

STALIN LINE

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'Stalin Line

Unofficial name of the Soviet defence structures line built from the Baltic to the Black Sea in 1928–1939. In the USSR, it was officially called the Long-Term Land Front. It was called the Stalin line in the foreign press of that time by analogy with other lines (Maginot, Mannerheim). In the 21st century, the name is also used in domestic literature.

Building the Long-Term Land Front on the western border of the USSR against Poland and other neighbouring countries as possible enemies

The beginning of the defence structure line construction in 1928 was connected with the deterioration in relations with the West, i.e. in 1927, Great Britain severed diplomatic relations with the USSR, and Soviet diplomat P. L. Voikov was killed in Warsaw. The Red Army had only 586,000 men in continuous service (in the Soviet Union, most conscripts underwent military training not in regular but in territorial troops at short-term training), which was not enough to protect such a huge country. Therefore, in 1928–1939, 23 fortified districts (FD) were built. They consisted of reinforced concrete pillboxes, i.e. long-term firing points, dug into the ground. By the beginning of World War II, there had been 3,279 pillboxes on the Stalin Line, and 578 had still been under construction. They covered 2,067 km of the western border of the USSR.

Half of this border belonged to Poland, half, to Romania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. Back then, Poland was considered a formidable opponent, given its victory in the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. The main forces of the Polish Army consisted of infantry and cavalry and could advance with a wide front.

To deter infantry and cavalry, 90 % of pillboxes were armed with machine guns, and the rest, with artillery guns. But artillery pillboxes were not built to fight tanks which were very few in Poland at that time but to support machine gun pillboxes with their more powerful and effective fire. To destroy the infantry and cavalry, the guns had high-explosive fragmentation shells and were supposed to fire on overlapping fields. Those guns were

the famous 'three-incher' of the Tsarist era, i.e. rapid-fire 76.2-millimeter guns of the 1902 model. During the Russo-Japanese War and World War I, they destroyed up to 60 % of the advancing enemy's infantry with their barrage fire on overlapping fields.

In 1935–1939, when Poland built 149 7TP light tanks, then, in order to combat them, ATFPs, i.e. anti-tank firing points, armed with a 45-millimetre cannon in a T-26 tank turret were built in the USSR. Its 45-mm armour-piercing projectile easily penetrated the bulletproof armour of Polish tanks at a distance of up to a thousand metres. The turret ammunition consisted of 52 armour-piercing projectiles and 7 machine gun drums. Another part of the shells and cartridges was placed in a bunker under the turret led to a special manhole. But the main ammunition part (up to a thousand shells) was placed in the field warehouse where an entrenchment led to from the ATFP.

Nine ATFPs were installed in the Minsk Fortified District and 10 in the Polack one. ATFP, similar to pillbox, represented a concrete bunker with the same wall thickness, i.e. 150 cm in front, 110 cm in top. Such protection was beyond the Polish artillery capabilities whose maximum calibre was only 155-mm. The T-26 tank turret had only 12 mm thick bulletproof armour. Therefore, either the ATFP tower was carefully disguised, or a pseudo-barn which had a part of the wall that could be quickly thrown away for inspection was built above it.

The objective of the Stalin Line was not to stall and defeat the enemy, as many mistakenly believe, but to hold the border areas during the general mobilisation in the country.

Stalin Line in 1939-1941

Poland ceased to exist as a state in 1939, and a common border between Germany and the USSR came into being, but 400 km to the west in comparison to the previous one. General military service was introduced in the country. The new border witnessed the construction of new fortified districts, to where they began to shift cover troops, to bring arms and special equipment some of which were removed from the old border line. In the Minsk FD, only one battalion of six remained. However, in May 1941, the Stalin Line was put on alert again. According to the memoirs of A. Sugakaw (remaining battalion commander), 105 out of 242 machine gun pillboxes were rearmed in the Minsk Fortified District in the Dziarzhynsk — Plieschchanicy section. On May 30, 1941, in addition to the battalion of A. Sugakaw, 3 more battalions, control and communication units, 18 platoons of caponier artillery and 9 squads of anti-tank artillery appeared in the Minsk Fortified District. Colonel S. Liálkow was appointed as commandant of the Minsk Fortified District, and captain I. Jukhimiets was appointed as headquarters commander. That is, on the eve of the war, the Minsk FD had begun to revive with two battalions short of being fully staffed.

Beginning of the Great Patriotic War and the offensive of the German Nazi troops on June 22-25, 1941

During the summer campaign of 1940 in Belgium and France, the Wehrmacht had a lot of experience in capturing well-fortified forts. Having taken Vilnius, on June 24, 1941, unexpectedly for the Soviet leadership, 3 German tank divisions turned towards Maladziechna and headed towards Minsk. When this information was reported to commander officer of the Western Front army general D. G. Pavlov, he did not believe it. Considering such a deep tank encircling as madness, D. G. Pavlov shifted anti-tank guns towards Lida where they were locked in the battle against the Wehrmacht infantry divisions without tanks. Meanwhile, the 7th, 12th, and 20th German Tank divisions continued their offensive without restriction. On June 25, they had already reached the borders of the Minsk Fortified District. Germany, being at war since 1939, had divisions deployed across wartime working and organisational structure. Therefore, its three tank divisions had 18,000 infantrymen put on delivery trucks, 300 main guns and about 600 tanks. In addition to the Soviet pillboxes' garrisons, only the 64th Rifle Division blocked their way. But it was deployed in peacetime working and organisational structure and had 6,000 soldiers instead of 12,000. In addition, instead of the 12 km appropriate for the division, it had to maintain a front of 50 km. Artillery units of this division had only those shells that they had brought with them in the main gun limber which contained from 20 to 50 shells per gun, depending on its calibre. A special train which was delivering the necessary amount of ammunition for the division was stalled by a German airstrike near Minsk and went back to Orsha.

The 17th and 18th German Tank divisions advanced on Minsk from Baranavichy. In their direction, there was the 108th Rifle Division whose front equalled 40 km instead of 12 km. Both Soviet Rifle divisions were supported by the pillboxes of the Minsk FD. To the east of Minsk, in Uruchcha rural settlement, there was the 100th Rifle Division which had no artillery at all with the 161st Division in reserve.

Battles on the approaches to Minsk

On June 26, the 12 Tank Division (Wehrmacht) was reinforced with additional units and ordered to capture Minsk by the evening. But on June 27, it never entered the city, having spent that day and the following day in the toughest battles with the defenders of the Soviet pillboxes. Acting according to a well-established scheme, at first the tanks which caused fire on themselves were sent into battle by the Germans. Artillery pillboxes which did not have armour-piercing projectiles (they were prepared to repel attacks by Polish infantry) and machine-gun pillboxes which made up 90 % of all the Stalin Line defensive structures were practically powerless in the battle against tanks. When the Soviet pillboxes started to fire, the enemy recorded these firing points on their maps, after that they were neutralised by the artillery (Germans conducted aimed fire at the embrasures).

The ATFP built specifically for tank destruction was tried and found wanting. In the battles, it became clear that before the attack on the USSR, the Germans had increased the thickness of the frontal armour on their main tanks to 5 cm. The Soviet 45-millimetre anti-tank gun could not drill in them even when firing point-blank. Although the side armour of German tanks was drilled at a distance of up to 700 m, it was not always possible to fire on the sides.

The defenders of the Minsk Fortified District had to stem the enemy with an anti-tank grenade thrown under the caterpillar track, and then to set fire to the tank with a Molotov cocktail. But to ignite a vehicle, it was necessary to get a bottle with an incendiary mixture exclusively into the air intake of the engine. It was the only way for the flame that erupted from the broken bottle to be drawn into the engine compartment and, thus, to cause fire. In all other cases, the burning mixture used up quickly on the tank's armour without causing any damage to it. The trophy Czech Panzer 38(t) tanks turned out to be especially resistant to the Molotov cocktail. Their air intakes were covered with armour from above, and the manholes had special gaskets that prevented the incendiary mixture from leaking inside the vehicle. It was necessary to throw the bottle under the air intake, which was very difficult to do in real battle conditions. It was those Czech tanks that formed the backbone of the 7th, 12th, and 20th Wehrmacht Tank divisions which attacked the positions of the Minsk Fortified District from Vilnius.

Although the central section of the Stalin Line was built to defend against Poland, not Germany, fight Polish infantry and cavalry, not German tanks, the 'three-inchers' were not anti-tank guns, the 'little forty-fives' were barely useful, and there were not enough shells, and the Molotov cocktail was ineffective, Minsk defenders took courageously a heavy attack. A comparison of German tank losses testifies to the brutality of the battles in the Minsk Fortified District of the Stalin Line. In just 3 days of fighting near Minsk, the 7th, 12th, and 20th Wehrmacht Tank divisions lost 210 armoured vehicles (the Wehrmacht lost 640 tanks during 40 days of the French campaign). In Zaslavje Rajon, separate pillboxes of the Minsk Fortified District defended themselves until July 1, 1941.

Battles on other sections of the Stalin Line

The delay of the Germans in the battles at the Minsk FD allowed six fully staffed rifle divisions of the Red Army to take up positions in the Polack Fortified District on time. The required number of artillery shells, unloaded from railway trains on time, was delivered to the troops. Kombrig (brigade commander) A. I. Zygin, commander of the 174th Rifle Division (from August 7, 1941, major general), became famous for his particularly skilful leadership of the FD defence there. As a result, 6 Soviet divisions held back the onslaught of 16 German divisions for about 20 days on the line of the Polack Fortified District of the Stalin Line. The positions of this FD were left by the order from Moscow only because of the complete encirclement threat of the defenders.

For about a week, units of the Red Army held defences in the Novograd-Volyn Fortified District and left it as well to avoid encirclement. For another 2 weeks, the Germans were detained in the Korosten' Fortified District of the Stalin Line. On the line of the Kyiv Fortified District, the Red Army stalled the enemy with battles for 2 months. As a result, A. Hitler ordered Army Group Centre to stem the attack on Moscow and turn all its tank divisions from the central direction to the south to surround Kyiv from the east. And although Germans managed to win at this place, time was irretrievably lost. The enemy could not break through the positions of the Karelian Fortified District of the Stalin Line during the entire war.

Significance of the Stalin Line for the course of war

Germany did not have enough resources for a protracted war, so it bet on a 'blitzkrieg' (lightning-fast war). Unlike the French Maginot Line which did not have any influence on the course of military actions, the Stalin Line made a significant contribution to the disruption of the blitzkrieg plan. Due to delays in the offensive on the Long-Term Land Front, the Germans had not taken Moscow before the autumn break-up season, the war became protracted, which predetermined Germany's defeat.

The [Stalin Line](#) historical and memorial complex was built in Zaslavje Rajon of Minsk Voblast.