

Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom

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EDINBURGH

EDINBURGH IS THE HISTORIC CAPITAL OF SCOTLAND. IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT URBAN CENTRES IN BRITAIN. ALTHOUGH GLASGOW (WITH ITS THRIVING INDUSTRIAL PARK AND LEAPFROGGING POPULATION), LOCATED FAIRLY CLOSE, SIGNIFICANTLY OVERSHADOWED IT IN THE RACE TO BECOME THE REGION'S MOST IMPORTANT CITY IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES, EDINBURGH REMAINED A KEY ADMINISTRATIVE AND SCIENTIFIC CENTRE.

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Places

Edinburgh is the historic capital of Scotland. It was one of the most important urban centres in Britain. Although Glasgow (with its thriving industrial park and leapfrogging population), located fairly close, significantly overshadowed it in the race to become the region's most important city in the 19th and 20th centuries, Edinburgh remained a key administrative and scientific centre.

Following the devastating defeat of the Allies during the French campaign, the British Isles faced a serious threat of armed invasion for the first time since Napoleonic times. The German plans, ultimately thwarted only during the long Battle of Britain, were treated with utmost seriousness by the British command and political elite. Preparing to repel the enemy forces was the most important task for a significant proportion of those involved in the military effort. Fortifications were being built, local self-defence units were being formed, and there were even a series of propaganda posters in storage intended for a poster campaign in the event of a German landing.

At the same time, British politicians were keen to demonstrate to the public that (even despite a series of defeats on the Continent) they were still a key member of the international coalition, rather than a lonely stronghold of resistance against the Nazi onslaught. Soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West were to play a key role in achieving both of these goals.

Scotland was designated as a deployment site for Polish land troops relatively quickly. Soldiers were sent to camps located in the towns of Douglas, Crawford and Biggar - a few dozen kilometres away from Edinburgh. Not too far from the last one, a centre for the organisation of Polish crews for armoured trains in the UK was also established, and Barony Castle, a 16th-century mansion located nearby the town itself, became the headquarters of a military school for those outside Poland.

Edinburgh Castle was also the headquarters of the Scottish Command, which was the reporting unit of the Polish I Corps when they were in England. Due to administrative and supply needs, numerous Polish servicemen remained there even after the war-related activity moved back to mainland Europe. Edinburgh thus became a natural centre of Polish emigration. The Edinburgh Zoo became home to Wojtek, a famous soldier bear. Gen. Stanisław Maczek also spent the last decades of his life in Edinburgh. The strength of Polish emigration and its links with the Scottish capital is evidenced by the fact that, as late as 2021, one of the Polish Armed Forces veterans and a participant in the Battle of Monte Cassino, Ludwik Jaszczur, was still running his own purse-making business in the city.

Despite all this, it is only in recent years that the Polish Armed Forces were permanently commemorated in the urban space. The only exception was a plaque erected in 1997 in memory of Gen. Maczek. This started to change in 2014, when a statue of Wojtek the Bear was unveiled in Princess Street Gardens. Just four years later, the long-standing campaign to erect a street memorial to General Maczek was successful.

ATHENS

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