



MILITARY HISTORY OF SLOVENIANS

The Republic of Slovenia holds a strategically very important position, because its territory provides the only continental passage from Italy to the Pannonian plain, when one is proceeding from the Alps towards the South. It was the very strategic position which, to a large extent, shaped the history of Slovenia and Slovenians.

The origin of Slovenians is explained by two historical theories. One (supported by Romance and Germanic historic sources) claims that after the downfall of the Roman Empire and the mighty migration of peoples in the 6th century the territory of today's Slovenia was emptied. Then the whole area was taken by Slavonic tribes coming from behind the Carpathian Mountains.

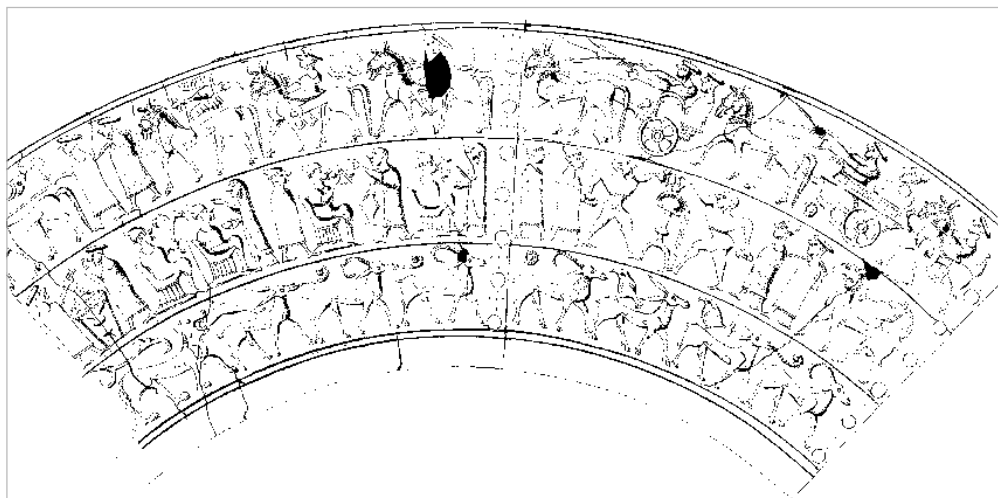
The other theory says that Slovenians are an autochthonous nation, which was subjugated by newly-settling invaders. Archaeology – offering many material proofs of continuity – has made it evident that the territory of Slovenia was inhabited at all times in history.

Among many archaeological findings let us single out the so-called helmets of Negova, quite a curiosity worldwide. In 1811 there were excavated 26 bronze helmets dating back to the period 500–400 BC. Some of the helmets were engraved with as yet unexplained characters in an unknown language. The two archeologically proven cultures in between the 9th and the 4th century BC were those of Vače and Novo mesto. There too, numerous helmets were found, as well as swords, axes, spears and a few wonderfully preserved bronze armours. Another location is known as Mušja jama, part of the Škocjan caves, where – again – a few hundred pieces of bronze weaponry were regained. The whole collection is believed to represent the biggest archaeological find of this kind in Europe. It is perhaps worth mentioning that during the first millennium BC the cave referred to, situated close to the Adriatic, served as an entrance to the (mythological) subterranean "Hades' kingdom of death".

At the beginning of the 3rd century BC the territory and population of Slovenia was dominated by the Celts, who introduced the longish swords in use by cavalry.

As early as 177 BC the Roman State incorporated the Istrian peninsula; shortly afterwards, when Augustus was the emperor, the whole territory of Slovenia was attached to ancient Rome. It was Augustus who ordered the important military communication across the Hrušica hills to be built. The Roman legions marched along that road, to fight the "barbarians" threatening the empire from the East. Let us mention a few local Roman towns from the period: Emona (now Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia), Poetovio (Ptuj) and Celeia (Celje). It is a fact that males from that area served in the Roman army.

Historically important was the battle fought at Frigidus, where the Christian identity of the Roman State was decided. Once the former Roman Empire was divided into two parts, the borderline between



Byzantium and Rome was drawn right across the territory of the eastern Alps.

All of the barbarian armies heading towards northern Italy made their advance through Slovenia. In 548 the Byzantine emperor Justinianus gave the Slovenian territory up to Lombard tribes; nevertheless, in 568 they moved on to northern Italy. It was during the 7th and the 8th century A.D. that the first Slovenian state was formed, in fact two of them: one Carinthia to the north of the Alps and the other to the south of the Alps. Carinthia – along with Bavaria – was attached to the mighty Frankish Empire in 745. In between 820 and 828 Carinthia took part in the large-scale rebellion against the Franks. Defeated, it lost its autonomy and was transformed into a county. Its territory was confiscated and handed over to foreign overlords and the Church. Germanisation of the local population progressively narrowed the old Slovenian-inhabited territory to a small portion of its original size. It was done with fire and sword, with the assistance of the Church.

Thus subjugated, the Slovenians were soldiers in a number of feudal armies, even taking part in crusades and war marches all the way to Palestine. In 1192 Richard the Lionhearted, King of England, was coming back home from a crusade passing through western Slovenia.

The feudal masters of the time built castles to protect themselves. It is true

that feudal lords fought small wars among themselves as well. Even nowadays one can see castle ruins and remains on top of steep hills in the country.

Hungarians invaded the territory in 896 and, more or less often, their troops were seen making raids here and there until the 12th century. Then the beginning of the 15th century was marked by the Turks making military expeditions into southern Slovenian territories bordering on Croatia, which – as a consequence – were almost completely devastated and depopulated.

To be sure, at that time both Slovenia and Croatia were defending Western Europe against Turkish invasion. During Turkish incursions, the lords locked themselves into the castles on hill tops, while the Slovenian peasants built stone walls around the churches, thus forming peculiar defence camps. In spite of that, thousands of them were caught and taken as slaves to Bosnia, Serbia and farther on.

Coming back to feudal lords in Slovenia: they were mostly of German origin, while Slovenians were peasants. Due to social and ethnical disputes there took place a series of uprisings and wars. More than 130 rebellions took place in Slovenia during the period spanning from the 13th to the 17th century, probably more than any other place in Europe. Notably 1478 in Koroška (Carinthia), 1515 all over Slovenia, 1573 jointly with the Croats and

Final images of dramatic life-and-death battle as depicted on a village vase made of bronze (Latin-derived name situla), dating back to the Iron Age.



The most celebrated Slovenian soldier of the 18th century was an artillery officer – otherwise a well-known mathematician, baron Jurij Vega.



1635 in Styria. Before the peasants' uprising took place in 1635, the local aristocracy wrote a letter to the emperor, letting him know that it will happen because of the traditional antipathy between Germans and Slovenians.

In 1478 an army of Slovenian peasants – defending the country – faced the ranks of mighty Turkish invaders. It was headed by a peasant named Matjaž (Matthias). The decisive battle took place on June 26, 1478, near Kokovo. Some 600 peasants and miners tried to stop the 20 thousand-odd Turkish army. All of the Slovenians died on the battlefield. Then a legend sprang that the mountain (known as Uršlja gora) "sheltered" the "king" Matjaž and his army. They are not dead but sleeping there. They will wake up once the king's beard has encircled nine times the stone table by which he rests. Then he will walk out of the mountain and happy times for all Slovenians will then begin, the legend has it.

The greatest of all peasant wars began in February 1515; in spring it spreaded all over the territory of Slovenia. There were 600,000 of Slovenians in all at that time – and 80,000 took part in the uprising. The peasants struck well and even took over many of the castles. The final battle took place on July 8 that same year, near the town of Celje. The peasants were united by one characteristic slogan: "Le vkup, le vkup, uboga gmajna" (Unite, unite, you poor slaves, to free yourselves) and "stara pravda" (in a battle unwon). Faced with a strong army of the aristocracy, cavalry and mercenaries, they had to be defeated. Some 2,000 were killed in the field of battle, many of them were captured and hanged or impaled.

Yet another in a centuries-long series of peasant rebellions was that which

broke out in 1717. Eleven of the leaders were caught and their heads were cut off near Gorica; their body parts were torn apart and left hanging along the roads leading out of town.

In the second half of the 18th century the Slovenian territory was subdivided into conscription districts, each of which had to provide a definite number of soldiers. Thus regiments were nationally distinct on a territorial basis. From that time onwards one can trace the history of Slovenian soldiers in the Austrian army. Slovenian regiments proved successful during a number of wars, e.g. against Turkey, during the conquest of Belgrade in 1789 and in battles against revolutionary France. At that time one Slovenian, mathematician Jurij Vega – officer of the Austrian army – was awarded for his bravery with the highest-ranking Order of Honour of Mary Theres.

During the war with France, 1809, there were formed special battalions of national defence. One well-known battle was fought in May 1809 near Razdrto, where some Slovenian battalions suc-

ceeded in holding back the advancing French army for several days. 1813, the French had to leave Slovenia as well. At that time Austria reorganised its army. Slovenian infantry regiments were established in the towns of Ljubljana – the so-called 17th regiment, Maribor – the 47th regiment and Klagenfurt Austria (inhabited by Slovenians, called Celovec); later on joined by the 87th regiment in Celje and the 97th regiment in Trieste (now part of Italy). Regiments known to be "Slovenian" were the 5th dragoon regiment, the 7th and the 9th regiment of hunters, as well as the 26th and the 27th regiments of regional defence. But, the commanding language in these regiments was German. German officers despised the Slovenian soldiers, calling them "Slovenian hounds" and the like.

From 1820 to 1866 Slovenian regiments made part of the Austrian occupation army in Italy. They also took part in wars fought against Italy (1848–49, 1859 and 1866), Denmark (1864) and even Prussia (1866); they were also sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was occupied in 1878. In addition, Slovenian soldiers fought bravely in battles near Italian



Soldiers of the 47th Slovenian-Styrian infantry regiment in battle near Costuzza on July 25, 1848.

ceeded in holding back the advancing French army for several days.

After the French victory over Austria western parts of Slovenia were incorporated into the French Napoleonic State. France introduced Slovenian as the official language in offices, courts and schools. In Ljubljana there was formed the infantry Regiment d'Illirie. In 1812 Napoleon left for Russia, and the Slovenian regiment accompanied him. The French expedition proved unsuccessful and the Slovenian regiment, as many others, found death in Russia. Only a few Slovenians saved themselves and returned home. Slovenian soldiers also served in other regiments of the French army.

After the battle fought near Leipzig, in

towns of Novara (1849) and Solferino (1859).

The army of the Mexican emperor Maximilian, brother of the Austria's Francis Joseph, also recruited a number of Slovenians, who then fought in Mexican wars (1864–67). As volunteers Slovenians were joining the rebellions against Turks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and fought flank-to-flank with the Serbians in Balkan wars (1912–13).

Following the beginning of World War I Slovenian regiments were sent to the Russian front. There they suffered heavy losses – especially during the harsh winter 1914–15 in the Carpathians, when many Slovenians in the prime of their youth were killed in battle.



As a reward for their participation on the side of the Allied Forces, the London Memorandum was passed which promised the territory of western Slovenia to Italy. Italy declared war on the Austro-Hungarian empire in May 1915. As a result, the western Slovenian border was turned into a new frontline, bearing the name of the nearby Soča river (the Soča front). Fierce battles along this line were going on almost uninterrupted until October 1917. Eleven large-scale offensives were launched by the Italians, and finally one by allied Germans and Austrians. The bloodiest battles were fought on the slope of Doberdob and during the siege of Gorica; the peaks of Sabotin, Sveta gora, Krn, Rombon and Sveti Gabrijel were also under heavy fire. The Italian army was much superior in numbers and artillery.

In 1917, when the first Austro-German offensive was launched, the Italian troops were completely defeated. The offensive referred to is considered to be the No. 1 mountain battle in the history of warfare. The Austrian attack near Bovec was headed by the Slovenian 26th regiment of gunners from Maribor. Among officers who proved especially successful the name of Erwin Rommel, future German field marshal, is mentioned. He commanded the breakthrough from Mrzli vrh (mountain peak), down into the valley of Soča and up to the top of Matajur.

The strong national and ethnical tensions – characteristic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – intensified during wartime. Rebellions of Slovenian soldiers serving in the Austrian army were among the most notable ones throughout the state. Slovenians took part in the great rebellion of marines in Boka Kotorska on February 3, 1918. Soldiers of the 17th infantry regiment rebelled in Judenburg on May 12, 1918. Twenty rebels were killed and 120 of them were wounded. Four leaders of the rebellion were shot – executed – on May 16. Just two days after Judenburg, another rebellion broke out in the 7th battalion of hunters of Murau. Boštjan Olip, leader of the rebels, was sentenced to death and shot. In a farewell letter addressed to his brother he wrote: "What I did, I did because I love our Slovenian motherland."

Yet another rebellion followed on May 23, 1918, in Radgona – again of Slovenian soldiers serving in the 97th Triest infantry regiment. Eight of them were found guilty and shot dead. The Codroipo rebellion on the Italian frontline, on October 24, 1918, was carried out by the 2nd mountain regiment of gunners. Seven soldiers were killed while fighting, 25 were wounded and the whole regiment was disarmed.

At the very beginning of the war, a number of Slovenians joined the Serbian forces. In 1916, Slovenian and other Yugoslav privates and officers – taken prisoners in Russia – formed two divisions of vol-

unteers. Another division of volunteers including Slovenians took part in fierce battles against Germans and Bulgarians near Dobruđa, and suffered heavy losses. Due to Greater Serbian pressures, the divisions disintegrated, and the remaining soldiers were sent to the Salonica front, where they fought in the Serbian army until the end of the war.

A Slovenian officer, doctor Ljudevit Pivko, was the one to organise the first Yugoslav and Czech units of volunteers in Italy.

A considerable number of Slovenians took part in the Russian civil war, fighting on both sides.

In autumn 1918 the Slovenian national liberation movement was getting stronger and stronger. Rebellions of Slovenian soldiers, forced to serve in the Austrian army, never stopped.

So on October 29, 1918, the self-standing State of Slovenians, Croats and Serbians was proclaimed, and the first regiments of the new Slovenian army were formed. These regiments instantly took over the Slovenian national territory along the northern border; then fighting for the border with Austria began. Soon Maribor was liberated by an army of Slovenian volunteers headed by the first Slovenian general, Rudolf Maister. On November 4, 1918, The newly formed Slovenian army was recognised by the Allied Forces commander, marshal Franchet d'Esperey.

As mentioned earlier, the London Memorandum assigned the whole western part of Slovenia to Italy. Since Italy made part of the Allies, Slovenia could not act against it. Fighting against the Austrian army, Slovenian troops at first succeeded in liberating much of the Slovenian national territory. Then, outnumbered by Austrians, regiments of the Serbian royal army were called in to help.

In December 1918 the Slovenian army had 2 generals, 47 staff officers, 962 officers, 11,364 privates, 538 cannons, 857



Another most distinguished Slovenian – one of the best-known Austrian Army officers of the mid-19th century – who was awarded the highest-ranking Austrian medal, was baron Andrej Čehovin.

machine guns, 7 planes etc. Eventually Serbia used the situation along the Slovenian borders with Austria and Italy and induced Slovenia to affiliate to the united Kingdom of the three nations. Nevertheless, on May 1919 the joint Slovenian-Serbian army liberated the whole Koroška (Carinthia), originally belonging to Slovenia (now part of Austria as Kaernten), along with the capital Celovec (Austrian name: Klagenfurt).

The Slovenian army was not in favour of the affiliation with the Kingdom of Serbia. So in January 1919 there broke out the first armed rebellion against Serbians in Ljubljana. Another, much greater rebellion followed in Maribor on July 22, 1919, as well as in Carinthia. Many Slovenian rebels were killed in action, and two of them were shot afterwards.



Assault troop of the 2nd Mountain Riflemen Battalion – all of them Slovenians, members of the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I.



General Maister, the 1st Slovenian general ever, headed his volunteers liberating the town of Maribor.

Finally, in 1920 Slovenian regiments were disbanded or made Serbian, and Slovenian men had to serve in the army far from home, they were mostly sent to the southernmost parts of the kingdom. The circumstances there was intolerable, especially in Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia or Herzegovina; there the Serbian language was the only official one.

Numerous young Slovenians graduated at military academies in Yugoslavia and reached important positions in the army: notably divisional general Lav Rupnik and Vladimir Vauhnik, attaché in Berlin, who was a successful intelligence officer. At the beginning of 1941 Yugoslavia had 8 aviation regiments, half of which were commanded by Slovenians.

Threatened by Italian fascism and German nazism, the national consciousness of Slovenians was getting stronger. Some 500 Slovenians took an active part in the international brigades during the Spanish civil war (1936–39). When Yugoslavia was attacked by Germany and Italy in 1941, many Slovenians became volunteers. During occupation, the Germans, Italians and Hungarians planned to exterminate the whole Slovenian nation. To be-

Slovenian partisans during World war II.



gin with, they deported intelligentsia, teachers and priests.

On April 27, 1941, a secret organisation was established in Ljubljana – called the Liberation Front – the purpose of which was to fight against the occupying forces. Armed resistance began in July 1941. The first guerrilla troops and detachments were formed, the liberation fighters were called partisans. Near the village of Rovte, 45 German policemen were killed in battle with partisans on December 12, 1941. The early partisan brigades were formed as early as 1942, joined by a few divisions and two corpses in 1943. The Slovenian partisan army was an important force, which “kept busy” numerous occupying formations. It fought using the weapons taken away from the enemy; and from 1943 onwards it was also receiving English ammunition supplies and equipment. After the arrival of an Ally mission sent in from England Slovene parti-

sans often co-ordinated their operations with Anglo-American units, especially attacks on railway towards Italy. In August 1944, the army of Slovenian partisans consisted of 27,751 combatants, men and women.

Faced with resistance, the German, Italian and Hungarian occupying forces resorted to extreme terror. Partisans caught were not treated as prisoners of war, hostages were taken and shot; civilians were deported to concentration camps in large numbers. Aided by the Roman-Catholic Church in Slovenia, in summer 1942 Italians organised local quisling units known as MVAC (anti-Communist militia). Following the capitulation of Italy, in autumn 1943 the German occupying forces formed anti-Resistance units called “Slovenian homeguards (militiamen)”. These quislings swore to fight under the command of Hitler against partisans and their allies.



Slovenian soldiers during manoeuvres, wearing the uniforms of the Royal Yugoslav Army.

The German army gradually lost its momentum, and the last battles of World War II in Europe were going on in Slovenia. German forces were withdrawing from the Balkans – passing across Slovenia to Carinthia, Austria. The Slovenian militia-men-quislings were sent back by the English army to Yugoslavia, where they were mostly shot. On the other side, 46,000 partisans and other members of the national liberation movement lost their lives in war; more than 80,000 Slovenians were expatriated and 29,000 deported to concentration camps.

During the War, the Slovenian army had its own command-in-chief, but by March 1945 the Slovenian army had been made part of the new Yugoslav army. After World War II, Slovenian units were disbanded, and – once again – Slovenians had to serve far in the south of the state. And – once again – Serbian was the only commanding language.

When, in 1968, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia, Tito ordered territorial defence units to be formed in all of the Yugoslav republics. This is how, gradually, a small but strong and well-armed force was created. After 1990 – marked by political change in Yugoslavia – this army, paralleled by the Slovenian police units, became a self-standing armed force of the Republic of Slovenia.

Independence of Slovenia was solemnly declared on June 26, 1991; and the next morning aggression of the Yugoslav army on Slovenia was launched. Its mission was to take over all of the border checkpoints, international isolation of Slovenia and, finally, overthrowing of the democratically elected Slovenian government. The joint action of Slovenian police units and territorial defence troops, unanimously backed by the whole nation, made it impossible.

At the outbreak of hostilities the Yu-

Yugoslav army in Slovenia had about 22,300 soldiers, it deployed 115 tanks, 82 armoured personnel carriers, 24 helicopters and a number of planes. Thirty-one tanks, 22 armoured vehicles, 6 helicopters etc. were either destroyed or damaged in 72 battles which took place. When fighting began, the Slovene army had under its command 16,000 soldiers, whose number grew to 35,200; and the Slovene police made available another 10,000 men.

Initially, the Yugoslav army managed to take hold of most Slovenian border posts, but the Slovenian forces soon struck back. After a number of blows received, the Yugoslav army found itself in a complete defensive. A helicopter-borne assault of special units near Trzin – in the evening of June the 27th – proved a complete disaster; two helicopters were shot down; Yugoslav troops and vehicles were blocked or attacked all over Slovenia. In those days Slovenian, Croatian and Albanian soldiers were massively deserting the Yugoslav army ranks, which were thus falling apart. The climax of it all happened on June 28 and July 2. At Prilipe in Croatia the people did not let pass a tank column. Thus the Yugoslav army units trapped in Slovenia remained helpless. However, 19 Slovenian soldiers, policemen and civilians were killed in action and 182 were wounded; 12 foreign citizens were also killed. Forty-five Yugoslav soldiers died on the battlefield and 146 were wounded. The Slovenian defence forces captured 4,693 soldiers and officers of the Yugoslav army, along with 252 federal policemen.

Epilogue: a special declaration was



The elite, well-armed 14th Division of the National Liberation Army – which included partisan detachments – undertook the first major manoeuvring march of the Slovenian Army during World war II.

signed at Brioni on July 7, 1991 – on the initiative of European negotiators – whereby the Slovenian independence act was postponed for three months, but in the meantime the national defence forces remained in control of the whole Slovenian territory. The Yugoslav units were blocked in barracks and, under the circumstances, the Yugoslav presidency decided to have the army move out of Slovenia. The last Yugoslav soldier left Slovenia during the night from the 25th to the 26th October of 1991.

Thus 1991 marks the beginning of Territorial Defence of the Republic of Slove-



Photo: Mirjan Gebajns
Member of special forces of Territorial Defence of Slovenia during the liberation fight in 1991.



C-47 Dakota – “plane museum” photographed at Otok in the Bela Krajina region. It is kept there to commemorate the co-operation of the Partisan Army with the Allies. During World war II. Slovenian partisans rescued 305 American and several dozen British airmen.

nia, the third Slovenian army in succession formed during the 20th century and the first peacetime army in Slovenian national history. In January 1995 it was renamed “the Slovenian Army”. From 1990 onwards its chiefs-of-staff were generals Janez Slapar, Albin Gutman and Iztok Podbregar, Ph.D.; the present chief-of-staff is general Ladislav Lipič.

■
Janez J. Švajncer

Janez J. Švajncer is a graduate of the Faculty of Law in Maribor and a retired brigadier of the Slovenian Army. He has written a number of books about the military and war history of the Slovenians.