

## Sicily and Italy

At the Casablanca conference in January 1943, the British and Americans disagreed on their strategy for Italy. The British plan was to keep the Germans fighting hard in the Mediterranean. They proposed an invasion of Sicily as a stepping stone towards the Italian mainland, hoping to draw Axis forces into a major campaign and away from the planned offensive across the channel. The Americans were strongly opposed, fearing the creation of a vacuum in Italy in which the resources of the cross-channel invasion would be dissipated. The Americans also contended that any surplus resource should be directed against Japan. After much debate the Americans grudgingly agreed that if some sort of European invasion was not staged in 1943 then the Russians might come to terms with the Germans, as they had in 1939. They therefore agreed to the invasion of Sicily with no far reaching plans beyond that. It was only with the fall of Mussolini, while the Sicilian invasion was in progress, that the argument for a full scale offensive against the mainland became overwhelming.

The operation was code named Husky and was the largest seaborne invasion mounted by the Allies in the Second World War. On July 10th 160,000 American and British troops, supported by 600 tanks and 4,000 aircraft, began landing at several points on the south coast of the island. Airborne units assigned to key bridges played a vital role in delaying German counter attacks, and for the most part complete surprise was achieved. However stubborn German resistance prevented the 8th Army from taking the Catania plain as planned, and it was left to the Americans under General Patton to sweep across the island to Palermo and then, in a classic armoured thrust, reach Messina before Montgomery. After several days of severe fighting, and two further outflanking seaborne assaults by American troops, German resistance began to crumble and by mid-August the Germans were withdrawing their forces to the mainland. By August 17th the conquest of Sicily was complete.

Until the battles of El Alamein and Stalingrad, most Italians had thought that their country would emerge from the war with a victory, or at least with an honourable peace. But after these defeats discontent with Mussolini set in and many felt the need for a change. Anti-Fascist groups began to appear and open demonstrations against the war started to emerge. Members of the

Italian government favoured an armistice with the Allies and implored Mussolini to propose this to Hitler. Realising that Mussolini would never have the courage to stand up to Hitler, members of the government now began to plan his forcible removal. On July 5th Mussolini was summoned to meet the deposed king, Victor Emmanuel, and following an audience was promptly arrested; his place as head of government was taken by Marshall Badoglio. The Badoglio government lasted just six weeks until it was supplanted by a German military regime. When Badoglio assumed power the invasion of Sicily was well under way and it was also clear that something similar would happen to the mainland. The Badoglio government therefore wanted peace with the Allies, as it was now clear that they would finally win the war. However that was not the Germans' plan; they intended to stay in Italy as long as they could, thereby keeping the war as far from their own frontiers as possible.

Hitler, being aware that the Badoglio government would most likely enter into peace negotiations with the Allies, began pouring divisions into Italy through the Alpine passes on the pretext of helping the Italians against the anticipated Allied invasion. Within a week seven new divisions had entered the country. Under severe diplomatic pressure from the Allies an armistice was signed and landings commenced at Salerno. Meanwhile Mussolini had been spirited away, to an isolated hotel on a mountain plateau. Hitler, anxious that his fellow dictator should not suffer the indignity of imprisonment, or worse, at the hands of his own countrymen, arranged a rescue attempt by paratroops commanded by the daring Otto Skorzeny. On the afternoon of September 12th gliders carrying German shock troops landed at Mussolini's retreat and freed him, before flying him off the mountain in a Storch spotter plane. He was then transferred to a larger aircraft and on to safety in Vienna.

When the Allies landed in Salerno they had hoped for an easy task. They assumed the Italians were not going to fight, and the Germans would not transfer sufficient troops to really impede a drive to the north. Despite early successes the Anglo/American armies faced their most difficult campaign to date. The big question was would the Germans fight to repel the landings in the south or retire to the north? In the event, German opposition and the terrain proved much tougher than anticipated and it wasn't until October 1st that the Allies entered Naples, and a week later were stopped altogether on

the German defence line at the Volturno river. It quickly became clear that there was not going to be a rapid drive to the north. The German defence of central Italy under the command of Field Marshal Kesselring proved so effective that the prospect of marching into Rome in 1943 was no longer a reality.

A new offensive began in late 1943 when the Allies resumed their drive on Rome, but unfortunately this attack met with the same opposition as those of October and November. German resistance now centred on the Gustav line, anchored on Monte Cassino, and every attack was repulsed to the point where Allied units became depleted and exhausted. In addition, the Combined Chiefs of Staff directed the Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower to transfer troops and landing craft to the United Kingdom for the forthcoming cross channel invasion. This meant that only small and shallow end runs would now be possible on the Italian front.

However, shortly after the end of the year, a final decision was made to execute a landing at Anzio behind the Gustav line, in an attempt to outflank the Germans and break the stalemate.

Operation Shingle, as it was known, began on January 22nd when Allied troops landed at Anzio, 33 miles south of Rome. Although initially the landings were unopposed, fatally slow advances meant that the Germans were able to quickly build up their forces and a stalemate set in. This led to the famous outburst from Winston Churchill to the effect that "I had hoped to hurl a wildcat on the shores of Anzio; instead I got a stranded whale". Meanwhile at Monte Cassino a three month running battle had convinced the Allies that the key objective, the monastery, must be outflanked rather than overwhelmed. On the morning of March 15th a force of 775 bombers and 200 fighters attacked the monastery, and this was followed up by yet another assault by ground troops. Despite all these efforts it was not until May 17th that the Germans finally withdrew, and eventually on May 25th a link up was achieved with the Anzio beach head.

May 31st saw the Allies begin to break through the last defences south of Rome and on June 4th troops at last entered the city. Thus Rome became the first Axis capital to fall in to Allied hands. The sacrifices of the Allies at Anzio

and Cassino might have been justified, if they had gone on to capture the Balkans to shield those nations from the advance of communist rule. But despite Churchill's insistence, Allied politicians decided otherwise and left Stalin with a free hand in the Balkans. Also, in the spring of 1944, some of the best divisions in Italy were taken away to take part in the invasion of Southern France, an operation much advocated by Stalin, but which led nowhere except to keep Western Powers away from the Balkans.