

CURRENT STATE OF MILITARY MUSEOLOGY IN SLOVAKIA

Pavol Šteiner

Konstantin Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

Historical introduction

Whether we like it or not, military conflicts are an essential part of each country's history. Wars influence any further development in the political, social, technical, ethnical or cultural sense. They also leave many traces like weapons, equipment, fortifications, graves... Thus they become a part of national cultural heritage, kept outdoors or indoors. Attractivity of militaria naturally causes that military expositions are ones of the most visited cultural institutions. And at the end of it, military museums often become a *display cabinet* of national museology.¹

The area of the modern Slovak Republic became a place of innumerable conflicts during its history. In spite of its relatively small surface, only about 49.000 km², its position on the northern edge of the Carpathian Basin made it almost a permanent battlefield.

Even if we skip archaeologically documented conflicts of prehistory and the early historical period, there are still numerous events and periods of war campaigns left. As a part of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, the territory of Slovakia became a scene of many foreign armies' invasions (Polish, Czech, Austrian, German imperial, Mongolian) but also several civil-war-like conflicts between the Hungarian royal forces and gentry clans. Probably the most peculiar era came in the 16th and 17th centuries. More or less intensive wars between the Ottoman Empire and Habsburg imperial forces were complicated by five rebellions of Hungarian, or rather Transylvanian gentry against Habsburg emperors. After an unusually peaceful 18th century and Napoleonic wars, which touched the area of modern Slovakia only marginally, there came large campaigns of the revolutionary years of 1848 and 1849 (Austrian imperial, Hungarian revolutionary, Slovak volunteers, and even

Russian imperial armies). The important Austro-Prussian war of 1866 struck only the western edge of the country.² The First World War campaigns in Slovakia took place only in its north-eastern part during the first Russian offensive in winter 1914–1915. After the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishing of Czechoslovakia, there were several local clashes between Czechoslovak legionary forces on one side and the Hungarian troops and later the Hungarian Red Army (1919) on the other, almost all over the country.³

Another conflict, an undeclared war fought by the just-emerging Slovak army against the Hungarian invasion in March 1939 became known as the so-called *Small War*. The involvement of Slovakia in the German campaign against Poland in September 1939 and the Soviet Union in 1941–44 also represents an interesting part of Slovak military history. Then came the autumn of 1944 with the outbreaking of the *Slovak National Uprising* (SNU) led by the army forces and subsequent partisan combats in the mountains of central Slovakia.⁴

The long process of Slovakia's liberation began in September 1944 and ended only in the first days of May 1945. It is surprising that such a small country was a stage of military operations for such a long time. However, its mostly mountainous terrain did not allow to large, motorized forces to spread entirely, and this is why only the smooth south-western part of Slovakia was taken as a place for strategical manoeuvres.⁵

Even the post-war era is a good subject for military museology, for it is the period of the Cold War and of what is still quite an attractive topic in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, namely the invasion of the Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968.⁶



1. Museum of the Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica, main building

Slovak military museology development

In spite of these rich historical facts, the development of military museology in Slovakia has often been limited mostly by political factors. The basic problem for a long period was represented by the absence of an independent or at least just an autonomous state form of the Slovaks.

The formation of national-level museology in the territory of present-day Slovakia dates back to the second half of the 19th century, just like in most of the European nations. However, the cultural life of the Slovaks in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was strictly limited by assimilatory efforts of the Hungarian government. But also in those unfavourable circumstances Slovak museum activists managed to establish the Slovak National Museum in 1907. It was also a period when specialized military museums were coming into being.⁷

The first museum to collect militaria from the area of Slovakia was also the world's first military museum, the Heeresgeschichtliche Museum in Vienna. As a central institution, it did not allow to found any separate military museums in the Empire, though there were several efforts in the Hungarian Kingdom to do so.

After 1918, in the newly emerged Czechoslovak Republic, a new military museum was established in Prague. Its collections were focused mostly on the history of outlandish resistance and legionary units' traditions. Only approximately 10 per cent of its collections had direct or indirect relation to Slovakia! In 1939, when the independent war-time Slovak Republic was established, the first efforts to create the state's own national military museum appeared. These were, however, limited by financial or material problems and, surprisingly, disinterest of responsible employees of the National Defence Ministry. Only in May 1941, with the coming of Ľudovít Vykysalý, we can speak

about a serious approach and a slow progress in creating a military museum. Though it never obtained its own building, it reached several successes (acquisition of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik's inheritance from Prague, opening of an exhibition of prey weapons and equipment from the eastern front). Even the Union of Slovak Museums approved the effort of Ľ. Vykysalý by accepting his museum as a regular member in March 1943. As the end of the war and the front-line were approaching, the museum had to evacuate its collections. The last known records say that they were stored in the military stall in Motešice, where they disappeared without a trace...⁸

After the war and re-establishing of Czechoslovakia, military museology returned to the pre-war conditions. That means that the central military museum in Prague was restored and Slovakia again had no such institution.⁹

Museum of Slovak National Uprising

Finally, in the 1950s, a new era of military museology in Slovakia began with the establishing of two institutions, which still exist in more or less improved conditions.

The Slovak National Uprising, as one of the most important events in the nation's modern history, was given an extraordinary prominence in the first post-war years. Slovak political elites, mostly former organizers of the Uprising, started to prepare a project of the Monument of the Slovak National Uprising as early as in December 1945. However, after the Communist coup d'état in February 1948, most of them were slowly forced out, some imprisoned, some even executed. That is why the project of the Uprising monument and museum was postponed and transformed according to the new image of SNU. As the SNU Institute, it was established in 1948 in Banská Bystrica, which back in 1944 had been the centre of the Uprising. Surprisingly,



2. Restored armoured train 'Štefánik' on temporary display at the Transportation Museum in Bratislava (2014)

in 1951, they moved the Institute to Bratislava and formally cancelled it by incorporating it into the History Institute of the Communist Party of Slovakia. Only with a celebration of the Uprising's 10th anniversary in 1954 and a moderate change of the main political line in Czechoslovakia, it was possible to declare the foundation of the Museum of SNU. Then the museum was re-transferred to Banská Bystrica, where it could open its first permanent exhibition.

In the first years of its existence, the Museum of SNU did not perform any scientific activities and acted only as an exhibit area until 1957. Then its further development made it one of the prominent Slovak museums. In 1969, the museum moved into a newly-raised modern building where it is still housed.¹⁰

The last great change of the Museum of SNU was required shortly after the downfall of the Communist regime in 1989. The most important task was to rebuild the exposition and remove any ideological veil off it.¹¹

Currently the Museum of SNU, within the Ministry of Culture's competence, runs five expositions. The main one, in Banská Bystrica, consists of an indoor presentation of moveable artifacts and an outdoor exhibition of heavy militaria (armoured vehicles, artillery, one aircraft). This main exhibition shows not only the uprising of 1944, but the whole political and military resistance during both World War I and II. Three other branches of the Museum present some monuments commemorating Nazi atrocities' victims *in situ*, where terrifying massacres took place in 1944 and 1945

(Nemecká, Kalište and Tokajík). The Museum of SNU is also responsible for the Slovak national exposition at the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oświęcim.¹²

Along these important display activities, the Museum of SNU obviously acts as a scientific institution; it also contains a large archives and serves as a centre of digitalization for many local museums.¹³

As one of the Museum's largest projects, we can mention a reconstruction of insurgents' armoured train 'Štefánik', including two original waggons, which is still able to move, but it is exhibited as a static item in an outdoor exposition in Banská Bystrica.¹⁴

Museum of Military History Svidník

Another military museum is situated in a relatively large area covering the so-called Death Valley between Svidník and the Dukla Pass. It was a stage of bloody fighting in autumn and winter of 1944 between the Germans on side and the Soviet and Czechoslovak armies on the other. The first feature, a monument and Czechoslovak military cemetery was built in the Dukla Pass in 1949. Then, in 1959, the local authorities started to create an open-air museum along the road to Svidník. In the late 1960s, when many of the persecuted war-time personalities returned to the public and political life (especially General Ludvík Svoboda, former commander of the Czechoslovak army corps and later president of the Republic), a new indoor museum was established in Svidník.

Founded in 1965, the Dukla Museum (outdoor and indoor) was opened to the public in 1969. A special modern museum edifice was built there as well as in Banská Bystrica. Since both museums share a similar fate, the Svidník exposition had to be changed after 1989, too. In 1994, with the establishing of the Institute of Military History, the museum in Svidník was incorporated into its structures and has remained there to-date.¹⁵

Officially called the Museum of Military History – Museum Department Svidník, under the Ministry of Defence competence, it includes an indoor exposition of local military operations during both World Wars in north-eastern Slovakia and an outdoor exposition of heavy military vehicles and artillery. The Museum is also responsible for several outdoor features in the Death Valley, including mostly T-34/85 tanks.¹⁶

Museum of Military History Piešťany

The third, the latest, and the last of the official military museums within the competences of the state authorities, is the Museum of Military History – Museum Department Piešťany. The idea to create it was conceived shortly after the splitting of Czechoslovakia and establishing of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993. During the partition of the former federal Czechoslovak property, the new

Slovak Ministry of Defence laid a claim on items having any relation to Slovakia in the collections of the Federal Military-Historical Museum in Prague. Therefore, it was necessary to establish a new museum to keep these and many new exhibits. This is why the Institute of Military History was founded on 1 May 1994 with two museum departments in Svidník and Trenčín.

The Trenčín Department from its creation had a task to collect post-war and recent army equipment. However, the main problem for many following years was the question where to store and present these exhibits. Since Trenčín is a traditional centre of army organisation in Slovakia, there were many opportunities to build an interesting collection of post-war military technology. The museum changed its seat several times. It was located in a number of army facilities in Trenčín and Nové Mesto nad Váhom and had no its own display space for many years.

The solution to this serious problem came in 2001. The former military airbase in Piešťany ended its operation and was transformed into a civilian airport. The Ministry of Defence decided to keep some hangars in this location and moved the collections from Trenčín there. The new museum was opened to the public in September 2004.¹⁷

Unlike in Svidník, the Museum Department in Piešťany concentrates on military equipment of the post-war era including armoured and light vehicles and air-forces.



3. Indoor exhibition at the Museum of Military History Svidník



4. Outdoor exhibition of heavy military equipment in Svidník



5. Indoor exhibition at the Museum of Military History Piešťany



6. Outdoor exhibition of air-force equipment in Piešťany



7. 'House of Battle Glory' in Kalná nad Hronom

These items are exhibited in three halls and also outdoors. Moreover, the museum keeps a large collection of small-scaled items, but it still lacks a suitable place to display them.¹⁸

Other museums and collections

Beside these state-wide military museums, there are also other institutions to keep and present military history of Slovakia.

The systematic processing and presenting of militaria rests mostly on the shoulders of local museums founded by local authorities (self-governing regions, municipalities). Since these museums are obliged to document the development of nature and history of a certain area, military history represents only a small part of their activities. As a matter of fact, militaria in their collections may be included in general historical collections and their presentation is limited to a few exhibition cases only, representing relevant military events.

There are, however, special exceptions to this unwritten rule. For example, the so-called *House of Battle Glory* located in the village of Kalná nad Hronom is quite a nice one. Placed on the authentic spot of heavy combats during December 1944 and March 1945, a small exhibition of the Second World War militaria is accessible to the public. It was originally founded in the 1970s as an obligatory *Revolutionary Traditions Room*, a typical feature of history presentation during the Communist era. After 1989, this exhibition was closed because of its ideological structure.

In 2012, a significant rise of public interest in military history caused a re-opening of the exhibition, showing militaria from private collections and also from the local Tekov Museum in Levice.¹⁹

As mentioned above, after 2000 we can observe a considerable rise of public interest in military history, especially WW II. It seems that people literally needed a break from mass and compulsory celebrations of the liberation and SNU, so typical of the previous political regime. Now they deliberately search for information, literature, or any records of this era. One of the evidences of this fact can be seen in increasing numbers of individuals and societies, collecting, and presenting militaria in several ways.

Public collectors mostly prefer presenting their collections in the way they call a 'museum'. From a strictly scientific point of view we cannot accept this term, since these 'museums' lack an expert care for items, have no documentation or custody. Some of these collections even have their origin in illegal excavations, using metal detectors, which is forbidden by Slovak legislation! What makes us really anxious is an open support of the Institute of Military History provided to such collectors (proved at least in two cases, one of them broadly presented in the public media).²⁰

The other group of enthusiasts gather in military-history clubs. Their aim is to present to the public the life of soldiers in several eras, several armies. This kind of military history presentation can be considered as the most popular since some of these re-enactment activities are attended by more than 15.000 spectators.²¹

Conclusions

Compared to the neighbouring countries, Slovakia still does not have an appropriate and representative national military museum. This fact cannot be excused with the long period without an opportunity to found one. It is quite absurd that we must travel to Vienna, Prague, or Budapest to see important items from our quite a rich national military history...

The current services and structure of the Museum of Military History provides no sufficient space to act as a real national institute of this kind. It deals only with the 20th century, as if there were nothing else in our military history to present. The focus of its two branches includes neither all the features, nor the entire surface of the country. The exposition in Piešťany keeps exclusively the post-war technology and the Museum in Svidník is limited only to a small area of the north-eastern edge of Slovakia.

Another great problem is the display method. While the Svidník Museum, thanks to more than fifty years of its tradition, is quite well furnished, with solid services, the branch in Piešťany is definitively not what we could call a modern museum. Many items, including tanks, aircrafts or helicopters are still in the open air, exposed to all kinds of weather. Two of the three exposition halls are made of tin plates, which makes the visit almost unbearable in summer. The museum has only a small car park for visitors and the entry is possible only three times (June to September) or twice (October to May) a day!

The Museum of SNU in Banská Bystrica has its historical fixation clear and cannot compensate for the shortcomings

of the Museum of Military History. However, its operation model could be an example how to perform modern military museology in Slovakia.

One can ask a question how it is possible that two large and specialized military museums in one country represent such different quality levels. The main explanation of this problem is quite simple. While the Ministry of Culture, founder of the Museum of SNU, is a natural provider of museum methodology, the Ministry of Defence shows only a little interest in founding its museums. Even the Institute of Military History, who is the immediate responsible chief body of the museums in Piešťany and Svidník, does by far not enough to keep them in an appropriate shape.

There have already been several proposals presented how to deal with these problems. One of them could be to transfer the entire military museology under the custody of the Ministry of Culture. In an ideal-world scenario, a central military museum should be established. In the late 1990s, the idea appeared to move the exposition of the military museum, then located in Trenčín, to the Komárno fortress in southern Slovakia. This famous fortification complex could really be suitable for such purposes, but it requires an expensive restoration and still is not ready to accommodate such an exhibition.

The absence of a nation-wide military museum in Slovakia leaves several gaps of unrepresented periods and territories. For example, south-western Slovakia, where almost each war was waged, has almost no military-museum presentation. Even if we admit that the military history of the 20th century is more or less documented, there are



8. Illegal militaria collection



8. Reenactment event. Tank days Laugaricio at Trenčianske Stankovce in 2019

(All photos by P. Šteiner)

still other centuries. Neither can we expect, for example, historical or archaeological departments of the Slovak National Museum to do this job. Another example: the only permanent exhibition of the wars against the Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries is located in the Slovak Mining Museum in Banská Štiavnica.

Valuable private military collections could become a part of Slovak museum network as well. Such a process requires, however, several important steps to be taken: to persuade their owners to transform their collections to full-valued museums with anything necessary. Many items should be legalized in view of their 'obscure' acquisition. And, finally,

an expert supervision over them should be kept.

All these proposals require, beside organizational changes, a distinct generation swap. We have to raise as many young military museology experts as possible. It is quite pleasant that at least at our Museology Department at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra we have already trained several such students with a clear interest in this branch of museology.

This article is one of the outcomes of the APVV-17-0199 Project: Cultural product of regional museum in context of objective social need: Life in totality in years 1939–1945.

Abstract: The area of the Slovak Republic has served over history as a 'melting pot' of civilizations and migrations. Thus during numerous conflicts and wars it turned into a stage of military operations. It is remarkable that a relatively small surface of the country gave so much space to numerous armies. Those campaigns have left many traces, represented by battlefields, monuments and also movable items, militaria. However, since Slovakia is a relatively young republic, several problems are present

with respect to building military museology on the national level. In the past, Slovakia's military museology was presented mostly in museums in other countries. The fall of the Communist regime enabled to transform the existing military museums into serious institution to present and research into the national military history. Currently, the process of the development of military museology in our country can neither be considered as completed nor as satisfactory.

Keywords: Slovakia, military museology, militaria collectors, military history, museums.

Endnotes

- ¹ A note from the author: Most of the monograph and articles used as sources are of Slovak origin and could be difficult to obtain or translate. However, a Polish reader is expected to be able to comprehend Slovak texts. Publications from the last several years mostly contain English summaries as well.
- ² See for example: V. Segeš: *Vojenské dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov*, Bratislava, 2015, Ottovo nakladateľstvo.
- ³ *Ibidem*, pp. 208-44.
- ⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 278-413.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 414-45; see also: P. Šteiner: *Babylon armád 1. Boje medzi Iplom a Hronom, zima 1944–1945*, Bratislava, 2018, Magnet Press; P. Šteiner: *Babylon armád 2. Boje medzi Hronom a Váhom, február–apríl 1945*, Bratislava, 2019, Magnet Press; V. Koppan: *Boje 25. gardového streleckého zboru na prístupoch do Bratislavy v dňoch 31. marca až 2. apríla 1945*, in: 'Studia Historica Nitriensia', 21/1, pp. 198-209.
- ⁶ V. Segeš: *Vojenské dejiny...*, pp. 446-83.
- ⁷ Š. Mruškovič, J. Darulová, Š. Kollár: *Múzejníctvo, muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, Banská Bystrica, 2005, UMB, pp. 60-2.
- ⁸ P. Turza: *Vývoj slovenského múzejníctva v rokoch 1939–1945*, in: 'Vojenská história', 2001, 5/3, pp. 92-104.
- ⁹ P. Turza: *História a vývoj dokumentovania vojenstva na Slovensku*. in: „Múzejná dokumentácia a prezentácia dejín Slovenska“, Bratislava, 2000, Slovenské národné múzeum, pp. 61-4.
- ¹⁰ M. Dobříková: *Vznik a vývoj Múzea SNP v Banskej Bystrici v rokoch 1955–1985*. in: 'Zborník múzea SNP', 10/1985, pp. 259-70.
- ¹¹ S. Eliašová, M. Palárik, D. Prelovska, P. Šteiner: *Komentované pramene k dejinám slovenského múzejníctva v 20. storočí*. Nitra, 2015, UKF, pp. 224, 225.
- ¹² www.muzeumsnp.sk/expozicie/ [31 Jan. 2020].
- ¹³ www.muzeumsnp.sk/digitalizacia/projekt-digitalne-muzeum/ [31 Jan. 2020].
- ¹⁴ Restored armoured train „Štefánik“ exhibited in Banská Bystrica is sometimes mistaken for another armoured train replica located in Zvolen. The latter one was built for making a movie in the 1980s and shows several wrong features like turrets of the T-34/85 tank instead of the original LT-35.
- ¹⁵ J. Rodák: *Z histórie vzniku prírodného múzea na Dukle a pomoc armády pri jeho zveľaďovaní*, in: „Vojenská história“, 2004, 8/1, pp. 92-4; V. Hospodár: *Zbierkové fondy v múzejnom oddelení Svidník Vojenského historického múzea v Piešťanoch*. in: 'Vojenská história', 2006, 10/2, pp. 100-3.
- ¹⁶ www.vhu.sk/the-museum-branch-of-mmh-svidnik/ [31 Jan. 2020].
- ¹⁷ M. Čipka: *Odhodlanie už nestačí*, in: 'Obrana', 1999, 7/4, p. 4.; M. Čipka: *Vážme si minulosť*. in: 'Obrana', 2004, 12/1, pp. 22-3.
- ¹⁸ www.vhu.sk/the-museum-branch-of-mmh-piestany/ [31 Jan. 2020].
- ¹⁹ P. Šteiner: *Babylon armád 2...*, pp. 114, 115.
- ²⁰ www.domov.sme.sk/c/20874394/techniku-zo-zakladne-v-dolnej-krupej-ziada-ministerstvo-vratit.html [31 Jan. 2020].
- ²¹ P. Šteiner: *Babylon armád 2...*, pp. 118-21.

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Pavol Šteiner, PhD

Studied archaeology, history and museology at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia). After several years at the Nové Zámky local museum, he returned to the university to complete his PhD; he studied and worked as a teacher at the Department of Museology. His scientific interest includes the material culture of the early Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin and also military history of south-western Slovakia, especially 1944 and 1945 combats. All these essentially different study subjects are linked by his permanent interest in their museum and monumental presentation. E-mail: psteiner@ukf.sk.

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