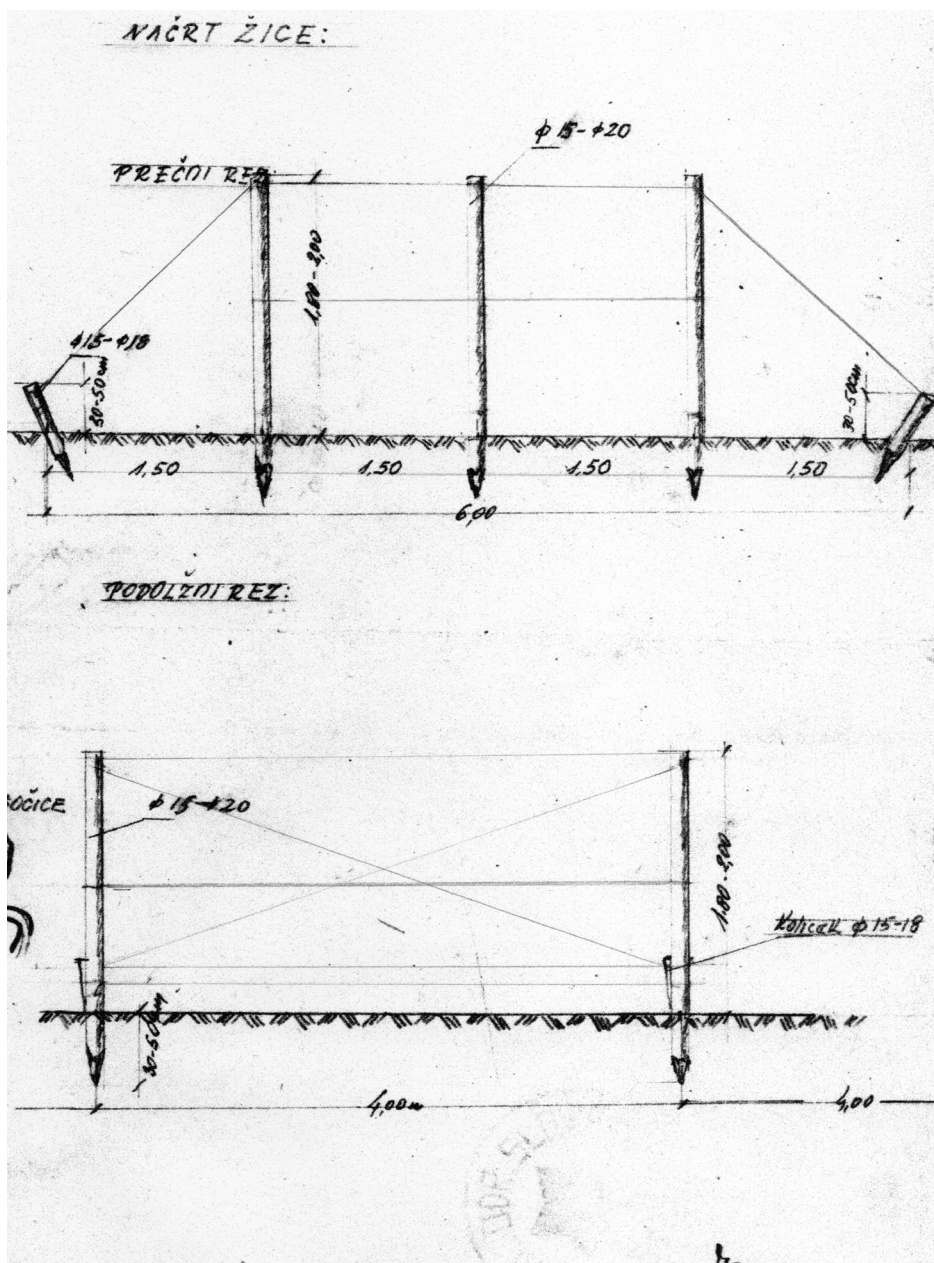


Fig. 2: A transverse and a longitudinal plan of the barbed wire corridor drawn by an informant of the East Dolenjska Detachment, 10 July 1943.

protecting the future barbed wire on the border, 30 June 1943. A report by the Commander of the engineering unit Pelissier, 14 August 1943. Stanislav Sluga, Šest kolov se je započilo, <https://youtu.be/j7qZi027gVU>, 1:05-1:30.

Sketches produced by the Isonzo Division at the scale of 1:50,000 show us the route of the fortified Italian border beneath the Gorjanci hill range and in Bela krajina, the process of its erection and plans that were not realized.<sup>14</sup> Jože Penca described the course of the route on the basis of a sketch drawn by the Isonzo Division:

“They set about their work approximately 1,000 metres to the east of Kostanjevica, on the right bank of the river Krka, continuing on the apex of the hillock to the west of the village of Slinovce towards the south, to the apex of the hillock to the south of the Church of the Mother of God, where they turned westwards, crossed the road from Kostanjevica to Črneča Vas, the stream Studeno in the direction of the south wing of Kostanjevica Castle, the modern-day location of Forma Viva. Here, barbed-wire fence crossed the stream Obrh and the road from Kostanjevica to Orehovec, crossed the road to Kočarija and encompassed the entire hamlet of Zaboršt. [...] From Zaboršt onwards the fence ran slightly in the direction of west by north-west, at the spot height of 280, i.e. where the fencing intersected the path from Dolnja Prekopa to Kočarija and Vodenice, the location of two strongpoints manned by 12 soldiers. The main course turned towards the west by south-west and ran in an almost straight line up to the height of Orehovica or the Vrhovo manor house. The villages of Ledča Vas, Brezje, and Dolnja Stara Vas remained inside the fence and the villages of Volčkova Vas and Sela outside. The fencing crossed the border from Šentjernej to Pleterje to the south-east of Šmarje. [...] From Šmarje towards Tolsti Vrh the fence ran between Dolenje Vrhpolje and the hamlet of Žvabovo, via Jelše and Vajndol to Tičnica, continuing beneath the Vrhovo manor house, which was provisionally repaired and served as a base for units that installed barbed wire. With its elevation of 357 metres above sea level, Tolsti Vrh was one of the most dominant spots on this course. [...] Near Tolsti Vrh the course turned in an almost straight line across spot height 430, crossed the road from Brusnice to Gabrje, ascended Gomile to the west of Gabrje and descended to the valley of the stream Klamfar, continuing via the village of Pušče to Dolž. [...] As maintained by people who witnessed the border, the fence had reached the village of Pušče, approximately the halfway mark between Gabrje and Dolž, by 8 September 1942, when Italy capitulated.”<sup>15</sup>

14 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, karte, SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 31 May, 13 June, 28 June, 1 July, 30 July, 14 August 1943.

15 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Parts I-III, 17.

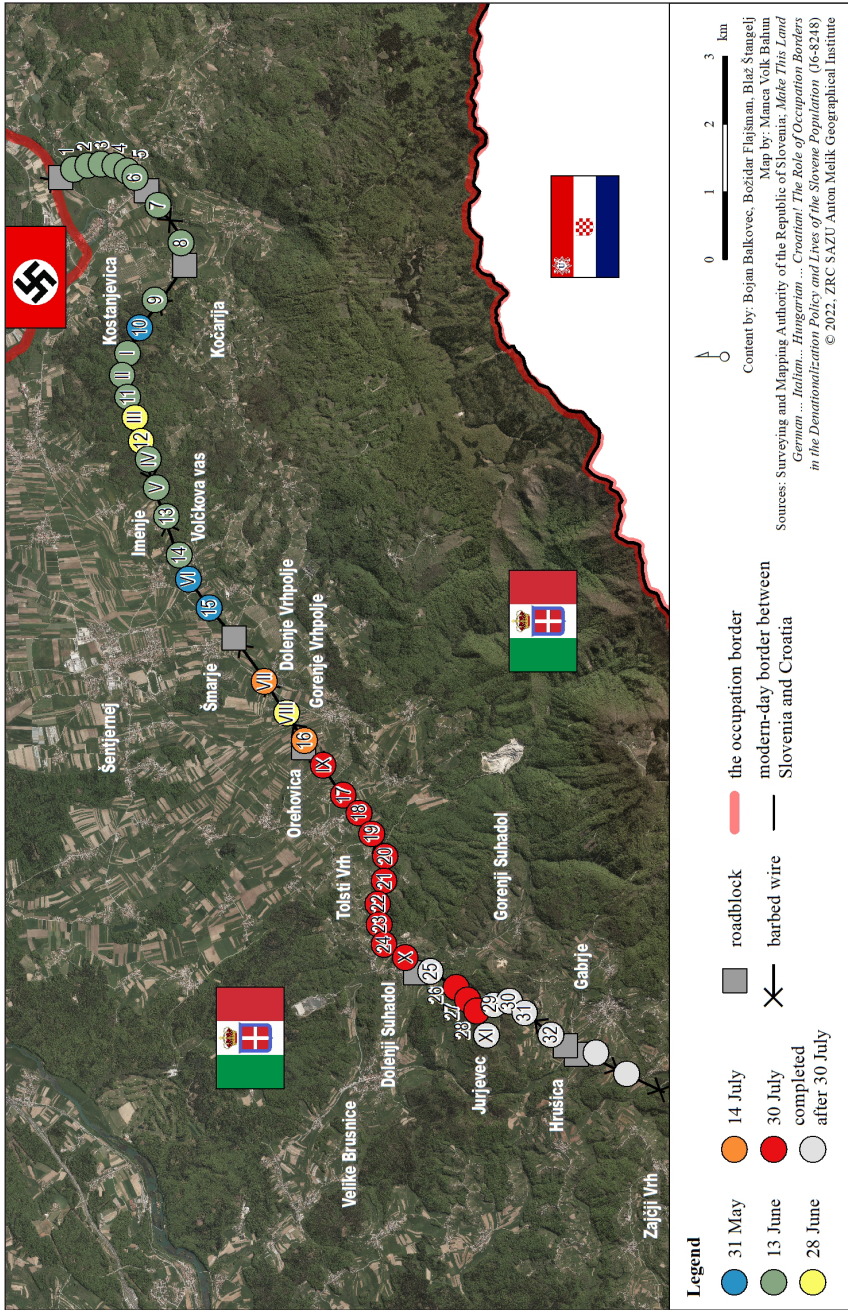


Fig. 3: A map depicting the sealed border with the NDH in 1943. It was produced on the basis of maps of the Italian Isonzo Division. The dating of bunkers (marked with Arabic numerals) and masonry fortifications (marked with Roman numerals) is indicated by circles of different colours.

The work came to a halt here. According to the plan, the fortified border would run along the course that was described by Jože Penca on the basis of a sketch produced by the Isonzo Division:

“In the vicinity of Dolž the border would turn southwards to spot height 887 – Oklinak, to the west of Trdinov Vrh, where it would join the fence from Božakovo that was installed via Gabrovec and Popovići.”<sup>16</sup>

On 1 January 1943 Gastone Gambarà, the Commander of the 11th Army Corps, informed his troops in a communication that, *inter alia*, he ordered that the border with the NDH must be sealed with barbed wire, as this would prevent partisans from crossing the border.<sup>17</sup>

M. Pelissier, the Commander of the engineering unit of the Isonzo Division, reported that the erection of the barbed-wire corridor had begun on 13 January 1943 near the village of Šmarje, to the south of Šentjernej.<sup>18</sup> This was the start of construction works taking place upon the visit of Gastone Gambarà, the Commander of the 11th Army Corps. About 30 metres of barbed wire were installed that day, beginning in Šmarje and running in the direction of Kostanjevica. Barbed wire was erected in the shape of a trapezoid, measuring 5.5 metres in width, and some 16 to 17 kilograms of barbed wire were used for a metre of fence. Pegs and (load-bearing) stakes were driven into the ground to the length of another 30 metres. Snow and low temperatures hindered the erection of barbed wire.<sup>19</sup> Barbed wire was installed by the engineering unit of the Italian Isonzo Division. Civilians were mobilized as well, and in the initial weeks they cleared forests on the envisaged route and cut pegs and stakes, drove them into the ground and stretched out barbed wire between them.<sup>20</sup>

The construction of barbed-wire fencing was also detected by the partisan intelligence. The Field Company for the area of Gorjanci reported on the erection of the fencing to the Staff of the East Dolenjska Detachment on 24 and 25 January 1943. Their memorandum of 24 January 1943 reads:

“The Italian Army continues to build wire obstacles in the valley.”<sup>21</sup> On 25 January 1943 they wrote: “The erection of wire obstacles continues. Two

16 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part III, 17.

17 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka ...*, Part VI, Vol. 5, 330, 334. Mikuš, *Pregled zgodovine NOB v Sloveniji*, 175-176. Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part I, 17.

18 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 22 January 1943 and 1 February 1943. Ferenc, *Kostanjevica na Krki in okolica 1941-1945*, 246. Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part I, 17.

19 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 22 January 1943 and 1 February 1943.

20 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 1 February 1943.

21 SI AS 1482, t. e. 5, Dopis Terenske čete za Gorjansko okrožje štabu VDO, 24 January 1943.

truckloads of wire arrive at Št. Jernej every day. This seems to be a large-scale construction. The word on the street is that it would run as far as Sušak. We are not entirely familiar with the purpose of this construction. It would be advisable if informants of our high commands look into the matter because this might be of extraordinary importance to our movement."<sup>22</sup>

On 31 January 1943, 250 metres of barbed wire ran from Šmarje in the direction of Kostanjevica.<sup>23</sup> On 19 February 1943, the length of the installed fence totalled 1,250 metres, with pegs and stakes running approximately 400 metres more.<sup>24</sup> By 3 March 1943, there were about 1,600 metres of barbed wire installed, with pegs and stakes running about another 500 metres, namely between Šmarje and Volčkova Vas. The command of the Isonzo Division reported that day that barbed wire had been installed in the shape of a trapezoid, measured 6 metres in width, and that about 5,000 (load-bearing) stakes, about 3,000 pegs, and 27 tons of barbed wire had been used up to that point.<sup>25</sup>

On 9 March 1943, Gastone Gambarà, the Commander of the 11th Army Corps, sent a communication to his subordinated units about his visit with Benito Mussolini in Rome. While there, Mussolini told him to complete the erection of barbed-wire fencing on the border between the Province of Ljubljana and the NDH as soon as possible, to prevent partisans from crossing the border. Gambarà told Mussolini that the Isonzo Division and the engineering unit of the 11th Army Corps regarded this task as an honourable duty.<sup>26</sup>

Around 10 March 1943, the erection of barbed wire was begun about a kilometre to the north-east of Kostanjevica, on the right bank of the river Krka, turning towards the village of Zaboršt (in the direction of Šmarje, to the south of Šentjernej). There were 1,500 metres of barbed wire installed on the route from Kostanjevica to Šmarje by 26 March 1943, from Šmarje to Kostanjevica 1,600 metres.<sup>27</sup> By the end of March 1943, starting in Kostanjevica, barbed wire had been installed as far as the village of Zaboršt and wooded areas were cleared as far as spot height 280, about one kilometre from Zaboršt.<sup>28</sup> These sections joined on 12 April 1943 somewhere between spot height 280 and the village of Zaboršt.<sup>29</sup> The Commander of the Isonzo Division and the Commander

22 SI AS 1482, t. e. 5, Dopis Terenske čete za Gorjansko okrožje štabu VDO, 25 January 1943.

23 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 1 February 1943.

24 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo, 28 February 1943.

25 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo Poveljstva divizije Isonzo poveljstvu XI. armadnega zbora, 3 March 1943.

26 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka ..., Part VI, Vol. 5*, 554–555. Vogrič, *Boj Belokranjcev*, 229.

27 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Telegram poveljnika divizije Isonzo generala Maccaria Poveljstvu XI. armadnega zbora, 26 March 1943.

28 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Parts I and II, 17.

29 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Telegram Ciapparellija, garnizija Šentjernej Poveljstvu divizije Isonzo, 12 April 1943.

of the 11th Army Corps praised Italian units for having completed the barbed-wire fencing between Šmarje and Kostanjevica.<sup>30</sup> They then continued to install barbed wire along the envisaged route from the village of Šmarje in the direction of Orehovica and Tolsti Vrh.<sup>31</sup>

To defend the barbed-wire corridor, they began to build fortified structures (bunkers) on the route from Kostanjevica to Šmarje in the second half of April or in May 1943.<sup>32</sup> In this section the bunkers had been completed by 19 June 1943.<sup>33</sup> Bunkers were still built along the barbed wire.<sup>34</sup>

Fortified border crossings were built on main roads between towns that were intersected by barbed wire. By 14 May 1943 border crossings stood on three routes from Kostanjevica, namely in the direction of Sveti Križ, Črneča Vas, and Orehovec, as well as on the road from Šentjernej to the Pleterje Carthusian Monastery.<sup>35</sup> On the road connecting Dolenja Brezovica and Vrhpolje barbed wire had been installed by 31 May 1943. They continued to install barbed wire and build bunkers on the envisaged route towards Tolsti Vrh, which was reached by 28 June 1943. Bunkers standing along the barbed-wire fence were built in stages.<sup>36</sup> On 28 May 1943 a partisan informant reported that the Italian Army was building 22 fortified structures or bunkers between the river Krka near Kostanjevica (the hamlet of Slinovce) and Šmarje pri Šentjerneju.<sup>37</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Pelissier, the Commander of the engineering units, wrote a report to the command of the Isonzo Division, describing the construction of the fortified corridor up to the end of May 1943 and work done in the course of this construction (the fortification, clearing forests). He conducted a check inspection of the construction of the fortified corridor between 29 and 31 May 1943.<sup>38</sup> Based on this report, Jože Penca wrote the following:

“1. Barbed wire: installed approx. 12 km. Pegs driven into the ground on the entire course, barbed wire stretched out between them along two-thirds of the course (shortage of wire). This equals the distance from Kostanjevica as far as one kilometre past Šmarje. The installing came to a halt towards the end of

30 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Telegram poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria Poveljstvu garnizije v Šentjerneju, 13 April 1943. Telegram poveljnika XI. armadnega zbora Gambare poveljstvu divizije Isonzo, 15 April 1943.

31 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Telegram poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria, 15 April 1943.

32 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 13 April 1943 and 27 April 1943. Promemorija o gradnji utrjenih objektov poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo M. Pelissierja, 24 April 1943.

33 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja Poveljstvu divizije Isonzo, Poveljstvo inženirije XI. armadnega zbora, 20 June 1943.

34 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 31 May 1943 and 28 June 1943.

35 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo M. Pelissierja, 14 May 1943.

36 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 31 May 1943 and 28 June 1943.

37 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis obveščevalca, 28 May 1943.

38 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part II, 17.

April because the garrison in Šentjernej failed to protect engineers and civilians involved in the erection. 2. Fortification work: a) the section from the river Krka to Kostanjevica Castle – three checkpoints completed on the roads between Kostanjevica and Sveti Križ, Kostanjevica and Črneča Vas, Kostanjevica and Orehovec, as well as seven strongpoints, each holding three shooters.<sup>39</sup> Everything is masonry and roofed. Finishing works and masking is underway; b) the section Zaboršt–Ledeča Vas: one masonry strongpoint completed, roofing and the construction of an observation post are underway, one strongpoint made of timbers is finished, as are five fortified wooden huts, the work on roofs and observation posts is in progress. Two armoured watch posts will have to be built in two different spots; c) the section Ledeča Vas–Šmarje: a wooden strongpoint is almost complete, the construction of three masonry strongpoints is in progress, of which one is masonry, one masonry structure for the Šmarje–Pleterje border crossing and one masonry strongpoint, both are which are in the final stage of the construction. 3. Clearing wooded areas between Kostanjevica and Prekopa is progressing relatively well, the work is done by the owners themselves. Little or almost nothing has been done between Ledeča Vas and Volčkova Vas because to lacking protection. Owners fear reprisal measurements taken by members of the resistance movement, who come in small groups and obstruct forestry workers with shots or outbursts of fire from machine guns. In the Kostanjevica–Ledeča Vas sector barbed wire is protected by a MVAC squad from Kostanjevica that is stationed on Prekopa and a MVAC platoon from Brezovica protects the Ledeča Vas–Šmarje sector.<sup>40</sup> 4. Supply of construction materials: the situation is alarming. Twenty tons of materials from Novo mesto are required for each kilometre of fencing, even though timbers and rocks are obtained locally. 5. The section Šmarje–Tolsti Vrh: during the inspection check he made an agreement with the Commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 24th Regiment that as soon as Tolsti Vrh is sufficiently fortified (this occurred after the attack of the Cankar Brigade) they would begin installing barbed wire from Tolsti Vrh towards Šmarje and involve garrisons equalling the strength of a platoon in the field defence system until solid strongpoints are built. In the following days, when the border crossings near Kostanjevica and Šmarje are completed, they ought to be manned by the Carabinieri and the Financial Guard, concludes Lieutenant Colonel Pelissier.<sup>41</sup>

39 Bunkers.

40 An informant of the Gorjanci Battalion reported to the East Dolenjska Detachment on 26 May 1943 that the post in Brezovica was manned by 80 members of the MVAC, who were armed with two heavy and four light machine guns. (SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Odrednemu obveščevalcu, 26 May 1943.)

41 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part II, 17.

The hill Tolsti Vrh is 357 metres high. The eponymous village with a wine-growing character sits on it and on its hillside. The Church of St Roch stands on the top of the hill,<sup>42</sup> which is one of the most dominant spots along the course of the Italian closure on the border with the NDH. The Italian Army was stationed on Tolsti Vrh in late May 1943 and turned it into a fortification for defending the border fence whose construction was underway on the southern slope. Vineyards around the church on Tolsti Vrh were cut and concrete bunkers were built.

In some places, the existing vineyard cottages were turned into bunkers.<sup>43</sup> Jože Penca maintains in his article that vineyards were cut in a strip of land measuring up to 100 metres from the church.<sup>44</sup> It is stated in a report produced on 26 May 1943 by the Gorjanci Battalion that the Italian Army removed around 40 to 50 metres of vineyards around the church and that bunkers are built around it.<sup>45</sup> The Italian Army encircled its post that surrounded the church with barbed wire. An informant of the Gorjanci Battalion reported on 6 June 1943 that the said battalion fired shots on Italian soldiers on Tolsti Vrh. Consequently, Italian soldiers enclosed their post with two-metre-high planks within the barbed-wire fence. In doing so, they prevented partisans from identifying the soldiers' exact location and they could no longer shoot at them.<sup>46</sup>

Seven bunkers had been built around the church on Tolsti Vrh by 5 June 1943.<sup>47</sup> On 26 May 1943, an informant of the Gorjanci Battalion estimated that the Italian garrison consisted of around 600 to 700 soldiers and that they had around 12 to 13 heavy machine guns, four light and two heavy mortars. The belfry was fortified as well, and there were two heavy machine guns in it. Additionally, he wrote that the Italian soldiers had broken into vineyard cottages on Tolsti Vrh and had helped themselves to some wine.<sup>48</sup> On 5 June 1943 another informant of this unit estimated that the garrison on Tolsti Vrh consisted of 80 soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

On 9 June 1943 an informant of the Gorjanci Battalion reported that the construction of the fortified border along the foothills of the Gorjanci hill range continued in June 1943:<sup>50</sup>

42 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part II, 17. *Krajevni leksikon Dravske banovine*, Tolsti Vrh, 481.

43 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part II, 17.

44 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part II, 17.

45 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Odrednemu obveščevalcu, 26 May 1943.

46 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 5 June 1943 and 6 June 1943.

47 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 5 June 1943.

48 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Odrednemu obveščevalcu, 26 May 1943.

49 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 5 June 1943.

50 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 31 May 1943 and 28 June 1943.

“Yesterday, on 8 June, a column of 62 vehicles arrived in Št. Jernej in two stages. They brought back the Italians from their campaign on the other bank of the river Krka. They brought a lot of wire and construction material as well. It seems that they will continue to install the wire.”<sup>51</sup>

Along with wire, they brought to Šentjernej food, hay, straw, planks and stakes for installing barbed wire.<sup>52</sup> On 8 June 1943 an informant of the Gorjanci Battalion reported a rumour that could be characterized as propaganda produced by an Italian officer:

“I have something here, but it is not positive. Rumour has it that seven thousand Italians will be settled between Novo mesto and Kostanjevica. An Italian officer stated this, and he says that they did not build because of partisans or because of the British and that a bunker would be made every 10 metres along the barbed wire, and also that the British would not chase away Italians from Slovene soil.”<sup>53</sup>

By 28 June 1943 barbed wire was installed as far as the eastern edge of the foothills of Tolsti Vrh. The construction of bunkers on the course of the border between the Vrh-polje–Šmarje (Jelša) road and the foothills of Tolsti Vrh was underway, while bunkers and other fortified structures standing along the course of the border between Šmarje and the river Krka near Kostanjevica were finished.<sup>54</sup>

Consisting of barbed wire and bunkers, the fortified border ran along the southern hillside of Tolsti Vrh that was blanketed in vineyards. Vineyards were removed within a strip of land measuring around 100 metres or more along the fortified border.<sup>55</sup> The border ran along the village of Dolenji Suhadol and crossed the road to Gorenji Suhadol that was reached on 14 July 1943.<sup>56</sup> A border crossing was built on the road, with a gate made of barbed wire and housed an Italian guard.<sup>57</sup> From here, the border ran towards the hillock Jurjevec, which was an important strategic spot with its elevation of 430 metres. The construction of a large fortified spot on its summit was begun in the first half of July 1943. It would be used for defending the fortified border<sup>58</sup> that ran along

51 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis štaba Gorjanskega bataljona štabu VDO, 9 June 1943.

52 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 8 June 1943.

53 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 8 June 1943.

54 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 28 June 1943.

55 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part II, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 1 July 1943, 30 July 1943.

56 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 1 July 1943, 30 July 1943.

57 Oral source: Terezija Paderšič, Dolenji Suhadol, 18 February 2019.

58 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. SI AS 1851, t. e. 59, p. e. 1684, Dopis VDO Glavnemu obveščevalnemu centru pri GŠ NOV in POS, 20 August 1943.

the hillside of Jurjevec and stood 300 metres away from its summit.<sup>59</sup> The construction of a fortification (a fortified hut) and three bunkers was envisaged on the summit of Jurjevec.<sup>60</sup> On the nights of 13, 14 and 15 July 1943 the Šercer Brigade attacked Jurjevec, where the construction of a large Italian bunker was underway. The partisans' attack was not particularly successful because the Italian troops had a better strategic position that allowed for better defence. The partisans destroyed about 40 metres of barbed wire, and their units launched attacks on other sections of the fortified Italian border. They demolished a portion of the barrier and managed to pass through the gap.<sup>61</sup>

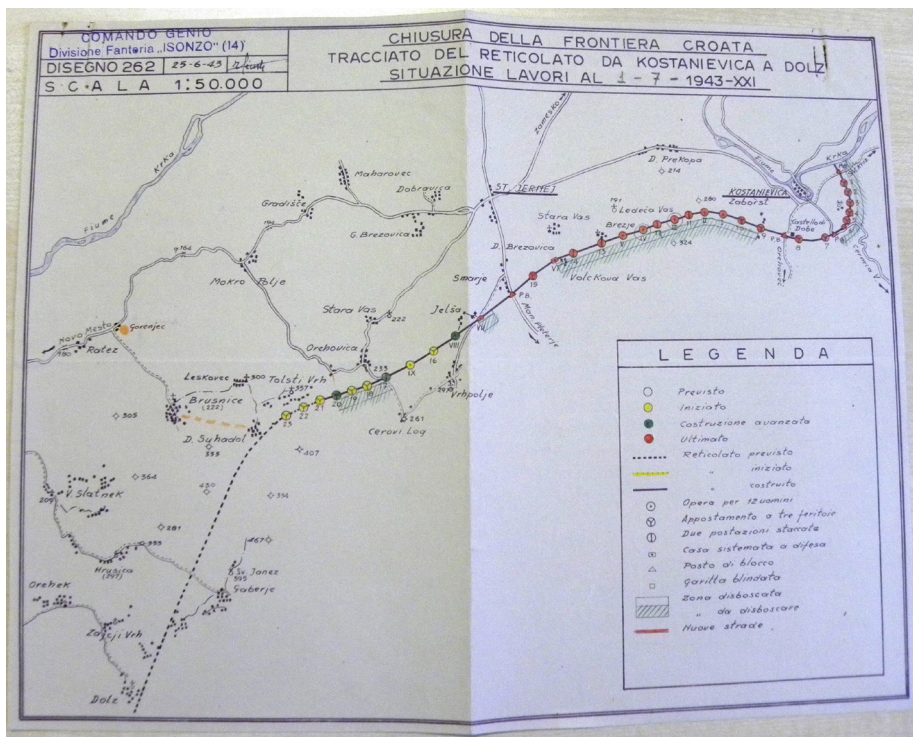


Fig. 4: A map depicting the sealed border with the NDH beneath the Gorjanci hill range, which was produced by the engineering unit of the Isonzo Division. It shows barbed wire and bunkers that had been built by 1 July 1943. Bunkers are marked with circles and connected with barbed wire. Red circles show bunkers that were completed, yellow and green circles indicate bunkers that were under construction. Green lines indicate clearing of wooded areas.

59 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 30 July 1943. Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943.

60 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 30 July 1943. Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17.

61 Guček, *Šercerjeva brigada*, 256, 258–260, 267–268. Stanko Kušljan, Pri belem dnevu je šla Cankarjeva brigada čez mejo, [https://youtu.be/R1F6\\_91QCoo](https://youtu.be/R1F6_91QCoo), 1:36-3:40.

The last preserved Italian sketch of the construction of the fortified border beneath the Gorjanci hill range shows the stage of the construction on 30 July 1943. Fortified structures (bunkers and buildings turned into forts) on the border, standing between its beginning in the proximity of the river Krka near Kostanjevica na Krki (the hamlet of Slinovce) and Dolenji Suhadol or the eastern foothills of Jurjevec (spot height 430), had been completed by 30 July 1943. Wooded areas along the border were still not cleared in specific sections. Up to that point barbed wire was installed as far as the southern slope of Jurjevec (spot height 430).<sup>62</sup> The construction of the fortified border, consisting of barbed wire and bunkers, continued into August 1943 up to Italy's capitulation on 8 September 1943.<sup>63</sup>

In August 1943 barbed wire was installed along the envisaged course of the border, on the slope beneath the summit of Jurjevec, via Rutovca, Kavce towards the hillock Gomila to the west of Gabrje. On 14 August 1943 barbed wire stood as far as the path between Gabrje and Hrušica; pegs and stakes were driven into the ground as far as the summit of the hillock Gomila (spot height 394), where a large bunker was planned.<sup>64</sup> The course of the barbed-wire fence intersected the route from Brusnice to Gabrje and from Gabrje to Hrušica. Border crossings with a barbed-wire gate stood in two spots where the fence intersected these two routes, guarded by the Italians. A new path was made to the hillock of Gomile, along with a path that connected Brusnice and Hrušica. It ran past Gabrje, which was outside the fence.<sup>65</sup>

They continued to build bunkers along the barbed wire. The construction of bunkers along the wire on the hillside of Jurjevec (Rutovca, Kavce) began on 4 August 1943<sup>66</sup> and had been concluded by 14 August 1943.<sup>67</sup> A new path from Brusnice to Jurjevec was built from 30 July 1943 to 14 August 1943. The route had been dug out by this date and after it the path was levelled out, gravelled and drainage work was underway.<sup>68</sup>

62 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 30 July 1943. Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943.

63 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Dopis poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccharia, 28 August 1943. Oral source: Terezija Ovniček, Dolž, 15 February 2019. Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019.

64 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943.

65 Oral source: Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019.

66 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943.

67 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943.

68 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943.



Fig. 5: Remnants of a bunker on Rutovca near the village of Gabrje, 9 February 2019.

On 9 August 1943 the intelligence centre of the 15th Partisan Division reported the following about the fortification of the border with the NDH:

“The Italians continue to install wire in the Šentjernej valley. The villages of Brusnice, Dolž, and Cerovec will be encircled. Comrade Breda reported that Gabrje and Igljenik would remain outside the barbed-wire fence.”<sup>69</sup>

Construction of the fortified spot on Jurjevec was begun in the first half of July 1943, and was still in process in August 1943.<sup>70</sup> An informant of the Gorjanci Battalion reported on 18 August 1943 that the post on Jurjevec consisted of nothing but bunkers and was manned by 250 Italian soldiers.<sup>71</sup>

69 SI AS 1851, t. e. 9, p. e. 261, Dopis Obveščevalnega centra XV. divizije NOV in POS Glavnemu obveščevalnemu centru NOV in POS, 9 August 1943.

70 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943.

71 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 18 August 1943.

On 23 August 1943 the same informant reported that there were about 150 Italian soldiers on Jurjevec. They were armed with two heavy mortars, five heavy machine guns and an unknown number of light machine guns. He assumed that mines were laid along the barbed wire on Jurjevec.<sup>72</sup> The garrison on Jurjevec stayed in bunkers standing along barbed-wire fencing.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, the informant of the Gorjanci Battalion wrote on 18 August 1943 that there were 150 Italian soldiers in Dolenji Suhadol and that they were stationed mostly in bunkers,<sup>74</sup> i.e. in bunkers standing along the fortified border.<sup>75</sup>

In the second half of August 1943, barbed wire was installed and bunkers were also built in the area of the hillock Gomile (spot height 394), to the west of the village of Gabrje.<sup>76</sup> On 18 August 1943 the informant of the Gorjanci Battalion wrote also that there was a new Italian post in Gomile, stating that the some 200 Italians soldiers stationed there were building bunkers and installing barbed wire,<sup>77</sup> which was around 20 August 1943, and after that date wire installed in the direction of the village of Dolž.<sup>78</sup>

A partisan sketch is preserved for the area of Gomile. It shows the course of the border fencing and six bunkers on the route from Gabrje and Brusnice, across the road from Gabrje to Hrušica, via the summit of the hillock Gomile (394 m) and onwards in the direction of the village Pangrč Grm, which is not seen in the sketch. This sketch contains no scale, date, stamp or author's signature. The first bunker on the sketch is located along the road from Brusnice to Gabrje, the next two above the road from Gabrje to Hrušica, in the direction of the summit of the hillock of Gomile. The largest bunker is drawn on the summit of the hillock Gomile and another two bunkers are drawn in the direction of the village Pangrč Grm.<sup>79</sup>

These bunkers on Gomile were built after 14 August 1943 because they are not mentioned in an Italian report that bears this date.<sup>80</sup> A communication produced by the command of the Isonzo Division on 23 August 1943 stipulates which units are responsible for the protection of the border and mentions works in the area to the south of the route, between Gabrje and Hrušica.<sup>81</sup> A partisan sketch of the bunkers on the hillock

72 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis štaba Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalni službi, 23 August 1943.

73 SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321, Dopis VDO za GŠ NOV in POS, 30 August 1943.

74 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 18 August 1943.

75 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943.

76 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo, 14 August 1943. Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943.

77 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 18 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 59, p. e. 1684, Dopis VDO Glavnemu obveščevalnemu centru pri GŠ NOV in POS, 20 August 1943.

78 SI AS 1851, t. e. 59, p. e. 1684, Dopis VDO Glavnemu obveščevalnemu centru pri GŠ NOV in POS, 20 August 1943.

79 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Skica žice in bunkerjev skozi Gomile pri vasi Gabrje.

80 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943.

81 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Dopis poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria Poveljstvu 24. pehotnega polka, 23 August 1943.

Gomile corresponds to eyewitness testimonies of two villagers, namely Ana and Mihael Rukša. They said that the bunker on the summit of Gomile was completed and two bunkers in the direction of Pangrč Grm were not.<sup>82</sup>

From the hillock Gomile onwards the Italian Army installed barbed wire along the envisaged route, past Pangrč Grm, in the direction of Dolž.<sup>83</sup> The command of the Isonzo Division reported on 28 August 1943 that barbed wire would reach the area of Dolž in late August, totalling 27 kilometres in length.<sup>84</sup> By 8 September 1943 barbed wire had reached the hamlet of Pušče, which was located on the hillside to the north-east of the village Dolž, at the halfway mark of the fortified border between the hillock Gomile and Dolž. Vineyard cottages and vineyards stood on the hillside of the hamlet of Pušče.<sup>85</sup> Terezija Ovniček from Dolž remembered that the Italian Army had installed barbed wire approximately 100 to 200 metres beneath the Kranjec farm, in Pušče. The Italian Army left the construction site overnight, so to speak, abandoning left many rolls of barbed wire and pegs.<sup>86</sup> Jožefa Šaponja, who lived at Dolž at the time, also remembers barbed wire being installed. She remembers the conversations held by the locals in Dolž, wondering whether the hamlet would end up inside or outside the fence. She also remembers a vineyard, whose middle part was removed in a broad strip. It was located beneath the school at Dolž, in the direction of Pušče.<sup>87</sup> The removal of vineyards, forests and trees in the area of Dolž and Pušče was also mentioned in war damage claims against the Italian Army that were filed by landowners in September 1945. The most damage was done to a landowner who had lost some 1,000 vines, followed by two landowners who lost 500 and 600 vines, respectively, because of the Italian troops.<sup>88</sup>

The following is mentioned in *The Dolž School Chronicle*, which was written retrospectively for the period between March 1941 and December 1944 in the 1950s:

“Italians and the White Guard arrived in Dolž in the spring of 1943. They stayed in the school building that had been burnt down. The cellar was not damaged and was converted into a bunker. The Italians and the White Guard worked together. However, there were no important battles at that time. They only stretched out barbed wire from Sela via Zajčji Vrh and Dolž. It ran from Kostanjevica and stopped at Dolž.”<sup>89</sup>

82 Oral source: Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019.

83 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part III, 17.

84 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, *Dopis poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria Poveljstvu XI. armadnega zbora 28 August 1943*.

85 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci*. Part III, 17. *Krajevni leksikon Dravske banovine*, Pušče, 487.

86 Oral source: Terezija Ovniček, Dolž, 15 February 2019.

87 Oral source: Jožefa Šaponja, Novo mesto, October 2018.

88 SI ZAL, NME 24 Okrožni ljudski odbor Novo mesto - Okrajna komisija za vojno škodo Novo mesto, t. e. 10.

89 SI ZAL, NME 301, t. e. 2, *Osnovna šola Dolž, Zgodovinska kronika šole Dolž, 1941–1944*.

This text from the school chronicle is surprising in the part that says that barbed wire was installed via the villages of Sela and Zajčji Vrh. This is not mentioned in preserved Italian and partisan documents about the sealed border with the NDH from 1943. However, this chronicle was written retrospectively, and should be thus taken with a pinch of salt. Still, it is mentioned in documents that the Italian soldiers were stationed in the village of Zajčji Vrh in the second half of August 1943. The Commander of the engineering unit of the Isonzo Division reported on 22 August 1943 that he had relocated a portion of his troops to Zajčji Vrh, and most probably this was a group of soldiers that installed the obstacles in the section between Gomile and Dolž.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, Italian soldiers that protected the erection of barriers on the border and protected the road from Novo mesto in the section Stopiče–Orehek–Dolž, on which construction material and food was transported, were stationed in Zajčji Vrh or its surroundings.<sup>91</sup> An informant of the Gorjanci Battalion detected the Italian troops on Zajčji Vrh, as well. On 27 August 1943 he wrote that an Italian garrison with its command was stationed there. He estimated that there were 300 Italian soldiers in this village.<sup>92</sup>

### Sealing the Border with the NDH in Bela krajina

The construction of the barbed-wire fence on the border with the NDH began in Bela krajina on 22 July 1943.<sup>93</sup> The fence on the border featured eight strands of thick barbed wire, measuring four metres in width and 160 centimetres in height. It began next to a masonry bunker with an armed guard on the left bank of the river Kolpa, next to the railway bridge near Rosalnice. The fortified border ran northwards, via the forest Boriha, and turned towards the north-west, in the direction of the intersection of roads from Metlika to Slamna Vas and Drašiči. It was installed by the engineering unit of the Italian Army under the command of the Isonzo Division and by mobilized civilians.<sup>94</sup>

Barbed wire reached the intersection of roads to Slamna Vas and Drašiči on 14 August 1943, after about two kilometres of barbed wire had been installed.<sup>95</sup>

90 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 22 August 1943.

91 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 22 August 1943. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Dopis poveljnika divizije Isonzo Maccaria Poveljstvu 24. pehotnega polka, 23 August 1943.

92 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Dopis Gorjanskega bataljona Obveščevalcu odreda, 27 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321, Poročilo VDO za GŠ NOV in POS, 30 August 1943.

93 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Dopis Poveljstva XI. armadnega zbora Poveljstvu divizije Isonzo, Poveljstvu divizije Lombardija in Poveljstvu inženirije XI. armadnega zbora, 12 July 1943.

94 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 30 July 1943 and 14 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 10, p. e. 284, Poročilo Okrožne komisije VOS Bela krajina za Centralno komisijo VOS, 12 August 1943. SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Obveščevalno poročilo s skicami, 19 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321 Poročilo VDO za GŠ NOV in POS, 5 August 1943. Vogrič, *Boj Belokranjcev*, 267–269.

95 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 11 August 1943 and 14 August 1943.

Six concrete bunkers were built along it between early August and the beginning of September 1943, and the construction of additional three bunkers was in the early stages.<sup>96</sup> The Italians continued to clear wooded areas along the envisaged route towards the Church of St Urban on Gabrovec in August 1943. They began to install barbed wire in this section of the route towards the end of August 1943.<sup>97</sup> The Italian guard that protected the erection of barbed wire fortified the Church of St Urban on Gabrovec and its belfry as early as on 14 August 1943.<sup>98</sup>

It was planned that the barbed-wire corridor and bunkers would run from Gabrovec towards the north-west, past Popovići, as far as the western edge of the Gorjanci hill range, where it would be joined with barbed wire coming from the direction of the village of Dolž. However, the Italian Army did not realize this plan because of Italy's capitulation on 8 September 1943.<sup>99</sup>



Fig. 6: A bunker near the village of Rosalnica, 28 March 2019.

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- 96 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943 and 25 August 1943. Rus, *Kronika mesta Metlike II*, 62.
- 97 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo Pelissierja, 14 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321, Poročilo VDO za Glavni obveščevalni center pri GŠ NOV in POS, 30 August 1943.
- 98 SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Obveščevalno poročilo Belokranjskega bataljona za čas med 8. 8. 1943 in 14. 8. 1943. SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, p. e. 1684, Poročilo štaba VDO za Glavni obveščevalni center pri GŠ NOV in POS, 20 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 59, p. e. 1684. SI AS 1851, t. e. 10, p. e. 284, Poročilo Okrožne komisije VOS Bela krajina za Centralno komisijo VOS, August 1943.
- 99 Penca, *Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III*, 17. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, *Zemljevid tras zapore meje proti NDH*, Poveljstvo inženirije divizije Isonzo, 14 August 1943.

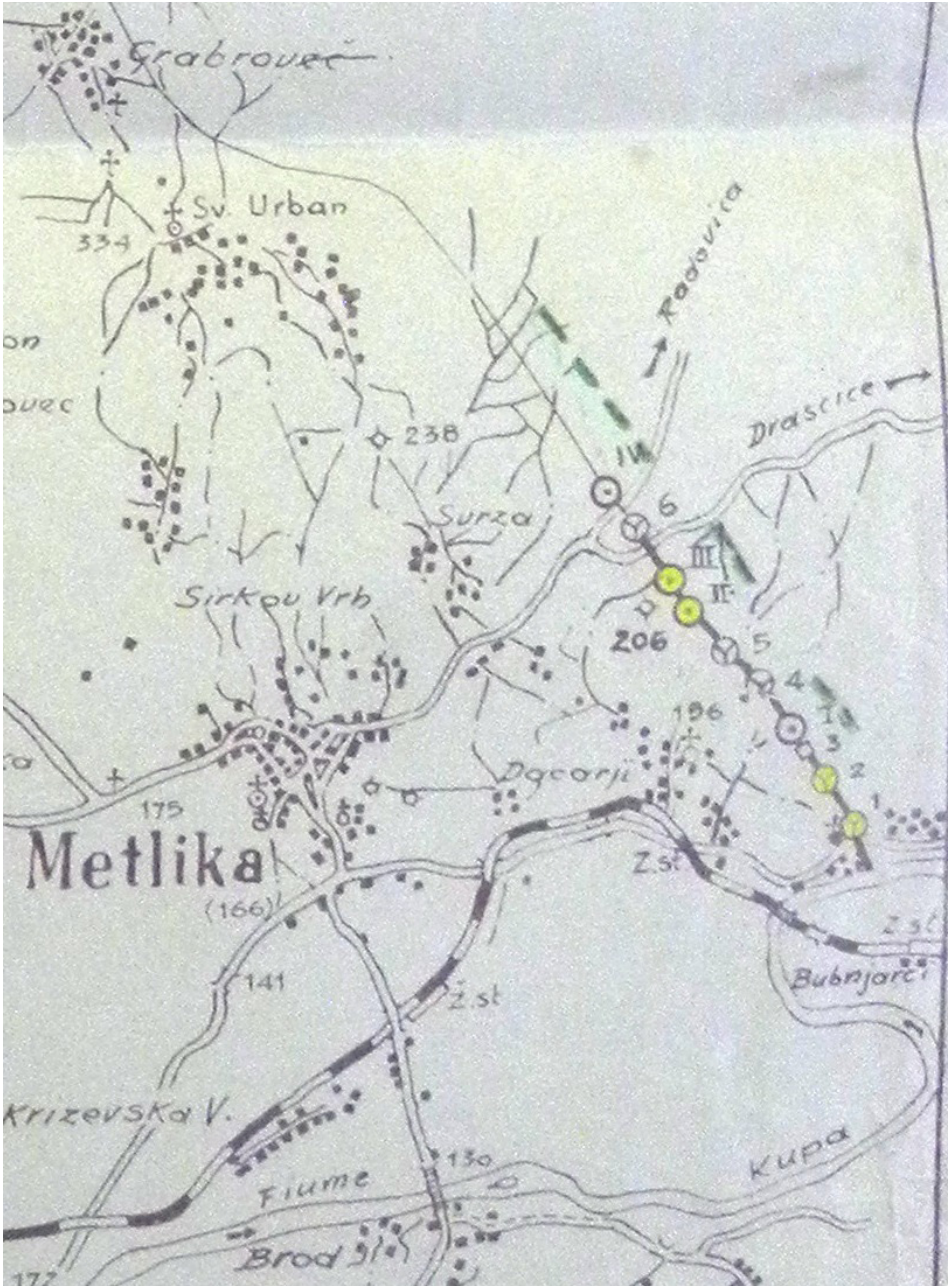


Fig. 7: A detail of a map produced by the Isonzo Division. It shows the construction of the sealed border with the NDH to the east of Metlika, 14 August 1943. Bunkers are marked with circles and connected with barbed wire. Yellow circles represent bunkers whose construction had begun by 14 August 1943. Other circles represent bunkers that were built at a later point. Green lines along the fortified border indicate deforestation.

## The Epilogue of the Sealed Border with the NDH

Owing to Italy's capitulation, the closure of the border with the NDH remained an unfinished project. Around 27 kilometres of barbed wire were installed between Kostanjevica and the hamlet of Pušče, 46 fortified structures were built along this and another two were still under construction. These structures included 34 bunkers (some of which were made of wood, others were masonry) and 12 solid forts or large bunkers (two of which were remodelled existing houses) manned by a 12-strong company. The last bunker of this kind stood at the top of the hillock Gomile.<sup>100</sup> At least six border crossings were built along with bunkers next to the barbed-wire fence.<sup>101</sup>

Starting from the river Kolpa near Rosalnica, six bunkers were built in the direction of Gabrovec and Žumberak from the beginning of August 1943 to 8 September 1943, with three other bunkers still being under construction at that time. The last bunker was set up at a spot height of 206 meters, to the north of Rosalnica, in front of the intersection of the routes to Slamna Vas and Radovica. Measuring two kilometres in length, barbed wire was installed as far as this fork and continued in the direction of Gabrovec.<sup>102</sup> It is unknown where the construction of the barbed-wire fence came to a halt. Taking into consideration remnants on location, we can assume that this happened approximately in the area of Berčice, to the south-east of the Church of St Urban on Gabrovec. This implies that another two kilometres of barbed wire were installed from the aforementioned crossroads in the direction of Gabrovec, i.e. a total of about four kilometres from the river Kolpa.<sup>103</sup>

Following Italy's capitulation, the closed border with the NDH no longer served its purpose, and was not used as a defence line by the German Army. Partisan troops, civilians and field workers removed barbed wire and demolished the bulk of bunkers.<sup>104</sup>

Remnants of the Italian fortified border beneath the Gorjanci hill range were still being removed in November and December 1943. The 3rd Battalion of the Gubec Brigade reported on 3 November 1943 that the German soldiers had collected Italian

100 Oral source: Ana and Miha Rukše, Gabrje, 16 and 17 February 2019. SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, skica žice in bunkerjev skozi Gomile pri vasi Gabrje. SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943. Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III,17. SI AS 1865, t. e. 211, Obveščevalno poročilo za štab VDO, 12 August 1943. Stanislav Sluga, Šest kolov se je započilo, <https://youtu.be/j7qZi027gVU>, 1:50-2:38, 3:24-4:38.

101 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Karta inženirije divizije Isonzo, 30 July 1943. Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III,17.

102 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Poročilo poveljnika inženirije divizije Isonzo, 14. August 1943 and 25 August 1943. SI AS 1851, t. e. 11, p. e. 321, Poročilo VDO za Glavni obveščevalni center pri GŠ NOV in POS, 30 August 1943.

103 SI AS 1773, t. e. 773, Zemljevid tras zapore meje proti NDH, Poveljstvo inženirije divizije Isonzo, 14 August 1943.

104 Penca, Nesojena meja pod Gorjanci. Part III, 17. Ambrožič, *Gubčeva brigada*, 360, 478. SI AS 1494, t. e. 2, Prepis poročilo RK KPS Gorjanci Okrožnemu komitetu KPS Novo mesto, 14 September 1943. Kušljan, Šentjerneje je bil trikrat ograjen, <https://youtu.be/g1-19cOIsW0>, 3:18-4:14.

barbed wire. Most probably, this occurred in the vicinity of Kostanjevica.<sup>105</sup> On 6 December 1943 the Gubec Brigade wrote the following instructions:

“Civilians, men, women or children, residing near barbed wire running beneath the Gorjanci hill range are ordered to collect barbed-wire obstacles and all stakes and hand them over to our field workers by 8 December 1943 at the latest. Our patrols will control this and inform us if this order is obeyed. Therefore, we warn you to take the matter seriously! On top of that, we order that all bunkers in your villages or in our vicinity disappear as soon as possible!”<sup>106</sup>

No reports about the work done are preserved.

The locals used the construction material (stones, bricks) to rebuild their homes after the end of the war. Barbed wire was repurposed as well, and was used to fence in pastures and gardens, as wire mesh in slab foundations, for drying corncobs, and so on.<sup>107</sup>



Fig. 8: Remnants of barbed wire in the area of Berčice near the village of Grabrovec, 28 March 2019. The location corresponds to the Italian map showing the sealing of the border with the NDH.

105 SI AS 1845, t. e. 2, p. e. 10, Poročilo III. bataljona Gubčeve brigade štabu Gubčeve brigade, 3 November 1943. Ambrožič, *Gubčeva brigada*, 413.

106 SI AS 1845, t. e. 1, mapa 2, ovoj 5, Odredba IV: bataljona Gubčeve brigade, 6 December 1943. Ambrožič, *Gubčeva brigada*, 478.

107 Oral source: Terezija Ovničec, Dolž, 15 February 2019. Ana Rukše and Mihael Rukše, Gabrje, 16 February and 17 February 2019.



Figs. 9 and 10: Remnants of barbed wire in the location of the border with the NDH in the vicinity of Dolenji Suhadol, 30 March 2019.

Near Rosalnice in Bela krajina, the locals demolished two bunkers after the end of World War II. Subsequently, they were not allowed to do this. Anton Kočever, a villager of Rosalnice, gave an account of these events in 2009.<sup>108</sup> Four Italian bunkers that were built on the border with the NDH are preserved until the present day. The foundations of a bunker that stood next to the railway bridge across Kolpa, the starting point of the barbed-wire fence on the border with the NDH in Bela krajina, are preserved as well.<sup>109</sup>



Fig. 11: A bunker in the vicinity of the village of Radoviči, 27 December 2015.

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<sup>108</sup> Bezek-Jakše, *Od bunkerja do bunkerja*, 40.

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## Summary

*Blaž Štangelj*

### The Italian Army's Closure of the Border with the Independent State of Croatia

In 1942, the Italian army drafted a plan to close a section of the border between the Province of Ljubljana and the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). They intended to fence it off with barbed wire and fortify it with bunkers and military outposts. The original plan was not realized, however, and the fortified border that was built followed the actual border with the NDH along the ridge of the Gorjanci hill range and headed towards the river Kolpa. A fortified blockade of the border, consisting of barbed wire, fortified structures (bunkers) and border crossings, was built in 1943, at the foothills of Gorjanci, and from the river Kolpa to the east of Metlika, in the direction of Žumberk. It was believed that this blockade would prevent partisans in Žumberk and Gorjanci from crossing into the nearby villages and hamper their efforts to obtain food. The construction was carried out by the engineering unit of the Isonzo Division and the mobilized locals. The construction of the border blockade consisted of four stages. The first stage began on 13

January 1943, in the village of Šmarje (to the south of Šentjernej), when a barbed-wire corridor was built, measuring six metres in width and shaped as a trapezoid, in the direction of Kostanjevica. The second stage began around 10 March 1943, when a barbed-wire corridor was installed from the river Krka, about one kilometre to the east of Kostanjevica, in the direction of Šmarje. These two branches were joined on 12 April 1943, in the vicinity of the village of Zaboršt. This date marks the end of the first two stages. The third stage began on 13 April 1943, when barbed wire was installed from Šmarje along the planned route in the direction of Tolsti Vrh and the village of Gabrje. The third stage ended in the hamlet of Pušče, near the village of Dolž, where on 8 September 1943, following Italy's capitulation, the construction of the fortified border below the Gorjanci hill range was halted. Between Kostanjevica and the village of Pušče, 27 kilometres of barbed wire was installed, while 46 fortified structures (bunkers) were built, two of which were not finished. The fourth stage was the construction of the fortified border in Bela krajina.

The construction of barbed-wire fencing and bunkers began on 22 July 1943, in the vicinity of the railway bridge near Rosalnice, in the Metlika area. The fourth stage ended on 8 September 1943, with the capitulation of Italy. About 4 kilometres of barbed wire were erected and six bunkers were built, with three never finished. The plan was for the corridor of barbed wire and bunkers to go from Dolž to the western part of the Gorjanci hill range, where it would merge with the corridor running northwards from Gabrovec. The plans remained unfulfilled, as the Italian Army was stopped by their country's capitulation. The Italian guarded border blockade hindered partisans but could not prevent them from crossing the border. It was attacked several times, with certain sections of barbed wire being destroyed and penetrated. Following the capitulation of Italy, partisans and locals removed the bulk of bunkers and barbed wire. The remnants identifiable on site remind us of the former Italian blockade of the border with the NDH.