

SICILY and ITALY:



Why and What for?

Martin Blumenson

The views expressed in this article are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U. S. Army Command and General Staff College.—Editor.

THE World War II campaigns of Sicily and Italy have always raised some nagging questions. How did we ever get involved in these op-

erations that seemed to lead nowhere? What did we gain from them?

To the men who participated in these campaigns, the questions have a particular—and unpleasant—relevance. The unbearable heat and odors of Sicily and the mud and mountains of the Italian mainland remain as unattractive memories. "Wars," someone once said with a great deal of reason, "should be fought in better places."

Not only the physical conditions, but the logic of the warfare seemed to make little sense. This was true even in Sicily where the action went so fast. It was especially true in Italy where progress was slow despite enormous exertion.

The Initiative

In a war developed by careful strategic study and debate, the entire framework or structure of the Mediterranean campaigns sometimes appears haphazard and out of order. Why military forces meet on a specific field of battle is a matter of strategy—for the side that has the initiative and can choose the battlefield. We had the initiative.

Why, then, did our leaders choose to fight offensively in terrain so favorable to the defense? Was the expenditure of a quarter of a million Allied casualties—125,000 of them American—worth the gains?

A good part of the answer to these questions lies in the truism that men are not always masters of their fate. Events generate their own momentum, impose their own force, and exert their own influence on the will of man. We went into Sicily and Italy because we had been in North Africa.

But there is more to the story than that. When the Allied leaders met at Casablanca in January 1943 to determine the shape of the effort against the European Axis Powers, their

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forces were still engaging the enemy in North Africa. Although combat on the northern shore of Africa would continue until May, the leaders were trying to decide far in advance what to do next. Where should they go?

There was no question of stopping. The enemy could be permitted no rest or relaxation, and no opportunity to shift additional forces to the Soviet front, nor could the Allied forces assembled in North Africa remain idle. Offensive operations had to continue.

Disagree on Time

A great strategic argument opened—a discussion that involved the Allied leaders on the highest level. The essential issue was how soon the Allied armies of Great Britain and the United States could launch a strong cross-Channel attack—an invasion of northwest Europe launched from the United Kingdom as a power blow striking along the most direct route to Germany, the principal enemy nation in Europe. All agreed on the necessity to mount the operation. The basic difference of opinion stemmed from the timing.

Many Americans favored a cross-Channel attack in 1943—to create the “second front” demanded by Joseph Stalin as a diversion for his hard-pressed troops, and to bring the war in Europe to a victorious conclusion quickly to permit the movement of men and materiel against the enemy in the Pacific.

Many British strategists believed a cross-Channel attack to be impossible until 1944. The problems, they felt, were too complex for speedy resolution, the requirements too intricate for fast preparation, and the necessary resources too large for quick assembly. The enemy was too strong.

Why not move the Allied forces at

the conclusion of the North African campaign from the Mediterranean area to the United Kingdom? This was not feasible for several reasons. Transferring men and materiel from the Mediterranean was uneconomical, particularly in 1943, when oceangoing

There were other reasons, of course. The capture of Sicily would help ensure the safety of Allied shipping in the Mediterranean, which was an Axis lake. Many ships nourishing the British forces based in Egypt had to voyage around the continent of Africa.



US soldiers charge ashore near Pozzuoli, Italy, in January 1944

ships were in short supply. Stopping operations in the Mediterranean would give the enemy a time of respite. Moving forces to the United Kingdom would show the Axis where the next Allied blow would be struck. This, of course, would permit the Axis to displace their own forces to defend against a cross-Channel attack.

The most economical use of the Allied forces in North Africa at the end of that campaign was somewhere in the Mediterranean area. Sicily, less than 160 kilometers away, looked attractive. An invasion was feasible in terms of distance, available forces, and air, naval, and logistic support.

Sicily would give airfields closer to enemy targets.

Still another desire was to knock Italy quickly out of the war. Despite the appearance of considerable power in the Italian Order of Battle—a strong navy and an impressive number of men mobilized in the army—Italy was poorly prepared to fight a modern war. Industrial and economic resources were lacking, and the Fascist dictatorship was incompetent. Consequently, the Italian soldier was poorly trained, poorly equipped, poorly led, and frequently defeated, and Italian warships refused to venture out of home waters.

Were the Italian people, whose morale was low, ready to renounce Benito Mussolini and withdraw from the war? Would an invasion of Sicily, part of the Italian homeland, completely demoralize the country? It was worth a try.

It was particularly well worth trying because the capitulation of Italy would increase Germany's burdens. If Italy surrendered, German troops would have to replace more than 30 Italian divisions performing occupational and coastal defense duties in the Balkans and southern France. The German military machine would be increasingly stretched across the vast periphery of much of Europe, and vulnerable to attack. If Italy came over to the Allied side and helped fight against Germany, so much the better.

Invasion of Sicily

For these reasons the British 8th Army and the US 7th Army invaded Sicily in July. Capturing the island in 38 days, the Allied forces gained almost all that had been hoped for. The offensive momentum had been maintained. A diversion had been created to aid the Soviets. A good part of the Mediterranean had been cleared for Allied shipping, and airfields closer to Germany had been seized.

The campaign failed to knock Italy out of the war, but it promoted an internal upheaval that unseated Mussolini. A new government came to power which began at once to seek a way out of the war.

Even before the invasion of Sicily, Allied strategists had considered the problem of where to move next. Should offensive operations be continued in the Mediterranean? Or should men and materiel now be shifted to the United Kingdom for *Overlord*, the cross-Channel attack?

The Allied leaders meeting in Washington in May decided to do both. They would move seven Allied divisions— all veteran organizations—out of the Mediterranean theater for use in *Overlord*, which was to be the climactic operation in Europe. And because it seemed virtually impossible to launch *Overlord* before the spring of 1944, they would wear down the Germans until that time by continuing the offensive drive in the Mediterranean with the formations remaining in the theater. Operations there were to have two purposes: eliminate Italy from the war and tie down the maximum number of Germans. But on the question of where to make the effort beyond Sicily, the Allied leaders could reach no agreement.

The toe of Italy was only three kilometers away from Sicily, an easy jump across the Strait of Messina. This was hardly enough reason to lure the Allied ground forces into a region of rugged mountains that would favor the defense. There was no point in starting an advance of 1,200 kilometers from the point of the toe to the German border along the Alps at the top of the boot. Once there, who wanted to storm German positions in the Alps?

Another Course of Action

Thus, during much of the summer of 1943, many Allied strategists thought in other terms. Some thought seriously of going from Sicily to Sardinia and Corsica. These islands would give airfields still closer to Germany and bases required for an invasion of southern France, which would fashion a pincer movement to assist the cross-Channel attack. Other Allied planners considered the possibility of invading the Balkans—Yugoslavia or Greece. But when the Italian Government

made secret contact with the Allies for the purpose of surrendering, another course of action became necessary.

Adolf Hitler had become suspicious of his Italian ally. He guessed that Italy was trying to get out of the al-

into the country. By late summer the equivalent of about eight German divisions were in Italy, and several others were poised along the frontier for immediate entry. If Italian resistance against the Allies collapsed, he would occupy Italy and keep the Al-



US Army Photos

Cassino, Italy, during concentrated bombing on 15 March 1944

liance and the war. If the Italian Government surrendered and if the Italian Army turned on the Germans, they might destroy the German forces that had been sent to help the Italians fight in North Africa and Sicily. Two German divisions in particular—located in the toe of Italy—were imperiled.

Hitler had no proof, and he was loath to disturb the alliance. The Italians were, after all, still contributing troops to help occupy Europe. Yet he had to save the German units stationed in Italy if the new Italian Government committed what Hitler called "treachery." He sent additional forces

lied forces still distant from the German homeland.

The result was that the Italian Government was unable to capitulate unless Allied forces landed on the mainland and, in effect, liberated Italy from German control.

To help Italy surrender and to tie down German forces were the basic reasons Allied forces invaded the Italian mainland in September 1943. Other reasons were much the same as for Sicily—keep the momentum going, use Allied resources already assembled and available, maintain pressure on the Germans, create a diversion for

the Soviets, and gain additional airfields closer to Germany.

The invasion of Italy represented something more. It was the first Allied entrance into the continent of Europe. It was the opening act of a new and broader strategic development that was to culminate in Normandy in the following year. It was part of the preparations for *Overlord*, the climactic and decisive operation in Europe. It was designed to drain German strength from the Soviet front and from the defense along the Channel coast of France.

The invasion made it possible for Italy to surrender and get out of the war. Germany remained alone in opposing the Soviets and the Allied forces of Great Britain and the United States. Germany was definitely on the defensive by then.

Two Allied Armies

Invasion of the Italian mainland involved two Allied armies—the British 8th and the US 5th, both of which contained French, Polish, and British Commonwealth units. This was one of the most difficult campaigns waged in World War II. The mountainous terrain of southern Italy enabled the Germans to fight effectively from a series of defensive lines.

At a high cost in casualties, the Allied ground forces inched their way toward Rome during the winter of 1943-44. In order to envelop the most formidable of these defensive positions—the Gustav Line at Cassino—the Allies landed at Anzio in January 1944. This, too, failed to speed the advance. Not until June, two days before the invasion of Normandy, did Allied troops finally enter Rome.

With world attention focused on Normandy, the most direct route to Germany, the Italian theater receded

to secondary importance. Although the hard fighting during the preceding winter, as General George C. Marshall had foreseen, had attracted additional forces to Italy—three new US divisions, for example—the commanders would henceforth be curtailed in their efforts by sharply restricted resources.

Gothic Line

When the Germans stopped the Allied forces at the Gothic Line in northern Italy, the lack of artillery ammunition and engineer support and the withdrawal of three experienced divisions for the invasion of southern France, as much as the strong German defenses, prevented immediate progress. As a result, the campaign stagnated and remained static throughout the winter of 1944-45. Not until late March 1945 did the offensive momentum pick up. On 29 April, a good week before V-E Day, the Germans in Italy surrendered, effective 2 May.

Despite the reluctance of the Allied leadership to become involved in a march of 1,200 kilometers up the Italian Peninsula, this was exactly what had happened. To a certain extent, the invasion of the Italian mainland had generated a momentum of its own that could not be denied. The commitment of Allied forces predetermined their continued employment.

Queried by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, who shaped Allied strategy, on whether he thought it possible to halt operations somewhere in Italy, General Dwight D. Eisenhower had replied in the negative. He said it would be impractical to establish a line across the peninsula, let the Germans set up another, and have a no man's land between. To relax the pressure would permit the Germans to shift forces elsewhere or to concentrate forces for

an overwhelming counterattack that might drive the Allied troops out of Italy. Once embarked in a campaign on the mainland, General Eisenhower declared, the Allied forces had to continue to the bitter end.

Expenditures Justified?

Was the expenditure of lives, then, in the dreadful conditions of Italy justified? Were the Battles of Salerno, the Volturno, San Pietro, the Rapido, Anzio, Cassino, Monte Altuzzo, and the others warranted? Or should the Allies have concentrated elsewhere?

It is difficult to see where else the resources of the Mediterranean theater could have been practically and realistically employed. In addition to the great cost in shipping, a real Allied shortage, the wholesale movement of resources out of the theater would have relaxed considerable pressure on the enemy.

But how about somewhere else in the theater? Sardinia and Corsica would have required far more amphibious equipment than Italy, especially landing ships and craft that were in short supply in all theaters. Southern France was rather distant from Sicily for an amphibious operation and too far from Germany for an invasion to have an immediate effect—although the 7th Army made a later landing that complemented the Normandy invasion and liberated a large part of France. Yugoslavia and Greece were just as far from Germany, and the bleak region of southeastern Europe—lacking good roads for the mechanized Allied forces—was anything but inviting.

It has become somewhat fashionable since the end of the war to say that we should have gone into the Balkans to checkmate the Soviets. This charge overlooks the fact that Germany was

then the enemy. It insinuates political naivete on the part of the Allied military command. It also fails to note the probability that Allied involvement in southeast Europe would have opened western Europe west of the Elbe River to the Soviets.

The soft underbelly of Europe is a fiction—except that Italy as the partner of Germany was, of course, the weaker enemy. In terms of terrain, the soft underbelly does not exist—the Rhone Valley, the Italian mainland, and the Balkan wilderness are equally unappetizing to ground forces.

A Holding Action

For the Allied forces, the Italian campaign was a vast holding action undertaken to pin down superior German forces and prevent their use in the USSR and western Europe. General Sir Harold L. Alexander has questioned who was holding whom—were the Germans really tying down the Allies?

This was true only to a certain extent. The Allied command employed relatively little strength in Italy—between 15 and 20 divisions at most. Perhaps the commanders tried to do too much with, and expected far too much from, what turned out to be too little. But if so, they had no other choice. Given the global requirements of World War II, there were insufficient resources to provide the amounts of men and materiel needed to achieve speedy victory in Italy.

In contrast, the Allied forces tied down and destroyed at least 16 German divisions in Italy. The presence of Allied troops in Italy helped pin down another eight to 10 German divisions in the Balkans. The Germans suffered approximately 250,000 casualties in Italy. This was the same number that the Allied ground troops in-

curred. Given the relative strengths of the nations involved, however, the Germans suffered a much more severe loss.

The cruel, grim march of the Allied troops from North Africa to the Alps achieved much more than the participating soldiers imagined. They saw only the slow and painful advance, but they provided a substantial contribution to victory.

They knocked Italy out of the war. They opened the Mediterranean to Allied shipping and naval operations. They secured airfields that permitted round-the-clock bombardment of vital military targets.

Most important, they helped to grind down the German fighting machine. They were applying General

George S. Patton's dictum—somewhat paraphrased here—to hold the enemy by the nose and kick him in the pants. The reverse would be more accurate. The Italian campaign grabbed Germany by the seat of the pants while *Overlord* delivered a mortal blow to the chin.

The supreme accomplishment of the Allied armies engaged in Italy was to make the German war machine more vulnerable for the climactic operations in northwest Europe, the decisive campaign. Without the agonizing difficulties of the preliminary and subsidiary operations in the Mediterranean area, the decisive action might very well have reflected the same type of anguish and frustration that characterized the campaigns in Italy.

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