

Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom

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Władysław Albert Anders

(1892-1970)

Major General of the Polish Armed Forces, commander of the Polish Army in the USSR and the Polish 2nd Corps.
Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces.

Anders graduated from middle school and high school in Warsaw. He began his military career by volunteering for compulsory military service in Tsarist Russia. In the years 1911-1914 he studied mechanics at Riga Technical University, he was an active member of the Arkonia student fraternity and the semi-underground Polish organization Sokół.

During World War I, he served in the 3rd Novorossiysk Regiment in Kaunas, and then in the 7th Rifle Division of the Tsarist Army. After the February Revolution and the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, he joined the forming Polish Army in Bobruisk. Anders joined the 1st Polish Corps commanded by General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki in September 1917, years later recalling: „the moment when I joined the 1st Krechowicki Ulan Regiment and could wear the Polish Eagle was particularly joyful”. He became a squadron commander. Then he was the chief of staff in the 1st Rifle Division of the 1st Polish Corps in the East. After the Corps was disarmed by the Germans in May 1918, he returned to Poland and joined the Polish Army.

At the beginning of 1919, Anders took part in the Greater Poland Uprising, and then, commanding the 1st Greater Poland Uhlans, he fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war, making himself known as an excellent commander. He was badly injured in the leg during the fights. On 22 April 1921, Marshal Józef Piłsudski decorated Władysław Anders with the Order of Virtuti Militari for valour demonstrated during the war with the Bolsheviks.

After the end of combat, he was sent to France for training. After completing it, he returned to Poland and served as a staff officer. After the May Coup he commanded large cavalry units of the Polish Army.

After 1 September 1939, General Anders' command skills, courage and character were put to the test. He fought in the „Modlin” Army, protecting the border with East Prussia, and then in the „Warsaw” Army in the region of Płock and Warsaw,

taking part in fierce clashes against the Germans near Mińsk Mazowiecki and Tomaszów Lubelski. After the Soviet aggression, Anders and his soldiers found themselves between the armies of both invaders, and were forced to retreat towards the Hungarian border. Wounded twice, the General was taken prisoner by the Soviets on 29 September near Lviv, to be detained in the worst of their prisons - Brygidki in Lviv, and then Butyrki and Lubyanka in Moscow. In nearly two years of incarceration, he was brutally interrogated, beaten, starved, and repeatedly pressed to join the Red Army.

Anders was released on 4 August 1941, and, following the Sikorski-Mayski agreement, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief General Władysław Sikorski gave him the task of creating and commanding the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR. Despite health problems, he immediately began gathering the troops: on 22 August 1941, he issued Order No. 1, calling on „all able-bodied Polish citizens to fulfill their duty to their country and to join the banner of the White Eagle.”

Thanks to his actions, he created regular units of the Polish Army from among people released from prisons and labor camps and civilians deported to Siberia. He opposed engaging some forces on the Eastern Front and decided to evacuate Polish troops as well as civilians to the Middle East. Gen. Anders made sure that the Polish civilians could leave the „inhuman land” with the army. In two evacuations between March and November 1942, over 120,000 people - 78,500 soldiers and 37,000 non-combatants, including ca. 18,000 children - departed for Iraq. The so-called „army of hope” crossed three continents.

After reorganization, resupply and training in Iraq and Palestine, units of the 2nd Polish Corps were formed, which took part in the Italian campaign, distinguishing themselves during the battles for Monte Cassino, liberation of Ancona and Bologna. In February 1945 Anders was entrusted with the duties of Commander-in-Chief. He served in that capacity until May 27 of that year.

After the war, he remained in Great Britain and participated in the political life of the Polish diaspora. He served, among other positions, as the General Inspector of the Armed Forces and the Commander-in-Chief, president of the Polish Educational Society and chairman of the Polish Cultural Foundation. The Communists, however, considered him one of their greatest enemies. On 26 September 1946, the Communist Provisional Government of National Unity deprived Anders of his citizenship and his rank.

He remained the undisputed authority for his subordinates, a symbol of patriotism and an uncompromising attitude towards communism.

He died in London on 12 May 1970. He was buried, in accordance with his wishes, amongst his fallen soldiers from the 2nd Polish Corps at the Polish War Cemetery at Monte Cassino in Italy.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)



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