

The Battle for Rome

Under the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini Italy had been one of the Axis Powers, siding with Nazi Germany. After the Allies removed the Axis Powers from North Africa they finally agreed on an Italian campaign that would remove the Mediterranean from enemy control but not demand an extensive supply of troops and machinery, which would be needed for the landings in Western Europe. In attacking Italy the Allies hoped to remove it from the war, giving them control of the Mediterranean and secure lines of communication with Egypt, the Far East, the Middle East and India.

The battle for Italy began with Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily on July 10th 1943. By August 17th the last Italian and German troops had left the island leaving it under Allied control. This operation plus the Allied bombing of Rome contributed to Mussolini's removal from power. On July 25th 1943 he was placed under arrest on the orders of King Emmanuel III, king of Italy. The new Italian government led by Marshall Pietro Badoglio secretly entered into surrender negotiations with the Allies finally agreeing to an armistice on October 13th 1943. Italy then declared war on Nazi Germany.

In the meantime Mussolini was rescued from captivity by German paratroopers and Waffen SS commandos. After a hastily arranged meeting with Hitler Mussolini was put in charge of a puppet government in northern Italy, the Italian Social Republic centred on Milan. The Germans decided to invade the rest of Italy attempting to thwart any Allied attempts at invasion. Hitler also understood the strategic importance of Italian airfields in trying to maintain some control of the Mediterranean. The German invading forces occupied Rome by September 1943.

The Allies also viewed Rome as being of great strategic importance, primarily because of its airfields, extensive road network and rail links. Both Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower saw the liberation of Rome as significant in regaining a stronghold in Europe. It would prove to be the first Axis Power capital to be captured, and the city's status as an ancient city of history and culture would be important to the Allies in propaganda terms. But to liberate it by causing widespread destruction

would damage their reputation. Therefore it would be preferable to use minimal force in capturing the city.

In response to damage in the city from Allied bombing, when the Germans entered Rome the Nazis declared Rome an Open City in May 1944, stating they would not offer resistance to any invading Allied forces, but instead retreat to positions north of the city. It was therefore possible that Rome could be taken without widespread damage.

Under German occupation Roman citizens experienced better living conditions than those endured by many people under Nazi domination. The city's water supply was still intact and there was still an electricity supply most of the time. In fact living conditions were still so good in Rome that even with knowledge of the invading Germans very few citizens decided to leave the city. In fact the city's population actually increased as refugees flocked to the city from the countryside. This caused a major shortage of food.

On September 9th 1943, bolstered by success in liberating Sicily, the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery landed on the Italian mainland in Operation Slapstick on the east coast at Taranto. Meanwhile the Americans landed on the west coast at Salerno, on exactly the same day that the new Italian government had agreed surrender conditions with the Allies. So only the German occupiers would be fighting the Allies in Italy. The British were able to advance up the east coast of Italy relatively easily as the Germans had concentrated their forces on a series of defensive lines south of Rome; however the Americans encountered more resistance. Two of the defensive lines set up by the Germans, notably the Volturno and the Barbara, were designed to delay the Allied advance northwards, to buy time so that a more formidable defensive line could be established known as the Winter Line. It was to prove a major obstacle to the Allies by the end of 1943. It halted the American Fifth Army advance up the west coast considerably, an advance made worse by the onset of poor weather conditions.

Although General Montgomery did partially penetrate the defences of the Winter Line the severe winter weather brought the advance to a standstill. The Americans and British then agreed that the best way to make a breakthrough for Rome was on the western front. To facilitate

this sea landings of extra troops were made at Anzio during Operation Shingle, with a planned thrust inland to cut off the German defences and so destabilise the overall German defensive line.

Between January and May 1944 the Allies launched four offensives on a front 20 miles in length between the western seaboard and Monte Cassino and in doing so hoped to capture the German Tenth Army as it retreated northwards. On May 11th the British Eighth Army finally broke through the Gustav Line (part of the Winter Line) causing German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring to abandon the Gustav Line and retreat north. This created an opportunity for the Americans led by General Clark to capture the retreating German Tenth Army. However he ignored the orders of General Alexander to do this, instead ordering his troops to march upon Rome. Consequently the German Tenth Army was able to escape north and regroup.

The American forces took possession of Rome on June 4th 1944. General Clark was initially hailed as a hero in the USA but subsequent assessments of his actions have become more critical. It is now thought that by allowing the German Tenth Army to escape capture Clark may have been responsible for doubling the number of Allied troop casualties.

The Italian campaign did not go as smoothly as the Allies had hoped. They believed that with the new Italian government on their side, and intelligence which suggested Hitler did not think southern Italy was strategically important, their liberation of the country would use relatively few men and resources. Hitler on the other hand, advised by Field Marshall Kesselring, was convinced that the natural terrain of Italy including the Appenine hills would provide a barrier to a rapid advance by the Allies. Moreover he thought that every Italian airfield taken by the Allies would make it progressively easier for them to inflict bombing raids on Germany, and more importantly to act as a springboard for an invasion of the Balkans with its supplies of oil, bauxite and copper vital to the German economy.

The liberation of Rome was welcomed by its citizens who came out on to the streets to welcome the Allies. Although there had been some German resistance to the Allied advance on the outskirts of the city, Nazi troops were ordered to evacuate the city centre and withdraw further

north in order to regroup. The city was therefore left relatively undamaged. However reports soon came in describing atrocities committed by both the German occupying force and Italian fascists not under the control of the new Italian government. Indeed civil strife in Italy continued with partisan groups representing communists as well as fascists committing terrorist acts in a period known as the Italian Civil War, which persisted right through until the end of the war in May 1945, when the Allies had completely overrun the Germans in the north of the country.