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The defensive organization of the Pyrenees: an overview

The Pyrenees have always constituted a great natural border between the Iberian Peninsula and continental Europe. However, both nations fortified their borders as a protective measure. It begins throughout the Modern Age with the construction of forts that follow the well-known *Traza Italiana*. But all military techniques changed after the First World War. All European states begin to build lines of bunkers and other modern fortification elements, highlighting the French *Maginot* Line and the German *Siegfried* line. During the Second World War, these defences are put to the test and continue to be built.

In this context, the General Staff of the Francoist army, from 1939 to the mid-1950s, considers it necessary to build a modern fortification line with the intention of defending the Pyrenees pass from possible invasions, whether by the allies or their German friends. Thus, the construction of more than 10,000 fortified facilities is projected throughout the Pyrenees, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, of which some 6,000 were built. Throughout its construction, we can differentiate three different periods.

The first period begins six months after the civil war in Spain began and the border area of Irún was taken. Franco's Headquarters ordered the study of the construction of defensive positions throughout the entire Pyrenees, intending to be able to face a hypothetical intervention by France in favour of the Republic. Throughout the war, the Generalissimo's Headquarters continued to issue orders to undertake the study of the fortification of the mountain range. In 1939, the Pyrenees Fortification

Commissions were established, with their Western, Eastern and Central sections. The leadership was made up of soldiers trusted by Franco. Priority was given to fortification works in the Eastern and Western regions, where the orography was not so rugged and where an enemy penetration would be more feasible.

In June 1939 work began in the Basque and Navarre areas, with large defensive complexes that follow the models of the Maginot or Italian Alpine Wall lines. The direction of the constructions makes them known as the "Vallespín Line". At the same time, in the Eastern Sector, different defensive positions began to be built on the main access roads to the border with the intention of repelling or containing possible incursions or an offensive from France.

With the outbreak of WW2, the Campo de Gibraltar and the Balearic and Canary Islands also began to be fortified. Although neutrality is defended, a possible invasion was feared.

The fortification works in the Spanish Pyrenees required many economic resources, but labour was much cheaper. At first, they had three fortification regiments supported by the Workers' Battalions. They included republican prisoners without blood crimes as well as all the doubtful and political disaffected to the regime. They were in legal limbo since they had not been tried, but they were confined and forced to do work for the State. As it was contrary to the 1929 Geneva Convention, the ridiculous daily compensation of 2 pesetas per worker was established, which once discounted the housing and living expenses, remained at 0.50 pesetas. About 10 Workers

'Battalions participated in the fortification of the Catalan area, that is, more than 7000 forced labourers, while in the Occidental area about 8 Workers' Battalions participated, comprising approximately 6,800 men.

The second period begins after the German invasion of France in May 1940 and the Spanish declaration of non-belligerence, approaching the Axis forces. A new defensive system is being rethought to continue the more leisurely construction, focusing work on other territories more at risk from the conflict. In 1942 the situation began to change, the allied advance by North Africa and the German occupation of Vichy France placed Spain as a possible strategic objective. This reactivates the work, but also that on the other side of the Pyrenees, the German army begins to build a fortification line called the *Sperrlinie Pyranäenfront*. However, the works carried out were abandoned the following year.

In 1943 the Central Army General Staff established a classification by areas of the Pyrenees based on their orographic characteristics and the possibilities of the advance of an enemy force. Thus, it is classified in "active zones", where there are good communications and the invasion is easier, so they should be the most fortified; "Dangerous zones" in which there are no communication routes but allow easy access, so they also had to be fortified; and finally, the "passive zones" where the orography only allowed difficult mountain infantry attacks.

In this period the workforce is also altered. In 1940 the freedom of the majority of war prisoners was decreed, dissolving the Workers' Battalions. To replace them, the Disciplinary Battalions of Working Soldiers are created, made up of replacement soldiers from military service considered disaffected to the regime. Although they were within the military structure, their situation was almost that of prisoners. They lived in dire conditions in constantly guarded labour camps. Those Battalions would be disbanded in 1942, giving way to a full military workforce.

Finally, the last stage begins in 1944, when the German armies retreat from the rapid Allied attack. The Spanish General Staff saw the possibility of being invaded by allied forces, for which Instruction C-15 of the Defensive Organization of the Pyrenees was decreed for an effective

construction of the fortification line. It is determined that the defence could not have a linear character. In this way, three well-defined areas appear in the defensive strategy. On the one hand, the "Security area," through which they intended to channel the penetrations of enemy forces; the "Resistance area" in which the firepower was centred and, finally, the "Reaction area" where the reserves and artillery would be concentrated to carry out the counter-attacks. The Pyrenean defences were organized into Resistance Nuclei or Resistance Centres, following Italian terminology. A set of fortifications linked together autonomously. A total of 169 Resistance Nuclei or Centres were projected. Its size and fortification elements varied according to the type of area in which it was found. Anti-tank elements and heavier defences abounded in "active areas", while in "dangerous areas" it was fortified against infantry. The plan was that the Resistance Nuclei were to be defended by a battalion, of between 600 and 800 men. The proximity of many fortifications to the communication routes and the border forced the army to resort to different camouflage elements.

Since 1942 the works were carried out by units of engineers and sappers. Although they were also fifth in military service, their situation improved substantially.

After the Second World War, the works continue to be carried out, although at a slower pace since there was no fear of an invasion. The attack through the Pyrenees never happened, beyond the incursions carried out by the republican exiles in France. In the 1950s, relations with the United States stopped the fortification works, ending completely in 1958. However, the Spanish army continued to review and preserve the different elements of the Pyrenean fortification line until the early eighties.

Although it was forgotten for a while, today the Defensive Organization of the Pyrenees is increasingly known for the proliferation of books and articles as well as audiovisual documentaries. On the other hand, there is the recovery and musealization of some nuclei of resistance, including the creation of groups on social networks, websites and applications on the subject. That makes it begin to be seen as an element to be preserved. However, the vast majority of fortification elements continue to be abandoned and deteriorated.