

A LONG ROAD TO ITALY: THE ODYSSEY OF THE POLISH WARRIORS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR¹

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According to a Polish Italian association, there are about 100,000 Poles or Italians of Polish descent currently living in Italy.² Meanwhile, the country is home to four cemeteries where Polish warriors who fought together with the Allied forces on the Italian front during the Second World War are buried.

The largest of these Polish war cemeteries is located in Bologna, in the Italian *comune* of San Lazzaro di Savena (figure 1). Here, 1,432 Polish soldiers were interred. They fell in the battle of the Gothic Line, in the Apennines, on the River Senio and during the liberation of Bologna. The Loreto cemetery is the final resting place of 1,081 soldiers who fought on the Adriatic Front, in the battles for Ancona and Loreto, on the River Metauro and in the battle of the Gothic Line. Buried in Casamassima (Apulia) are 429 soldiers who fell in action on the Gustav Line and the River Sangro or who died in the military hospital in Casamassima and other hospitals in Bari and Naples.³



FIGURE 1. Main gate of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio HIYAMA, *Study on the Documentation of War Memories and on the Construction of Postwar Societies in Nation-States in the Context of Global History: in an Attempt to Find a Postwar Conciliation Doctrine*, Nagoya, Chukyo University, 2018, p. 522).

At the Polish war cemetery at Monte Cassino—undoubtedly a symbol of the Polish warriors' devotion to a liberation of Italy—, 1,066 soldiers were buried. In the battle of Monte Cassino, the so-called fiercest battle on the Western front, the Polish soldiers proved their devotion in capturing the German stronghold with huge losses. Monte Cassino represents one of the most important national memories in Poland. It may be difficult to find a Pole who does not know the military song *Czerwone Maki na Monte Cassino* (The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino) (figure 2).



FIGURE 2. The Polish War Cemetery on Monte Cassino (Figure: *Polish Second World War Military Cemeteries in Italy*, <<http://cmpi.fondazionemm2c.org/en/>>).

So, how did the Polish soldiers get to Italy? Their odyssey started from the Soviet Union. This paper presents their experience during the long journey to Italy.

On September 1, 1939, the Second World War broke out and in the same month Poland was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union. In 1941, after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, relations between the Polish Government in exile in London and the Soviet were reestablished and a Soviet-Polish agreement—the Sikorski-Maysky agreement— was signed in London on July 30, 1941. The agreement approved the formation of a Polish force. General Władysław Anders, who before the Second World War had served in the Polish Army, was nominated to be its commander. After the outbreak of the war, he had been jailed by the Soviets, but with the signing of the Soviet-Polish agreement, he was released from a prison in Moscow.

1. The research of this article was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grants, Numbers 17H00929 and 19K01069.

2. *Polacy we Włoszech* (online): *Wiadomości Online*, Rome, Polacy we Włoszech, 2019, <<https://www.polacywewloszech.com/>> (accessed: December 1, 2019).

3. *Polish Second World War Military Cemeteries in Italy* (online), Rome, Polacy we Włoszech and Ambasada Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Rzymie, 2021, <<http://cmpi.fondazionemm2c.org/en/>> (accessed: December, 15, 2019).

The *Anders Army* was recruited from former citizens of Poland who were located in the Soviet Union. This force was supposed to fight the Germans on the Eastern front together with the Red Army. Contrary to the Soviet's intentions, Anders was aiming to form a sovereign Polish army in the Soviet Union and there was constant friction between Anders and the Soviet authorities over shortages of weapons, food and clothing, etc. The situation of his army was becoming more and more dire due to the lack of food and medicine. General Anders decided to evacuate the entire army together with Polish civilians—including their children—from Soviet territory. The Soviets were reluctant to allow it, and only after difficult negotiations with the Soviet authorities did Anders finally attain an agreement to realize his plan.⁴

In March and April 1942, 33,069 soldiers and 10,789 civilians, including 3,000 children, were evacuated from Soviet territory through the Persian Corridor. In August 1942, another evacuation was carried out. As a result of these two evacuations, 116,543 people, of whom 78,631 were soldiers, arrived in the Middle East. In April 1943, mass graves of killed Polish officers were discovered by the Germans in a village near Smolensk. The notorious *Katyn Affair* began. When the Polish government in exile asked the International Red Cross to investigate the case, the Soviet government accused the Poles in London of cooperation with the Germans and broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government. It was only by chance that the Anders Army had left the Soviet Union before the dispute occurred.

4. On the formation of The Anders Army and its evacuation from the Soviet Union, see Zbigniew WAWER, *Armia Generała Władysława Andersa w ZSRR 1941-1942*, Warsaw, Bellona, 2012; Zbigniew WAWER, *Władysław Anders 1892-1970*, Warsaw, Institute of National Remembrance, 2019; Martin WILLIAMS, *From Warsaw to Rome. General Anders' Exiled Polish Army in the Second World War*, Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military, 2017.

The Anders Army joined the British forces in the Middle East. From the autumn of 1942, Polish army was reorganized, absorbing various Polish units. It got acquainted with British weapons and equipment and was well trained. In the spring of 1943, the Anders' Army officially formed *The Polish 2nd Corps* which would fight alongside the Allies. At the same time, educational and cultural activities were carried out among the Polish civilians who came with the Anders Army—including organizing Polish schools and a theater, publishing newspapers or books, etc.

The Polish 2nd Corps moved from Iran through Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Furthermore, during late 1943 and early 1944, the Polish soldiers were transported onward to Italy. The Allied forces had been hopelessly stuck for several months at the German Gustav line. The fortified positions in the Monte Cassino complex were the biggest obstacle blocking the way to Rome. American, British, French, New Zealand, Canadian and other troops could not break through the German line in the previous three consecutive battles. After deliberations, the British and American high commanders decided to deploy the Polish 2nd Corps in the fourth battle. The British Eighth Army commander, General Olivier Leese, told General Anders that he intended to give the Polish 2nd Corps the task of breaking through the German positions in the Monte Cassino complex, capturing the monastery and then Piedimonte, a town on the Hitler Line. It was obviously a very difficult task (figure 3). After a moment's reflection, General Anders answered that he would undertake the mission, because their success in capturing Monte Cassino would give the Polish government in exile a new asset in defense of the rights of the Polish nation and contribute to the good of the nation's future. Anders noted in his memoir:

I realized that the cost in lives must be heavy, but I realized too the importance of the capture of Monte

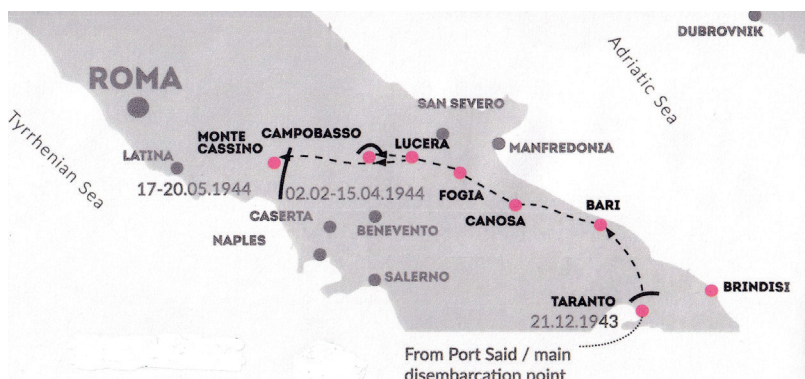


FIGURE 3. The Polish 2nd Corps's trail to Monte Cassino (Figure: Norman DAVIES, *Trail of Hope: The Anders Army, an Odyssey across Three Continents*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2015, p. 475).

Cassino to the Allied cause, and most of all to that of Poland, for it would answer once and for all the Soviet lie that the Poles did not want to fight the Germans.⁵

The Polish soldiers battled bravely and carried out this task suffering heavy losses (923 killed and 2,931 wounded). They raised the Polish flag on the ruins of the Benedictine monastery and soon captured Piedimonte. The Polish 2nd Corps continued to fight on the Italian front, although they were withdrawn to the reserve of the British Eighth Army for some time, and in April 1945, liberated Bologna. The heroic action of the Polish soldiers in the battle of Monte Cassino became widely known thanks, mainly, to the reporting of the Polish writer Melchior Wańkowicz.⁶ And Monte Cassino became a symbol of the devotion of the Polish warriors on Italian front (figure 4).



FIGURE 4. Polish soldiers against the backdrop of the ruins of the monastery at Monte Cassino (Figure: *National Digital Archives of Poland*, <<https://www.nac.gov.pl/>>).

Here, let us look at a unique episode that is part of these events. Among the Polish soldiers on the Italian front, we can count one mountain bear. His name was Wojtek. While the Anders Army temporarily was living in Hamadan (Iran), a Polish woman bought a little orphaned bear cub from a local boy in a street market. They named the cub Wojtek. He became soon a mascot of the Polish soldiers and civilians. He soon grew to be a big bear and enjoyed wrestling with the soldiers, smoking and drinking beer (figure 5). They say that he used to sleep with the soldiers on cold nights. It is also said that when the Polish soldiers mo-



FIGURE 5. Wojtek playing in the Middle East (Figure: Aileen ORR, *Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2014, without page).



FIGURE 6. Souvenir magnet from the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk (Figure: author).

5. Władysław ANDERS, *An Army in Exile: The Story of the Second Polish Corps*, Nashville, Battery Press, 1981, p. 163.

6. Melchior Wańkowicz observed and interviewed participants during the Battle of Monte Cassino. His three-volume book about the battle was first published in 1945-1947 and enjoys popularity even today. See Melchior WAŃKOWICZ, *Bitwa o Monte Cassino*, Rome and Milan, Wydawnictwo Oddz. Kultury i Prasy II Polskiego Korpusu, 1945-1947.

ved to Iraq, Wojtek marched on his hind legs with them like a man. When the Polish 2nd Corps was to move to Italy, the British officers refused to accept Wojtek, a live animal. Yet the Polish soldiers wanted to continue their journey with Wojtek, and, as a solution, Wojtek was formally admitted to the Polish Army. Norman Davies, a British historian, wrote humorously,

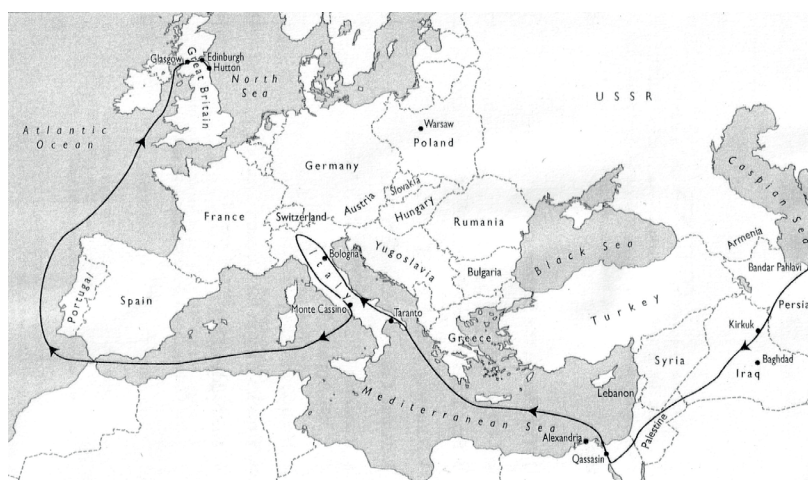


FIGURE 7. Wojtek's journey (Figure: Aileen ORR, *Wojtek the Bear...*, without page).

«As far as is known, he did not swear the oath of loyalty, but sailed to Italy, not as a cargo or as a mascot, but as a private soldier».⁷ Wojtek spent two years among the Polish soldiers on the Italian front. It is generally believed that he was present during the battle of Monte Cassino, and that when the *Wojtek unit* (the 22nd Transport Supply Company) conveyed ammunition, he helped by carrying 100-pound crates of 25-pound artillery shells without dropping a single one (figure 6).⁸ However, as Norman Davies concludes, it was not true «that the bear carried a gun and fought at the front line. Such tales are pure invention. But it is correct to say that Wojtek was registered as a soldier—with name, number, regiment, and rank—that he travelled with the Anders Army for most of its long odyssey.»⁹ Davies explains the great popularity of Wojtek's story by referring to Poland's tragic history which is «sad, depressing and full of despair»: «Wojtek's heart-warming story has none of that; it makes you gasp and it makes you smile; and it helped Anders' men to bear their travels and to reach their goal. Wojtek never doubted, never wavered, never deserted, and never turned back.»¹⁰ After the Second World War, Wojtek lived in the Edinburgh Zoo in Scotland and died there in 1963. For a part of the Polish soldiers as well, Edinburgh marked the terminus of their odyssey, because they could not return to Poland as their real

home was under the rule of the communists and the Soviet Union (figure 7).

Yet the history of the Polish 2nd Corps isn't only that of the Poles and Wojtek. Among the soldiers of the 2nd Corps, there were soldiers of non-Polish ethnicities as well. In the Polish war cemeteries, we don't only find Roman Catholic graves but also Orthodox, Jewish and the graves of other faiths as well (figures 8-12). At Monte Cassino, the official consecration took place on September 1, 1945, during a multi-faith celebration conducted according to the rites of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish faiths.¹¹ The Casamassima cemetery is not divided into sectors, while there are Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish sectors in the other cemeteries. Hence, in the Polish war cemetery in Casamassima, Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish graves lie side by side with Catholic graves, which proves that, ultimately, religious differences were of little meaning to the soldiers of the 2nd Corps (figure 13).¹² The Polish war cemeteries in Italy belong to Italian State, and from the beginning, there was no voice which insisted that the victims of the battles should be buried in the separate cemeteries according to faith.¹³

Before the Second World War, Poland was indeed a state with large numbers of national minorities totaling almost one-third of the entire population. The Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*, in Polish) which covered approximately the provinces of Białystok, Wilno, Nowogródek, Polesie, Wołyń, Lwów, Stanisławów and Tarnopol were a particularly multi-national (multi-ethnic) region (figure 14). In most of these provinces, the Poles were a minority, while non-Polish ethnicities—the Ukrainians or the Belarusians—formed a

7. Norman DAVIES, *Trail of Hope: The Anders Army, an Odyssey across Three Continents*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2015, p. 464.

8. See, for example, Wiesław LASOCKI, *Wojtek spod Monte Cassino*, London, Gryf Publications, 1968; Bibi D. TAK, *Soldier Bear*, Amsterdam, Garry Paulin, 2008; Jenny ROBERTSON, *Wojtek: War Hero Bear*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2014; Aileen ORR, *Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2014; James A. CUTCHIN, *Once a Hero: The Story of Private Wojtek Bear*, Denver, Outskirts Press, 2015.

9. Norman DAVIES, *Trail of Hope...*, p. 462.

10. Norman DAVIES, *Trail of Hope...*, p. 469.

11. *Polish Second World War...*

12. *Polish Second World War...*

13. Information from President of Polacy we Włoszech, Ms. Urszula Stefanska-Andreini.



FIGURE 8. Catholic sector of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio HIYAMA, *Study on the Documentation...*, p. 538).



FIGURE 11. The single Islam grave of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio Hiyama).



FIGURE 9. Orthodox sector of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio HIYAMA, *Study on the Documentation...*, p. 540).



FIGURE 12. The single Buddhist grave of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio HIYAMA, *Study on the Documentation...*, p. 542).



FIGURE 10. Jewish sector of the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna (Figure: Yukio Hiyama).



FIGURE 13. Main gate of the Polish War Cemetery in Casamassima (Figure: *Memorial Museum of the 2nd Polish Corps in Monte Cassino*, <<https://www.fondazionemm2c.org/en/>>).

substantial majority. Ukrainians represented the largest national minority in Poland. According to the conclusions of Jerzy Tomaszewski, who analyzed the Census of 1931, Ukrainians made up 16.0% of the whole population and were living mainly in the provinces of Wołyń, Lwów, Stanisławów and Tarnopol —other minorities: Jews 9.8%, Belarusians 6.1%, the Germans 2.4%, and so on.¹⁴ In Wołyń, the Ukrainians formed nearly 70% of the population while representing more than one-half of the local population in another three provinces. On the other hand, large numbers of the Belarusians lived chiefly in the provinces of Białystok, Wilno, Nowogródek and Polesie. More than one-half of the population of Nowogródek and Polesie was made up of Belarusians. In the Eastern Borderlands, there were also sizable Jewish populations. They constituted about 8-11% of the population in each province.



FIGURE 14. Poland, 1919-1939 (Figure: Bernadotte E. SCHMITT, *Poland*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1945, p. 5).

The Eastern Borderlands were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, and the multi-national character of this region was reflected in the structure of the rank and the file of the Anders Army —later, the Polish 2nd Corps—, as it was formed by recruiting former Polish citizens of different nationalities in this region.

14. See Jerzy TOMASZEWSKI, *Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów*, Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1985, p. 35 and 78.

General Anders was thought to believe that all Polish citizens should be eligible for the military, irrespective of race, religion or politics,¹⁵ but the stances of many Poles toward respective non-ethnic Polish citizens were various and complicated. The most difficult partners for Polish soldiers were the Jews —or the Poles of Jewish descent— due to ingrained prejudice against the Jews among many in Poland and anti-Polish incidents which had occurred during the Soviet invasion —many Poles attributed them to the Jews.¹⁶ Many Poles generally bore ill will against the Ukrainians as well. In the eyes of Polish soldiers, the Ukrainians were hostile to Polish rule and pro-German. The national minority which seemed to be least disturbing was the Belarusian minority. Many Polish political and military sources point out the Poles' sense of closeness and reliability toward the Belarusians in contrast to their hostility or suspicion against the Jews and the Ukrainians. In such circumstances, the Anders Army was faced with the dilemma that although it was reluctant to accept the Jews and the Ukrainians, in view of Poland's demanding its right to the territories of the Eastern Borderlands, it was necessary to accept former Polish citizens from these areas, including the Jews and Ukrainians as well. Moreover, the situation was further complicated by the intervention of the Soviet authorities who attempted to disturb the admission of non-Polish ethnicities from the Eastern Borderlands into the Polish forces.

Irrespective of this, people of various ethnicities —including Jews and Ukrainians— enlisted in the Anders Army from its very beginning. According to General Anders' estimates, 10% of the people who evacuated from the Soviet Union under his leadership were non-Polish —mostly Jews. Although it is true that many Jews were present in the Anders Army, claims that 60% of its soldiers were Jews have proved to be false.¹⁷ It is difficult to know the exact total number of each nationality in the Anders Army. If only for reference purposes, it is possible to show statistics regarding nationalities in the Anders Army in the end of 1942 when it was located in Iraq: among 67,799 soldiers, there seemed to be 4,978 (7.3%) from non-Polish ethnicities, including 3,545 Jews —many

15. Norman DAVIES, *Trail of Hope...*, p. 88.

16. On the Polish-Jewish relation in the 2nd Corps, see Zbigniew WAWER, *Armia Generala...*, p. 325-344 (chapter XII); Stefan J. PASTUSZKA, «Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w Armii Polskiej w ZSRR w latach 1941-1942», in Ewa MAJ, Stanisław MICHAŁOWSKI and Alicja WÓJCIK (eds.), *Idee. Państwo. Ludowcy*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009, p. 190-209; Sylwester STRZYŻEWSKI, «Dezerccje Żydów z Armii Andersa w świetle dokumentów Instytutu Polskiego i Muzeum im. Władysława Sikorskiego w Londynie». *Zeszyty Naukowe* (Wrocław), vol. 3, No. 165 (2021), p. 220-238.

17. Zbigniew WAWER, *Armia Generala...*, p. 484.

of whom left the Anders Army in Palestine—, 794 Belarusians and 594 Ukrainians.¹⁸

The soldiers of the Polish 2nd Corps fought bravely in Polish uniform on the Italian front regardless of their nationality. The graves of various faiths in the Polish war cemeteries are a poignant testimony to this. Interestingly, Czesław Partacz, a Polish historian, wrote the following about the Ukrainians of the Polish 2nd Corps who joined the battles on Monte Cassino: «It is difficult to say what they thought, and how was their motivation and feeling. [...] Was their oath of faithfulness for the Polish Republic honest? Surely, yes», because all the Ukrainians did not belong to anti-Polish nationalist groups and «among them there were also straightforward people who knew what is honor, what an oath means, what is honesty and loyalty».¹⁹

Nevertheless, the many stories or episodes regarding the loyalty and devotion of the Belarusian soldiers are much better known than those regarding other national minorities. A Polish officer who witnessed their bravery in the battle of Monte Cassino even called the Belarusians *model soldiers*. Jerzy Grzybowski, a Belarusian specialist of military history who researched the Orthodox graves at Monte Cassino and the birthplaces of the killed soldiers from the Eastern Borderlands, concludes that at least 49 of 1,099 soldiers who fell in the battle of Monte Cassino were Belarusian.²⁰

18. Czesław PARTACZ, *Kwestia Ukraińska w polityce Polskiego Rządu na Uchodźstwie i jego ekspozytur w kraju 1939-1945*, Koszalin, Politechnika Koszalińska, 2001, p. 216.

19. Czesław PARTACZ, *Kwestia Ukraińska...*, p. 221-222. On the Ukrainians in the Anders Army, also see Taras PYLYPOVYCH, «Przyczyny obecności Ukraińców w Armii Polskiej w ZSRR (1941-1942), Armii Polskiej na Wschodzie i 2 Korpusie we Włoszech», *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* (Łódź), vol. 13, No. 1 (2014), p. 243-257.

20. Grzybowski, however, gave the number of the killed soldiers as 924 and of missing as 94. Jerzy GRZYBOWSKI, *Białorusini w polskich regularnych formacjach wojskowych w latach 1918-1945*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2006, p. 272-273.

Among the Poles, there is a strong opinion that the Belarusians had been historically very favorably inclined towards the Poles. However, when we look at the situation of the Belarusians in inter-war Poland, it seems difficult to agree with this opinion which is still dominant in Poland. While researching the Belarusians in the inter-war period, the author of this paper was struck by the bad behavior of the Polish local administrations, the police and the Polish inhabitants and colonists who settled in the Eastern Borderlands.²¹ The policy of the Polish government toward the Belarusians was harsh and oppressive as well. While most of the Belarusians were peasants who lived in the most underdeveloped lands in Poland, the authorities all the more strictly enforced the payment of taxes and arrears, and taxes were raised ruthlessly—in the words of a Belarusian deputy's speech in the Polish Parliament— «as if the very skin of the peasant is being flayed». In these social and economic conditions, the Belarusians came to be hostile to the Poles. How could they be favorable to their ruler?

Notwithstanding the sad history of the two nations in the inter-war period, when a Pole is asked about the relations between Poles and Belarusians, he often refers to the loyalty and devotion the Belarusians showed in the battle of Monte Cassino. Indeed, Monte Cassino is one of the most important national memories in Poland. But we must consider that it functions to confirm and strengthen Poles' stereotype about the Belarusians' favorable attitudes toward the Poles. The glorious history of the Polish 2nd Corps in Italy is factually accompanied by the various stories, many of which are little known to us, regarding the complicated relations between the Poles and the national minorities in Poland.

21. See Michihiro YASUI, «Hromada's Day in the Polish Sejm (Feb. 4, 1927). The Belarusian national movement under the early Sanacja Regime», in *History of Belarus in XX Century: In Memory of the Professor Ivan Koukel*, Grodno, Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno, 2017, p. 67-92.