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ITALY AND THE BALKANS

'Happy Austria,' the seventeenth-century tag went. 'Others wage war, you wage weddings.' The Habsburgs did indeed have a habit of marrying into property, and this eventually brought them the greatest landholdings of any monarchy in Europe. Italy, parts of which remained in Habsburg possession until 1918, was Austria's antithesis – unlucky in both love and war. Its north and south, unified only in 1866 under the House of Savoy, never achieved a proper marriage; its wars for independence from the Habsburgs in the mid-nineteenth century, and to win itself colonies in Africa later, turned out at best unvictorious, at most inglorious. The Italian expeditionary force which met the Ethiopians at Adowa in 1896 was one of the few European armies to suffer defeat at the hands of indigenous forces throughout the course of the imperial conquest of the continent; while its avenging of Adowa in the successful campaign against the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1936 brought it international odium.

No war cost Italy more than the First World War, its experience of which explains almost everything about its domestic and international conduct in the years that followed. Although their efforts were disparaged, the Italians fought with tenacity and courage against the Austrians on the most difficult of all fronts contested by the Allies between 1914 and 1918. Beginning in May 1915, when Italy threw in its lot with Britain, France and Russia, the Italians mounted eleven successive offensives into the Julian Alps, winning little ground but suffering heavy casualties. Surprised in a twelfth battle in November 1917 by a German intervention force, in which the young Rommel was one of the most enterprising junior officers, the Italian army was thrown back into the plain of Venice but recovered enough by late 1918 to go over to the attack and end the war with its self-esteem restored.

There was the rub. Italy had won its place among the victors; but, although 600,000 young Italians had given their lives to the Allied cause, neither Britain nor France would allow Italy the spoils it felt it had won. France and Britain divided between themselves

Germany's colonies and Turkey's Arabian dominions, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan. All Italy got was a small slice of former Austrian territory and a foothold in the Near East which proved untenable. Moreover, when the United States and Britain decided in 1921 to fix treaty limits on the size of fleet which the Allied powers were to be allowed to operate, Italy was obliged to accept constraints which effectively set its naval strength at the same level as the Royal Navy's in the Mediterranean – a sea in which it reasonably felt it had claims to be predominant.

The disparity between Italy's entitlement, as Italians perceived it, and her post-war inheritance lay at the root of the fascist revolution which overwhelmed established order in the kingdom in 1922. Mussolini's appeal to the Italian working and lower-middle class was only partly economic; it was equally that of a veteran to veterans. At a time of recession, unemployment and financial turmoil, he not only offered work and security of savings but also promised honour to ex-servicemen and the territorial recompense to the nation that it had not received at the peace conference. The transformation of Libya, annexed from Turkey during the Balkan wars of 1912–13, into an overseas 'empire' was followed by the conquest of Abyssinia in 1936 and the annexation of Albania in 1939. Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War was part and parcel of Mussolini's assurance to Italians that their country would cut a figure on the world stage; and that was ultimately the motivation also for his decision to enter the Second World War on the German side in June 1940. His efforts to build an alliance centred on Austria, as an alternative to the Italo-German Axis, had collapsed when Austria was incorporated into the Reich by the *Anschluss* of 1938, which automatically devalued his bilateral treaties with Hungary and Yugoslavia. The *Anschluss* determined that Mussolini should become Hitler's partner in the Second World War.

Circumstances dictated, however, that Italy should never be an equal partner, hard though Mussolini strove to make himself one. It was not only that Italy's economy could support only one-tenth of the military expenditure met by Germany (Italy \$746 million, Germany \$7415 million in 1938); it was also that Italy's military strength had declined absolutely during the inter-war period, so that it was less a match for Britain and France in 1940 (as long as the war with France lasted) than it had been for Austria in 1915. Italian divisions were weaker in infantry and artillery than twenty-five years earlier, partly because numbers were diverted, entirely for Mussolini's political conceit, into the Fascist Party's dubiously valuable Blackshirt formations. Italian manpower had continued to decline through the surge of emigration to the United States. Italian equipment, though elegant and brilliantly engineered, was produced by artisan methods which could not match the output of British – and eventually American – factories working to volume demands. The Italian services also suffered from the disadvantage of having been driven by Mussolini's urge to national aggrandisement into rearming too early. Italian tanks and aircraft were a whole generation outdated by their British equivalents; when confronted by American equipment, which reached the British in 1942, they appeared antediluvian.

There was a final and ultimately disabling impediment to Italy's effective commitment to war on Germany's side: the Italians harboured little or no hostility towards the enemies Hitler had chosen for them. Mild Francophobia may be an Italian sentiment; but the Italian upper class is notably Anglophile, while Italy's peasants and artisans have high regard for the United States, whose known hostility to Nazism influenced the national outlook from the start – and decisively so after the American entry into the war. Consequently it was a half-hearted Italian army which crossed swords with the British in East Africa and the Western Desert in 1940–1. Its confidence had not been improved by its poor showing against the Greeks in October–November 1940. It was severely shaken by Wavell's counter-offensive in December and, despite the arrival of the Afrikakorps to its assistance in February 1941, it never really recovered. Brilliant though Rommel was as a general, and notably *simpatico* though the ordinary Italian soldiers found him, their commanders could not but remember that the origins of his reputation lay in his exploits at Caporetto in November 1917, when he had captured several thousand Italians at the head of 200 Württemberg mountaineers.

By the end of the campaign in Africa in May 1943, the total number of Italians who had become prisoners of the Allies – in East Africa in 1941, in Libya in 1941–2 and in Tunisia in 1943 – exceeded 350,000, more than the number of those who had garrisoned Mussolini's African empire at the start of the war. Even before the Tunisian débâcle, the Italian army, which Mussolini had been planning the year before to raise to a strength of ninety divisions, had equipment for only thirty-one. The loss of so many of the best divisions in Africa, so soon after the catastrophe suffered by the Italian Eighth Army (220,000 strong) at Stalingrad, reduced it to a shadow; and these twin crises drove the Italian high command to examine the wisdom of continuing to lend Mussolini and the fascist regime its support. Italy's generals were disproportionately drawn from the northern society of Savoy-Piedmont, seat of the royal house where their loyalty ultimately lay. They had acquiesced in fascism as long as it favoured the monarchy's and the army's interests. Once it became clear that it was failing to do so, they began to reconsider their position. During the summer of 1943, and particularly as Italian cities began to feel the weight of Allied air attack, they were driven into plotting Mussolini's removal. The trigger to action was the appearance of Allied landing forces on the southern coast of Sicily on 9–10 July 1943.

The decision to invade Sicily after the expulsion of the Axis from Tunisia had not been taken without disagreement between the British and Americans. To the Americans, Husky, as the operation was to be known, risked diverting forces from and even setting back the Second Front. To the British it seemed to promise highly desirable if intangible benefits: the domination of the central Mediterranean, from which threats could be levelled at the 'soft underbelly' of the Axis in southern France and the Balkans; the humiliation of Mussolini, perhaps leading to his downfall; the acquisition of a stepping-stone towards the location of the invasion of Italy itself, if that subsequently proved easy,

desirable or necessary. The British eventually had their way, at the Trident conference in Washington in May 1943, but then only because the changing circumstances persuaded the Americans that a Second Front could not be opened that year. In the event, the invasion took Hitler even more by surprise than Mussolini – or his Italian enemies. Hitler harboured no illusions about the sympathies of the Italian ruling class. On 14 May he had told his generals:

In Italy we can rely only on the Duce. There are strong fears that he may be got rid of or neutralised in some way. The royal family, all leading members of the officer corps, the clergy, the Jews [still at liberty; for all Mussolini's faults he was not anti-Semitic] and broad sectors of the civil service are hostile or negative towards us. . . . The broad masses are apathetic and lacking in leadership. The Duce is now marshalling his fascist guard about him. But the real power is in the hands of others. Moreover he is uncertain of himself in military affairs and has to rely on his hostile or incompetent generals as is evident from the incomprehensible reply – at least coming from the Duce – turning down or evading [my] offer of troops.

Hitler had just offered Mussolini five German divisions, to join the four re-formed in Sicily and southern Italy from the rear parties of those lost in Tunisia, but his offer had been refused. As a precaution, plans had been prepared for the occupation of Italy (Operation Alarich, so named after the fifth-century Teutonic conqueror of Rome). However, although Mussolini warned that he expected the Allied army released by its victory in Tunisia to attack Sicily, Hitler insisted that the island was too heavily defended to be taken easily and that the Anglo-American descent would fall on Sardinia, Corsica or the Greek Peloponnese. The spectre of a landing in Greece aroused Hitler's worst forebodings; it threatened not only the opening of a 'third front' in the rear of the *Ostheer* but also the interruption of supply of Germany's most vital raw materials, bauxite, copper and chrome from the Balkans and, most precious of all, oil from Romania's wells at Ploesti.

— Operation Husky —

A remarkable Allied deception plan involving the planting of a corpse bearing fabricated top-secret papers had further helped to convince Hitler that any enemy invasion fleet detected in the Mediterranean would be heading for Greece, Corsica or Sardinia, not Italy. Even when an earthquake bombardment of Sicily's offshore island, Pantelleria, forced its commander to capitulate to the Allies on 11 June, he still refused to consider the possibility of an invasion of Italy. Hitler, moreover, was distracted by events elsewhere – by the intensification of the combined bomber offensive against the Reich, by the worsening of the German situation in the Battle of the Atlantic and by last-minute decisions over the launching of the Kursk offensive (Operation Citadel) in Russia. He had also just changed

headquarters again. Since March, after a prolonged sojourn at his Werwolf headquarters in the Ukraine, he had been at his holiday house, the Berghof in Berchtesgaden. He left there only at the end of June for his gloomy forest retreat, Wolfschanze at Rastenburg in East Prussia, and was re-established there a bare four days before Citadel began on 5 July. Since it was on the outcome of Citadel, designed to destroy the Red Army's offensive potential, that the course of the war on the Eastern Front in 1943 depended, it was understandable that his attention should have been divided at the moment when Patton's and Montgomery's divisions began their descent west and east of Cape Passero on 9 July.

The Allies had brought eight seaborne and two airborne divisions to the assault – an armada which greatly exceeded not only OKW's forecast of their amphibious capability but also the Axis force deployed on the island. Alfredo Guzzoni, the Italian general in overall command, disposed of twelve divisions, but of these six were static Italian divisions of negligible worth; four other Italian divisions, though capable of manoeuvre, were no match for the Allies; only the 15th Panzergrenadier and the newly raised Hermann Goering Panzer Division (the elite of the Luftwaffe's ground troops) were first class. Despite the disparity in strength and the surprise the invaders achieved, however, Operation Husky, as the Sicily landing was codenamed, went less smoothly than planned. The Allied airborne forces, drawn from the US 82nd and British 1st Airborne Divisions, suffered enormous casualties when inexperienced pilots dropped them into the sea and nervous anti-aircraft gunners shot down their aircraft. A key operation by British paratroopers to seize the Primosole bridge south of Mount Etna on the fourth day of the invasion proved particularly costly when the German 1st Parachute Division counter-attacked.

However, the seaborne landings mounted against Italian 'coast' units were uniformly successful, and some of the 'defenders' even helped unload the invaders' landing craft. On 15 July Major-General Sir Harold Alexander, Patton's and Montgomery's superior, was able to issue a directive for the final elimination of Axis forces on the island. While Patton occupied the western half, Montgomery was to advance each side of Mount Etna and secure Messina at the north-eastern tip, thus cutting off the Axis garrison's line of retreat into the toe of Italy. In the event, Patton made rapid progress against light resistance, but Montgomery, opposed by the Hermann Goering Division, found it impossible to pass east of Mount Etna on the short route to Messina and was forced to redeploy his divisions to pass to the west. On 20 July Alexander accordingly ordered Patton to delay his assault on Palermo and Trapani and instead turn eastward to drive along the coast road to Messina. Hitler, who had sent a German liaison officer, Frido von Senger und Etterlin, to oversee Guzzoni's conduct of the battle, and five German divisions as reinforcements to the Italian army, now ordered two of them, the 1st Parachute and the 29th Panzergrenadier, into Sicily to stiffen the defence.

Confronted by these forces, the Allied advance slowed. It was not until 2 August that Patton and Montgomery had formed a line running south-east and north-west between Mount Etna and the north coast of the island. Even then they moved forward only by

using seaborne forces in a series of amphibious hooks (8, 11, 15 and 16 August) to unseat the enemy from his strong defensive positions. Nevertheless, Guzzoni had accepted as early as 3 August that his situation was ultimately indefensible and had begun to evacuate his Italian units across the Straits of Messina. The Germans began to evacuate on 11 August; sailing at night, they largely evaded Allied air attack and were even able to save a large portion of their equipment (9800 vehicles). The Allies made a triumphal entry into Messina on 17 August; but the enemy had escaped.

Although Operation Husky failed to inflict much damage on the enemy's troops, it had indeed secured the Allied line of communications through the Mediterranean to the Middle East; but, since the wars there and in North Africa were now over, that was a hollow achievement. It had not by any visible sign brought Turkey nearer to joining the Allies; it had not diverted German divisions from Russia, since all those sent (after 24 July) to Italy, the 16th and 26th Panzer, 3rd and 29th Panzergrenadier and 1st Parachute Divisions, had come from the west. It remained to be seen whether it would exert sufficient pressure on the anti-fascist forces in Italy to bring about a reversal of alliances.

The Americans, as represented by General George Marshall, the chief of staff, in any case doubted the value of a reversal of alliances. As always they held to the view that direct assault into north-west Europe was the only quick and certain means of toppling Hitler. They had been deflected from this position by practicalities in 1942 but had never been converted to it by argument. They suspected (in retrospect, rightly so) the logic of Churchill's commitment to a 'peripheral' strategy against what he called the 'soft underbelly' of Hitler's Europe, better seen as its dewlap. Hitler valued Italy because its loss would be a blow to his prestige and because it offered flank protection to the Balkans, where he had genuinely vital economic and strategic interests. However, if he had been able to eavesdrop on General Marshall's assessment of Italy as a secondary front where operations would 'create a vacuum into which it is essential to pour more and more means', he would have wholeheartedly agreed.

A reversal of alliances was nevertheless at hand. The arrival of the Allies in Sicily and the incontrovertible evidence of how limply the Italian forces in the island had opposed them now persuaded Italy's ruling class that it must change sides. Churchill, in conference with Roosevelt at Quebec (Quadrant, 14–23 August), remarked when he heard the first news of approaches from Mussolini's enemies: 'Badoglio [the senior Italian general] admits he is going to double-cross someone . . . it is . . . likely that Hitler will be the one to be tricked.' Hitler himself had formed the same impression on 19 July. While the battles of Sicily and Kursk were both in progress, he had made the long flight to Italy to see his fellow dictator and assure him of his support, in a form of words intended to disguise his intention of neutralising the Italian army and seizing the defensible portion of the peninsula with his own troops at the first sign of treachery. On 25 July a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council requested Mussolini's resignation as Prime Minister. When he meekly obeyed a summons to the royal palace by the king, he was arrested and

imprisoned. King Victor Emmanuel assumed direct command of the armed forces and Marshal Pietro Badoglio became Prime Minister.

The new government publicly announced that it would remain in the war on Hitler's side but secretly entered immediately into direct negotiations with the Allies. The first meeting took place in Sicily on 5 August, the day before Raffaele Guariglia, the new Italian Foreign Minister, gave the German ambassador his word of honour that Italy was not negotiating with the Allies. Eisenhower was soon afterwards empowered by Roosevelt and Churchill to conclude an armistice, but on terms much harsher than Badoglio expected. While the Italians quibbled, preparation for a landing on the mainland went forward. The Italians hoped that the Allies would land north of Rome and seize the capital by parachute landing, thus forestalling the moves they guessed Hitler had in train to occupy the peninsula himself. Eventually, on 31 August, they were presented with an ultimatum: either to accept the terms, which were in effect unconditional – as Churchill on 28 July had told the House of Commons they would be – or to suffer the consequences, which meant German occupation. On 3 September the Italians signed, believing that they were being given time to prepare themselves against the German intervention they knew must follow as soon as news of the armistice became public. Only five days later, however, on 8 September, Eisenhower made the announcement, just a few hours before his troops began landing south of Naples at Salerno.

— Hitler's countermeasures —

The Salerno landing (Operation Avalanche) was not the first by the Allies on the Italian mainland. On 3 September Montgomery's Eighth Army had crossed the Straits of Messina to take Reggio Calabria as a preliminary to the occupation of the toe of Italy. Hitler had nevertheless decided to discount this move as unimportant, a view shared by Montgomery, who was disgruntled at being shunted into a secondary role. The Salerno landing, by contrast, stirred Hitler to order Operation Alarich to begin. Although he failed to prevent the sailing of the Italian fleet to Malta as required by the armistice terms, the Luftwaffe did succeed in sinking the battleship *Roma* en route by release of one of its new weapons, a guided glider bomb. In almost every other respect, Operation Alarich (now codenamed *Achse*) worked with smoothness.

Washington was reluctant to commit forces to Italy because it was determined the Alliance should launch an invasion of north-west Europe without avoidable delay. Accordingly, it was very much to Hitler's advantage that Eisenhower's lack of landing craft and divisions had obliged him to go ashore so far to the south. In consequence Hitler was able to use the divisions which had escaped from Sicily to concentrate against the Avalanche forces, while he deployed those brought from France and elsewhere (the 1st SS Panzer Division was temporarily transferred from Russia for the mission) to occupy Rome and subdue the Italian army in the centre and north of the peninsula. Before the invasion

he had received contradictory advice: Rommel, one of his favourites, had warned against trying to hold the south; Kesselring, the general on the spot and an acute strategic analyst, had assured him that a line could safely be established below Rome. He now employed both men's talents. While Rommel took charge of the divisions which had been rushed through the Alps to put down military and civilian resistance in Milan and Turin (and to recapture the tens of thousands of Allied prisoners liberated from captivity on Italy's defection), Kesselring organised the Tenth Army in the south to check and contain the Salerno landing.

German troops elsewhere moved rapidly to disarm and imprison Italian troops or extinguish their resistance when it was offered. The areas of Yugoslavia under Italian occupation were brought under German control or that of their Croat (Ustashi) puppets. Italian-occupied France was taken over by German troops (with tragic consequences for the Jews who had found refuge there). Sardinia and Corsica, regarded as indefensible, were both skilfully evacuated, the former on 9 September, the latter by 1 October after a Free French invading force had come to the rescue of the local insurgents, who had risen in revolt on news of the armistice. In the Italian-occupied sectors of Greece the Germans actually scored a remarkable success against the run of strategic events. Encouraged by an outbreak of fighting between the Germans and the Italian garrison of the Ionian islands on 9 September (brutally put down by the Germans, who shot all the Italian officers they captured), the British, in the teeth of strong and wise American discouragement, invaded the Italian-occupied Dodecanese islands on 12 September and, with Italian acquiescence, took Kos, Samos and Leros. Sensing an easy success, offered by their local command of the air – as the Americans had perceived but the British refused to acknowledge – the Germans assembled a superior triphibious force, retook Kos on 4 October, forced the evacuation of Samos and seized back Leros by 16 November. The Dodecanese operation, painfully humiliating to the British, was then extended into the Cyclades. By the end of November the Germans directly controlled the whole of the Aegean, had taken over 40,000 Italian and several thousand British prisoners, and had actually set back the likelihood of Turkey's entering the war on the Allied side – Churchill's justification for mounting his second Greek adventure in the first place.

These were not the only chestnuts plucked by Hitler from the fire raised by Italy's defection. On 16 September an airborne task force, led by an SS officer, Otto Skorzeny, rescued Mussolini from the mountain resort in the Gran Sasso where he was currently confined. Mussolini at once proclaimed the existence of an 'Italian Social Republic' in the north of the country; after 9 October it was to have its own army, formed from soldiers still loyal to him and led by Marshal Rudolfo Graziani, once governor of Libya and Wavell's opponent in Egypt. The creation of Mussolini's successor state to fascist Italy ensured that the growing resistance to German occupation of the north would swell into a civil war, with brutal and tragic consequences. To those consequences Hitler was entirely indifferent. Italy's change of alliance relieved him of the obligation to supply a large part of

the country with the coal on which it depended for energy; it added a captive labour force to the body of Italian volunteer workers in German industry; and it brought him nearly a million military prisoners who could also be set to work for the Reich.

Meanwhile the strategic effort to minimise the effect of the Allied invasion of the mainland was developing to his satisfaction. Rommel's deprecation of the chances of defending Italy south of Rome had proved ill founded. Kesselring, by affiliation an officer of the Luftwaffe but by training and background a product of the general staff elite, had correctly argued that the Italian terrain lent itself admirably to defence. The peninsula's central mountain spine, rising in places to nearly 10,000 feet, throws numerous spurs east and west towards the Adriatic and Mediterranean. Between the spurs, rivers flow rapidly in deep valleys to the sea. Rivers, spurs and mountain spine together offer a succession of defensible lines at close intervals, made all the more difficult to breach because the spine pushes the north-south highways into the coastal strip, where the bridges that carry them are dominated by natural strongpoints on the spurs above.

Salerno, the spot chosen by the Central Mediterranean Force staff for the main landing in Italy, falls exactly within this topographical pattern. Although the coastal strip is unusually wide and level (the factor recommending the beaches to the planners), it is dominated on all sides by high ground and the exit northward is blocked by the massif of Mount Vesuvius. Had Kesselring had sufficient force available at the outset, he might have formed the line across the peninsula that he had assured Hitler was militarily feasible, perhaps as far south as Naples. Commanding as he did, however, only seven divisions in his Tenth Army, of which the 16th Panzer alone was at full strength, he was obliged to commit what strength he had against the northern edge of the bridgehead with the aim of denying the invaders a swift exit towards Naples, and thus win time to construct a front above the city (eventually to be known as the Winter Position).

Despite the Tenth Army's immediate weakness, it nevertheless gave the Avalanche force a bad time in the first week of the invasion. Mark Clark, the American general commanding the Fifth Army, had two corps under his command, the British X and US VI. Supported by overwhelming naval and air bombardments, both got easily ashore on 9 September. They were slow to exploit their initial superiority, however, and next day came under heavy counter-attack from German reserves, including those from the toe of Italy who had escaped Montgomery's army. Counter-attacks by the 16th Panzer Division were particularly effective. On 12 September it retook from the British the key village of Battipaglia, close to their boundary with the Americans; the next day, together with 29th Panzergrenadier Division, it redoubled the pressure, threatening to break the bridgehead in half and cut the British off from the Americans who lost Altavilla and Persano and were preparing to re-embark their assault divisions. The Allies managed to stabilise the bridgehead by unleashing a tremendous weight of firepower on the advancing Germans. While the infantry of the US 45th Division took to their heels, the division's artillerymen stuck to their guns and, with naval and air support, eventually halted the German

Panzergradiers in their tracks.

By 15 September, thanks to the landing of British armour and American airborne infantry in the bridgehead, the crisis had passed. General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, in direct command of the Tenth Army, recognised that the balance of force had now shifted against him, and Kesselring accordingly sanctioned a fighting withdrawal towards the first of his chosen mountain lines further north. Montgomery's Eighth Army had been reinforced by the British 1st Airborne Division, which on 9 September had landed at Taranto. On 16 September spearheads of the Eighth Army, advancing from Calabria, made contact with the Americans in the bridgehead south of Salerno. Two days later the Germans began their withdrawal, covering it by blowing the bridges in their rear as the Fifth Army pursued them. On 1 October British troops entered Naples. Meanwhile the Eighth Army had pushed two divisions, including the 1st Canadian, up the Adriatic coast to capture the complex of airfields at Foggia, from which it was intended to mount strategic bombing raids into southern Germany. In early October the Fifth and Eighth Armies established a continuous line across the peninsula, 120 miles long, running along the Volturno river north of Naples and the Biferno river which flows into the Adriatic at Termoli.

— Kesselring's Winter Position —

Now began the bitter and costly winter campaign to breach the line by which the Germans defended the approaches to Rome. Advance along the central mountain spine being impossible, the Eighth and Fifth Armies' offensive efforts were confined to short stretches on either coast, on fronts at most twenty miles long. This – and the failure of the British and Americans to co-ordinate their offensives – greatly simplified Kesselring's strategy, since it allowed him to leave his central sector almost undefended while concentrating his best divisions on the Mediterranean and Adriatic flanks. German troops in Italy, because they had been drawn from OKW's central mobile reserve, were of high quality and would remain so throughout the Italian war. In October Kesselring deployed the 3rd and 15th Panzergradiers Divisions against the Fifth Army, with the Hermann Goering in reserve, and the 16th and 26th Panzer, 29th Panzergradiers and 1st Parachute, together with two infantry divisions, on the Adriatic flank. Against these nine divisions the Allies could deploy only nine of their own, of which one alone was armoured; and, although Clark and Montgomery had additional tank resources in independent units, they did not enjoy material superiority, nor could they count on their total command of the air to unseat the Germans from their fortified positions. Airpower has its limitations, which the topography of Italy made all too evident. The Allied air forces posed no threat to the defenders: established on and behind steep, rocky hillsides, they had no need to manoeuvre and required only the barest of essentials to sustain their resistance. Historians might have recalled that Italy had only twice in modern times been overrun in a rapid offensive, first

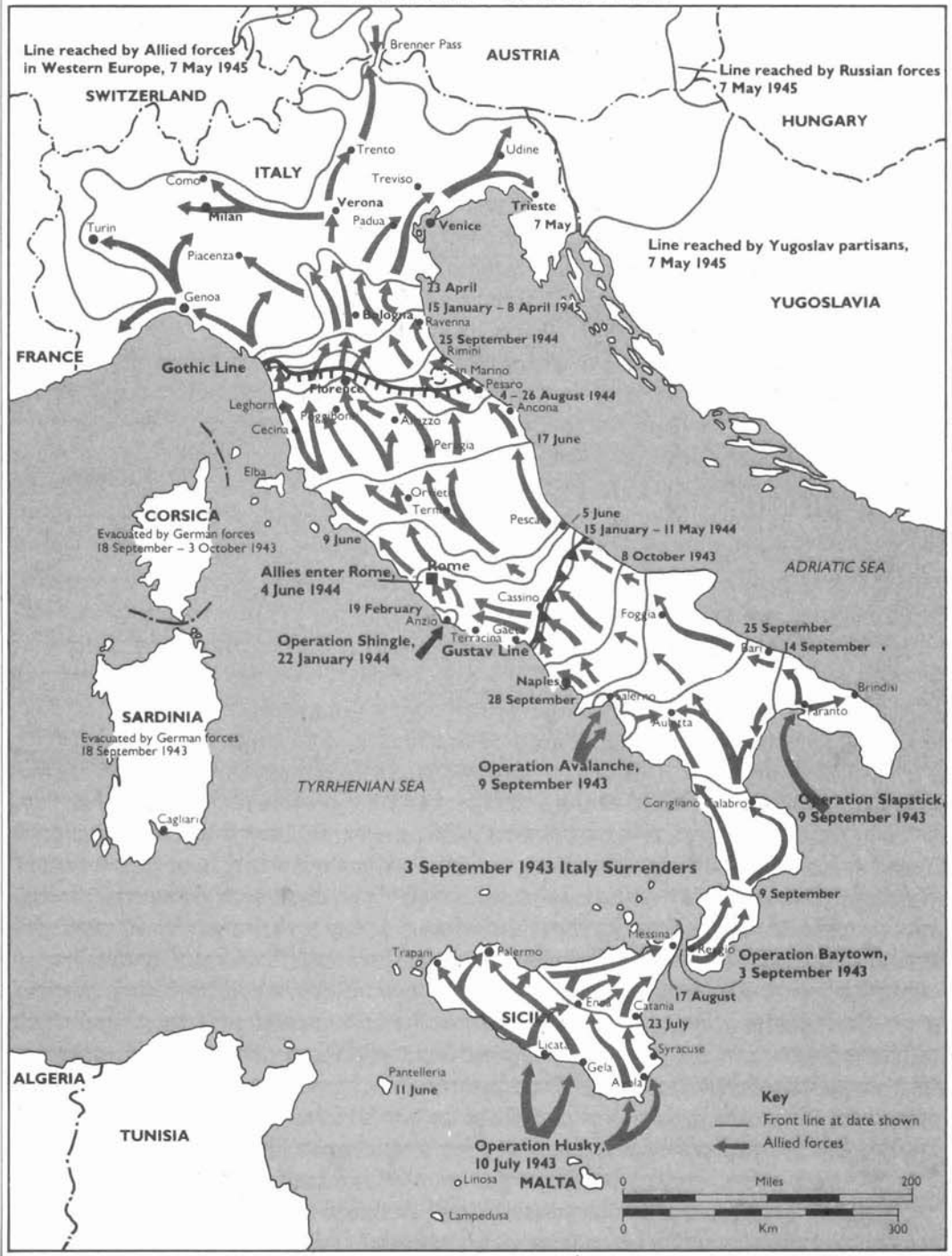
by Charles VIII of France in 1494 and second by Napoleon after Marengo in 1800. In the first case the French had brought a revolutionary weapon, mobile cannon, to the campaign, and in the second they had been confronted by inept and divided opponents. Neither condition obtained in the winter of 1943. The Allies enjoyed at best material parity in a battle with a resolute and skilful enemy who had nothing to lose and much to gain by standing his ground. The effort to make him loosen his grip on the crags and outcrops of the Apennines was to involve the British and Americans in the bitterest and bloodiest of their struggles with the Wehrmacht on any front of the Second World War.

The bloodiness of the Italian fighting was felt all the harder by the Allied Mediterranean Force because, by a chance of assignment, so many of its divisions were drawn from narrowly localised recruiting areas. The US 36th and 45th Divisions were respectively Texas and mountain states formations of the National Guard, while the British 56th and 46th Divisions came from London and the North Midlands. The two Indian divisions, 4th and 8th, were raised from the 'martial race' minority of the Raj, while the 1st Canadian was formed of volunteers from a dominion which, after the tragedy of a failed raid on Dieppe in August 1942, harboured ill-concealed suspicions about the freedom with which British generals shed its soldiers' blood. Three other groups of soldiers under Alexander's command, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the French Moroccan and the Polish II Corps, were renowned for their hardihood; the Poles in particular demonstrated the fiercest determination to pay back the enemy for the sufferings inflicted on their country since 1939. However, in the prevailing circumstances, all three lacked any easy means to make good the losses they suffered at the front. Recognition of the human fragility of the instrument under their command afflicted all the Allied generals throughout the battle for Italy and deeply affected their conduct of it.

Some of the most harassing fighting was to follow immediately on the Salerno success, as the Allies drove forward to attack the Winter Position which Kesselring was busily fortifying between Gaeta and Pescara. Its western end, hinged on the great fortress abbey of Monte Cassino, where Benedict had established the roots of European monasticism in the sixth century, was known as the Gustav Line and was the strongest section of the whole position. Its approaches were strong also and were to cost the Allies heavily in the five offensives they launched between 12 October and 17 January to reach it. From 12 to 15 October the Fifth Army established bridgeheads across the Volturno, just north of Naples. Meanwhile on the Adriatic coast the Eighth Army crossed the river Trigno beyond Termoli, which had been captured on 6 October, and then breasted up to the line of the river Sangro. The Sangro battle (20 November to 2 December) proved particularly difficult. Winter rains turned the river to spate and forced both sides into inactivity during the first week. When Montgomery got his army across he was prevented from exploiting

The Italian campaign, a slow and bitter slog up the peninsula. The Allies did not reach the Po until 22 April 1945.

THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN



his success by the tenacious German defence of the coastal town of Ortona, where the 1st Canadian Division suffered heavy casualties in house-to-house fighting. Sangro was Montgomery's last Mediterranean theatre battle before he left to assume command of the Overlord forces.

While the Sangro campaign was in progress, the Fifth Army had been inching forward, through a maze of broken country and enemy demolitions, to the river Garigliano, from which the valley of the Liri led past the Monte Cassino massif towards Rome. The approaches to the Liri were, however, dominated by the peaks of Monte Camino, Rotondo and Sammucro, each of which had to be scaled and conquered in a succession of bitter actions between 29 November and 21 December. Winter snowstorms then imposed a pause until 5 January, when the American and French divisions of the Fifth Army attacked again to reach the Rapido river, which flows into the Liri below the Cassino heights. As a final move in his drive to enter the Liri valley, Clark ordered the 36th (Texas) Division to make an assault crossing of the Rapido, on the seaward side between Cassino and its junction with the Liri, on 20 January 1944.

The American engineer commander responsible for clearing the mines with which the Germans had strewn the battlefield, and in charge of bridging the watercourse once the infantry had crossed in assault boats, warned beforehand that 'an attack through a muddy valley that was without suitable approach routes and exit roads and that was blocked by organised defences behind an unfordable river [would] create an impossible situation and result in a great loss of life.' His prediction was gruesomely borne out in practice. The Texans tried for three days to cross the river; some did, but all help failed to reach them, and most of them swam back to the near side. When the operation was abandoned, 1000 were dead, out of an infantry strength of less than 6000. The after-action report of the 15th Panzergrenadier Division which opposed them conveyed no sense of the disaster it had inflicted, merely stating that it had 'prevented enemy troops crossing'. The repulse of the Texan attack ended all Mark Clark's hopes for an early breakthrough to Rome up Highway 6, the main north-south route on the Mediterranean coast. He did not despair of capturing Rome quickly, however, for since 3 November a plan, sponsored by Eisenhower, had been afoot to unhinge the Winter Position by an amphibious landing in the Fifth Army's rear at Anzio, close to Rome. The genesis of the plan was not entirely military; it partook of the politics of the Second Front, in particular the controversial plan to match Overlord in Normandy with another landing (Anvil, later Dragoon) in the south of France. General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, personally regarded Anvil as a wasteful diversion. However, it was his duty to facilitate it, and he recognised that for its support it required the retention by the Central Mediterranean Force of a considerable portion of its landing fleet scheduled to leave Italy for England at the end of 1944, since Anvil could only be launched from northern Italy. Possession of a line running from Pisa to Rimini was regarded as essential for a successful launching of Anvil; to reach it by mid-1944 the Fifth Army would have to get north of Rome quickly; and to advance



An American Sherman tank debarking from a Landing Ship Tank (LST) at Anzio, May 1944, at the time of the break-out from the bridgehead.

beyond Rome it would require landing craft to make a descent behind the Winter Position at once – hence Anzio and Operation Shingle.

The logistic calculation was flawless, the operational practice was lamentable. According to Bedell Smith's plan, sixty Landing Ships Tank (the key amphibious vessel) were detained in the Mediterranean until 15 January, a terminal date later extended to 6 February. On 22 January the US VI Corps, which included a large complement of British troops as well as the American 1st Armoured and 3rd Divisions, commanded by General John P. Lucas, debarked at Anzio thirty miles south of Rome. The landing achieved complete surprise; neither the Abwehr nor Kesselring's staff had detected any sign of its preparation. Had Lucas risked rushing at Rome the first day, his spearheads would probably have arrived, though they would have soon been crushed; nevertheless he might have 'staked out claims well inland,' as Montgomery was to try to do in Normandy. In the

event he did neither but confined himself to landing large numbers of men and vehicles and securing the perimeter of a tiny bridgehead. He thus achieved the worst of both worlds, exposing his force to risk without imposing any on the enemy. The Germans, rescued from crisis by his inactivity, hastily assembled 'emergency units' (*Alarmeinheiten*) from soldiers returning from leave, and these were rushed to Anzio while formed units were transferred from the north and quiet sectors of the Winter Position. When Lucas tried to move inland on 30 January he found the way barred; and on 15 February the newly formed Fourteenth Army counter-attacked him. This offensive, codenamed *Fischgang*, was undertaken in great strength on Hitler's orders as a warning to the Allies that an Anglo-American landing could be thrown into the sea, and as a reassurance to the German people of the fate that awaited the invaders of northern Europe. *Fischgang* failed; but it left Lucas's men besieged in squalor and danger. He was relieved on 23 February and his successor, General Lucius Truscott, was left to sustain the defence for the next three months.

— A crisis in Allied strategy —

Having failed to take Rome both via the Liri valley and via Anzio, General Mark Clark now found himself confronted by the necessity to smash his way forward past the great fortress monastery of Cassino which dominated Highway 6. It had been chosen by St Benedict 1400 years earlier as a place of impregnable refuge for his contemplative monks; the monks remained, assailed on three sides by the clamour of war; the monastery was as impregnable as ever. Its immediate environs were garrisoned by the 1st Parachute Division, one of the best in the Wehrmacht. Frido von Senger und Etterlin, the local corps commander and a lay member of St Benedict's Order, would not allow them to use the monastery buildings for defence; but the crags and re-entrants of the mountain provided all the defences they needed to hold the Allies at bay.

Four times in the next three months, between 12 February and 17 May, Allied troops came forward to the assault and three times they were repulsed. In the First Battle of Cassino the US 34th Division merely learned the painful lesson of how naturally strong and how strongly defended the Cassino position was. In the Second Battle the 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Division, commanded by Bernard Freyberg, the veteran of Crete, assaulted the monastery and the town at its foot between 15 and 18 February; their attack was preceded by the bombing of the monastery by 135 Flying Fortresses which reduced it to ruins, but both bombers and troops failed to dislodge the German parachutists from their positions. In the Third Battle, 15–23 March, Freyberg's divisions tried again, with even heavier air support. Again the attack failed, leaving the Cassino position still more impregnable than it had been at the outset: constant bombing and shelling had tumbled the monastery and the town below into a heap of ruins, into which the German parachutists burrowed to form tunnels and bunkers.

By April the conduct of Allied strategy in Italy was almost in crisis. Churchill had become openly scathing at the lack of progress. Hitler exulted in the success of the Tenth and Fourteenth Armies; although vast sectors of the Eastern Front were falling to Russian attack and German cities rocked nightly under Bomber Command's assault, in Italy his Anglo-American enemies had advanced only seventy miles in eight months. Mark Clark, perhaps the most egocentric Allied general of the Second World War, feared for his career, his temperamental antipathy to the British having been fed by their double failure at Cassino. Alexander, the theatre commander since Eisenhower's assumption of the Supreme Allied Command in Britain in January, could see no way forward, and even Churchill, who revered him as the model of the military aristocrat, had begun to doubt his will and capacity to unlock the stalemate. What was needed was a plan and a new impetus to relaunch Allied Armies Italy on to the path of victory.

Behind the locked front the Allied air forces were playing their part. They were commanded by Ira C. Eaker, who had been transferred from Britain, where he had directed the first (unsuccessful) stage of the American strategic bombing attack on Germany. From March onwards, they had been prosecuting Operation Strangle, designed to destroy the logistic network which supplied the Tenth and Fourteenth Armies at Anzio and in the Winter Position. Although the terrain precluded successful ground-attack missions against units in the front line, the Italian roads and railways presented profitable strategic targets for aircraft. Eaker's interdiction plan was a model of military logic; then, in April, Alexander's chief of staff, John Harding, began to construct an equally logical plan to exploit the Allied capacity for manoeuvre on the ground.

Since the end of the previous year Allied Armies Italy had been significantly reinforced. The Polish II Corps was now present in its full strength. The Eighth Army (commanded by Oliver Leese after Montgomery's departure to England for Overlord in late December) had been joined by an additional Indian division, a South African armoured division and another hard-fighting Canadian formation, the 5th Armoured Division. Truscott's corps in the Anzio bridgehead had doubled in size. Further, a French Expeditionary Force, formed largely of Moroccan hill tribesmen to whom mountain warfare was second nature, had taken over the sector between Cassino and the coastal plain. These reinforcements largely compensated for the withdrawal to Britain, in preparation for Overlord, of the six experienced British and American divisions which had fought the Italian campaign thus far. Out of their disparate but complementary qualities, Harding began to construct an operational plan (Diadem) designed to turn the Cassino position, open up the Liri valley and draw in the Anzio force, with the object of encircling the Germans south of Rome and delivering the city into Allied hands.

Harding's plan was that, covered by an elaborate deception (Dunton) designed to persuade the Germans of the danger of another amphibious descent in their rear, nearer the Pisa-Rimini position which marked Kesselring's ultimate line of retreat in the peninsula, the Poles would attack and seize Cassino in a Fourth Battle from the north,

while the French infiltrated the mountains from the south. This move would open the Liri valley to the Canadian and South African armour, while the Americans on the west coast drove across the Garigliano to link up with the Anzio corps, which would break out from its bridgehead to block the Germans' line of retreat to Rome. A major encirclement victory promised to stand in the offing.

Much of the initiative for this plan came from General Alphonse Juin, commanding the French Expeditionary Force, who promised Harding and Alexander that his North Africans had the experience to find a way through the mountains to which Anglo-Saxons were blind. When Diadem opened on 11 May they were indeed able to do so. The Poles, opposed by the German 1st Parachute Division, at first failed to match the North Africans' progress; but after Juin's mountaineers, led by his Moroccan irregulars, had wriggled their way through into the entrance to the Liri valley by 17 May, the Poles carried Monte Cassino in a final and self-sacrificial assault. The mouth of the Liri valley and the coastal zone thus being opened, the American infantry and British armoured divisions started forward on 23 May, the same day on which Truscott's VI Corps broke out of the Anzio bridgehead.

*A British soldier brings in two German prisoners under Castle Hill at Cassino, May 1942.
Cassino was taken by Polish II Corps after a savage battle.*



Both the German Tenth Army and Rome now stood within the Allies' grasp, the encirclement of the first inevitably determining the occupation of the second. Rome, declared an 'open city', and thronging with escaped Allied prisoners of war who circulated openly under the noses of the few Germans who remained, awaited liberation. The prospect of a triumphal entry overcame Clark's strategic sense. Always impatient of Alexander, whose style of command was advisory rather than emphatic, and increasingly suspicious of what he conceived to be his British allies' intention to rob him of the laurels of victory, he issued orders of his own on 26 May for his American troops to abandon their northward drive across the rear of the retreating Germans, thus surrendering the chance to encircle them, and drive directly into the capital. The realignment played directly into Kesselring's hands. While his rearguards fought effective delaying actions at Valmontone and Velletri in the Alban hills south of Rome, he hurried the intact formations of the Tenth Army across the Tiber and made post-haste for the first of a series of defensive positions on the Gothic Line, which his engineers were fortifying between Rome and Rimini.

Clark's entry into Rome on 4 June proved, therefore, a hollow triumph. Even the crowds were absent; fearing a last-ditch stand by the departing Germans, the Romans kept behind locked doors, thus depriving the supremely publicity-conscious (and photogenic) 'American Eagle', as Churchill called him, of his lap of honour.

Kesselring's Tenth and Fourteenth Armies were nevertheless in retreat, and would conduct a fighting withdrawal as they made their way to the Pisa-Rimini Line, 150 miles to the north, which he had identified as the next most defensible position across the Italian peninsula. Allied Armies Italy followed as best they could; but the withdrawal of seven divisions – four out of the seven French divisions that had come from North Africa and the American 3rd, 36th and 45th – to mount the Operation Anvil/Dragoon landing in the south of France, scheduled for mid-August, prevented Clark from pressing the retreat. Kesselring succeeded in fighting two delaying actions, first on the so-called Viterbo Line and then on the Trasimene Line, before safely reaching sanctuary on the Gothic Line in early August.

The focus of action in the Mediterranean now shifted to the coast of southern France, defended by the German Nineteenth Army of Army Group G. It was already depleted by withdrawals of troops to Army Group B which was locked in struggle in Normandy, and, although initially it contained four good divisions, the eight divisions which remained were dispersed so widely between Nice and Marseille that they could not adequately deny the Allies landing places. Churchill had long opposed the operation as militarily valueless, but Marshall's staff in Washington had insisted that Marseille was vital to the logistic support of the Anglo-American invasion of the north of France, while Roosevelt, sensitive to Alliance politics, had argued that it could not be cancelled without giving offence to Stalin. On 15 August, therefore, the newly constituted American Seventh Army under General Alexander Patch debarked between Cannes and Toulon, preceded by

a brilliantly successful airborne landing, and supported by air and sea bombardment. The army, which had been collected from ports as far afield as Taranto, Naples, Corsica and Oran, got ashore with little loss and, though it had to fight hard for Toulon and Marseille, meanwhile launched a thrust up the valley of the Rhône which drove the mobile elements of the Nineteenth Army, including the 11th Panzer Division, pell-mell past Avignon, Orange and Montélimar towards Lyon and Dijon. As Army Group B was itself in full retreat by late August, the Nineteenth Army did not tarry. The spearheads of Patch's Seventh and Patton's Third Armies, the latter advancing from Normandy, met north of Dijon on 11 September, but by 14 September about half of the Nineteenth Army had found refuge in southern Alsace, where it stood ready to defend the approaches to Germany's West Wall.

The loss of the south of France was not in itself significant in Hitler's view; the course of the campaign in Italy, even though it had entailed the surrender of a broad band of territory, might actually be counted as strategically advantageous to the Germans, for it left the bulk of the Allied forces in Italy lodged against the strong defences of the Gothic Line, at a safe distance from the Italian industrial area and the Alpine approaches to the borders of the Greater Reich, while Anvil had actually diverted the Allies' amphibious fleet and the bulk of their disposable reserve into an operationally vacant zone and away from the Balkans, which still bulked so large in importance for his conduct of the war.

— The Balkans —

British support for the resistance in Yugoslavia had thus far troubled the Wehrmacht little. Although up to thirty Axis divisions had been engaged in internal security operations in the Yugoslav mountains, including Italian, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Croat (Ustashi) formations, only twelve were German, most of a military value too low to permit their employment on the major battlefronts. Even after the British had definitively transferred their sponsorship of Yugoslav resistance in December 1943 from the royalist Chetniks to Tito's communist guerrillas, who then numbered over 100,000, the Germans were able to keep the resistance forces constantly on the move, forcing them to migrate from Bosnia to Montenegro and then back again during the campaigning season of 1943 and in the process inflicting 20,000 casualties on their troops, as well as untold suffering on the rural population. The capitulation of Italy in September 1943 had eased Tito's situation. It brought him large quantities of surrendered arms and equipment and even allowed him to take control of much of the area relinquished by the Italians, including the Dalmatian coast and the Adriatic islands. However, as long as the Germans continued to isolate the Partisans from direct contact with external regular forces, the rules of guerrilla warfare

A Beaufighter of the Balkan Air Force attacking the German-held town of Zuzembork in Yugoslavia during the closing days of the war. The Balkan Air Force provided vital support to Tito's partisans.





Partisan units parade on the island of Vis, off the Yugoslav coast, in 1944. During 1944 Tito took refuge in Vis, which had been captured by the Royal Navy.

applied: Tito had a strong nuisance value but an insignificant strategic effect on Germany's lines of communication with Greece and the areas from which it drew essential supplies of minerals.

In the autumn of 1944, however, Germany's position in the Balkans began to weaken, so threatening to elevate Tito from the role of nuisance to menace. Hitler's Balkan satellites, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, had been brought into the war on his side by a combination of threat and inducement. Hitler could no longer offer inducement, while the principal threat to these states' welfare and sovereignty was now prescribed by the Red Army, which between March and August had reconquered the western Ukraine and advanced to the foothills of the Carpathians, southern Europe's natural frontier with the Russian lands. Much earlier in the year the satellites had begun to think better of their alliance with Hitler. Antonescu, the ruler of Romania, had been in touch with the Western Allies since March; his Foreign Minister had even attempted to draw Mussolini into a scheme for making a separate peace as early as May 1943. Bulgaria – whose staunchly pro-German King Boris died by poisoning on 24 August 1943 – had made approaches to

throughout the war. It was that fear which, in large measure, had driven him to take control of the Balkans in the first place, to contemplate the attack on Russia, and to hold the Crimea long after it was militarily sound to do so. Now that the synthetic oil plants which had subsequently come on stream within Germany had been brought under disabling attack by the US Eighth Air Force, the loss of Ploesti was doubly disastrous. However, Hitler could not hope to recover them by counter-attack, for not only did the Russian Ukrainian Fronts which entered Romania on its defection enormously outnumber his own local forces; the simultaneous defection of Bulgaria put the German forces in Greece at risk also and on 18 October they evacuated the country and began a difficult withdrawal through the Macedonian mountains into southern Yugoslavia. Tolbukhin, commanding the Third Ukrainian Front, entered Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital, on 4 October, having made his way there through Romania and Bulgaria. The 350,000 Germans under the command of General Löhr's Army Group E thus had to make their escape from Greece past the flank of a menacing Soviet concentration, through mountain valleys infested with Tito's Partisans and overflowed by the Allied air forces operating across the Adriatic from their bases in Italy.

The security of the other German forces – Army Group F – in what remained to Hitler of his Balkan occupation area now closely depended upon Kesselring's ability to defend northern Italy. Should it fall, Allied Armies Italy would be free both to strike eastward through the 'gaps', notably the Ljubljana gap which led into northern Yugoslavia and so towards Hungary, and also to launch major amphibious operations from the northern Italian ports across the Adriatic, as the commanders of Land Forces Adriatic, supported by the Balkan Air Force (established at Bari in June 1944), had already begun to do on a small scale. At a meeting with Stalin in Moscow in October 1944, Churchill concluded a remarkable, if largely unenforceable, agreement advocating 'proportions of influence' between Russia and Britain in the Balkans. Unlike the Americans, Churchill continued to be fascinated by the opportunities that a Balkan venture offered. In the event it was not Allied scheming but German force allocation that decided the issue. By the time the Fifth and Eighth Armies reached the Gothic Line, their strength stood at only twenty-one divisions, while that of the German Tenth and Fourteenth, thanks to the transfer of five fresh formations and the manpower for three others, had increased to twenty-six. Although the Gothic Line was eighty miles longer than the Winter Position, it was backed by an excellent lateral road, the old Roman Emilian Way from Bologna to Rimini, which allowed reinforcements to be sped from one point of danger to the other, and on the Adriatic coast was backed by no less than thirteen rivers flowing to the sea, each of which formed a major military obstacle.

This terrain and the onset of Italy's autumn rains now ensured that Kesselring's hold on northern Italy, if not the whole of the Gothic Line itself, could not be broken. Alexander, correctly assessing that the route towards the great open plain of the river Po was more easily negotiable on the right than on the left, secretly had transferred the bulk

of the Eighth Army to the Adriatic coast during August. On 25 August it attacked, broke the Gothic Line and advanced to within ten miles of Rimini before being halted on the Couca river. While it paused to regroup, Vietinghoff, commanding the Fourteenth Army, rushed reinforcements along the Emilian Way to check its advance. The British renewed the offensive on 12 September but were fiercely opposed; the 1st Armoured Division lost so many of its tanks that it had to be withdrawn from offensive operations. In order to divert enemy strength from the British front, Alexander ordered Clark to open his own offensive on the opposite coast on 17 September, through the much less promising territory north of Pisa. So narrow is the coastal plain there, dominated by heights reminiscent of Cassino, that it made very slow progress. During October and into November, as rains turned the whole battlefield into a slough and raised rivers in unbridgeable spate, the campaign dragged on, while ground was won in miles and lives lost in thousands. The Eighth Army lost 14,000 killed and wounded in the autumn fighting on the Adriatic coast, the Canadians bearing the heaviest share, for they were in the forefront. The Canadian II Corps took Ravenna on 5 December and pushed onwards to reach the Senio river by 4 January 1945. The Fifth Army, attacking through the mountains of the centre, reached to within nine miles of Bologna by 23 October; but it had also lost very heavily – over 15,000 killed and wounded – and was confronted by terrain even more difficult than that on the Eighth Army's front. So weakened was it that a surprise German offensive in December won back some of the ground it had captured in September north of Pisa.

Losses, terrain and winter weather determined that at Christmas 1944 the campaign in Italy came to a halt. It had been a gruelling passage of fighting, almost from the first optimistic weeks of landing and the easy advances south of Rome sixteen months earlier. The spectacular beauty of Italy, natural and manmade, its scenery of crags and mountain-top villages, ruined castles and fast-flowing rivers, threatened danger at every turn to soldiers bent on conquest. The painters whose landscapes had delighted European collectors had left warnings to any general with a sharp eye of how difficult an advance across the topography they depicted must be to an army, particularly a modern army encumbered with artillery and wheeled and tracked vehicles. Salvator Rosa's savage mountain landscapes and battle scenes spoke for themselves. Claude Lorraine's deceptively serene vistas of gentle plains and blue distances were equally imbued with menace; painted from points of dominance that an artillery officer would automatically choose as his observation post, they demonstrate at a glance how easily and regularly ground can be commanded by the defender in Italy and what a wealth of obstacles – streams, lakes, free-standing hills, mountain spurs and abrupt defiles – the countryside offers. The engineers were the consistent heroes of the campaign in Italy in 1943–4; it was they who rebuilt under fire the blown bridges the Allied armies encountered at five- or ten-mile intervals in the course of their advance up the peninsula, who dismantled the demolition charges and booby traps the Germans strewed in their wake, who bulldozed a way through the ruined towns which straddled the north–south roads, who cleared the harbours choked by the

destruction of battle. The infantry too proved heroic: no campaign in the west cost the infantry more than Italy, in lives lost and wounds suffered in bitter small-scale fighting around strongpoints at the Winter Position, the Anzio perimeter and the Gothic Line. Such losses were shared equally by the Allies and the Germans, as were the natural hardships of the campaign, above all the bleakness of the Italian winter. As S. Bidwell and D. Graham put it in their history of the campaign: 'A post on some craggy knife-edge would be held by four or five men . . . if one of them were wounded he would have to remain with the squad or find his own way down the mountain to an aid post . . . if he stayed he was a burden to his friends and would freeze to death or die from loss of blood. If he tried to find his way down the mountain it was all too easy . . . to rest in a sheltered spot . . . or lose his way . . . and die of exposure.' Many of the Germans of the 1st Parachute Division who held Cassino so tenaciously must have come to such an end; many, too, of the Americans, British, Indians, South Africans, Canadians, New Zealanders, Poles, Frenchmen and (later) Brazilians who opposed them there and at the Gothic Line.

Losses and hardships were made the more difficult to bear, particularly by the Allies, because of the campaign's marginality. The Germans knew that they were holding the enemy at arm's length from the southern borders of the Reich. The Allies, after D-Day, were denied any sense of fighting a decisive campaign. At best they were sustaining the threat to the 'soft underbelly' (Churchill's phrase) of Hitler's Europe, at worst merely tying down enemy divisions. Mark Clark, commander of the Fifth Army and, under Alexander, of Allied Armies Italy, sustained his sense of personal mission throughout. Convinced of his greatness as a general, he drove his subordinates hard, and his frustration at the deliberation of British methods poisoned relations between the staffs of the Fifth and Eighth Armies – a deplorable but undeniable ingredient of the campaign. More junior commanders and the common soldiers were sustained, once the spirit of resistance to German occupation had taken root among the Italians, by the emotions of fighting a war of liberation. No great vision of victory drew them onward, however, as it did their comrades who landed in France. Their war was not a crusade but, in almost every respect, an old-fashioned one of strategic diversion on the maritime flank of a continental enemy, the 'Peninsular War' of 1939–45. That they were continuing to fight it so hard when winter brought the campaigning season to an end at Christmas 1944 was a tribute to their sense of purpose and stoutness of heart.