

Italians Open Negotiations for Surrender.

The military situation on 16th August was thus clearly defined. The final decisions as to the manner of the invasion of the Italian mainland in Calabria and at Salerno had been taken and the planning of the operation was in an advanced stage. On the next day we received the news that the political situation had once more undergone a sudden change. On 15th August a General Castellano, of the Italian Commando Supremo,* presented himself at the British Embassy in Madrid; he was travelling under an assumed name as a civil servant and had no written credentials but he claimed to be an accredited representative of Marshal Badoglio and bearer of a message on the latter's behalf. The Marshal stated that when the Allies invaded Italy the Italian Government was prepared to order the immediate cessation of hostilities against the Allies and to join them forthwith, with all available forces, in the fight against Germany. This was the news we had been awaiting since 25th July, when Mussolini fell. The delay had been caused, not by any reluctance to accept the formula of "unconditional surrender," but because Badoglio was anxious to establish himself firmly in power and also because this was the first good opportunity which had presented itself to get in touch with the Allies unknown to the Germans. The cover employed was that Castellano was going to Lisbon as one of the party sent to meet the Italian ambassador returning from Chile. However, the date was well chosen since Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt were at that moment conferring in Quebec, accompanied by the Combined Chiefs of Staff. They were able, therefore, immediately they were notified from Madrid of this new development, to direct General Eisenhower, in a signal received on 17th August, to send two representatives to Lisbon where a further meeting with Castellano had been arranged at the British Embassy. The two emissaries, Generals Smith and Strong, Chief of Staff and Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2,† of Allied Force Headquarters, left on 18th August and returned to Algiers on the 20th.

The nature of the Italian capitulation and the reasons which led to it were not generally understood by the public at the time and have been widely misrepresented since. This is not the place for a discussion of the political aspects of the situation but I feel that in order to explain its effect on our military appreciation of the problems of the invasion of Italy and give the proper strategical background to our subsequent operations I should deal as briefly as possible with the motives behind the Italian offer. Italy in 1943 was in a very different position from Germany in 1945. Germany capitulated when the country had been almost completely occupied by the victorious Allies and when the prospect of resistance, even for a few days more, had been almost totally excluded by the complete disintegration of the armed forces and the disappearance of central control. This was not the case with Italy; she still had large armies in the field (her forces in the peninsula alone were numerically superior to anything the Allies could bring against them)

* The Supreme Headquarters of the Armed Forces equivalent to our Chiefs of Staff or the German O.K.W.

† Major-General (now Lieutenant-General) Walter B. Smith, United States Army and Major-General K. W. D. Strong, C.B., O.B.E. (G-2 = Intelligence branch.)

and, although their morale was shaken and their quality inferior, there were sufficient German forces in the country to stiffen them. Resistance was certainly still possible. The events of the next twenty-one months showed that the German forces alone were sufficient to impose a most serious delay on the Allied occupation of Italy and the experience of the Republican Fascist Government showed that an Italian Government could have continued to function and exercise authority over the greater part of Italy for a long time to come.

Nor was it true that capitulation was dictated by internal unrest and popular demand. There were, indeed, continuous reports during this period of disturbances in the industrial towns of Northern Italy, reports spread for the most part by exiled Italian politicians who had also claimed the credit of provoking the fall of Mussolini by similar disturbances; but these reports, like the earlier ones, were known to be greatly exaggerated. A reference once more to subsequent events will show the unimportance of this factor: no unrest among the civilian population played any significant rôle in diminishing the German capacity to resist in Italy;* it cannot therefore have been the main factor in disposing the Royal Government to capitulate nor, if they had decided to fight on at the side of their German allies, would popular unrest have been any more of an embarrassment to them than it was to their Republican successors. The plain fact is that the Italian Government did not decide to capitulate because it saw itself incapable of offering further resistance, nor because of any change of heart or intellectual conviction of the justice of the Allied and Democratic cause; it decided, as Italian statesmen had decided in the past, that the time had come to "spring to the aid of the victors".

It was largely a General Staff decision. On a cool calculation, inspired by that "sacro egoismo" recommended by Salandra in 1914, the chief military authorities had decided that the fortunes of war had turned at last against the Axis. A similar calculation, false as it turned out, had brought them into the war in June 1940. The moment then had been carefully chosen; now also they hoped that, by changing sides at this juncture, they would have just enough fighting to do to justify a claim, when the actual end of the war came, to a place among the victorious allies. It would involve sacrificing for the present their troops in the Balkans and South France but they hoped that their armies in Italy itself would remain reasonably intact. The calculation was acute in one sense, in that they clearly saw that resistance at the side of the Germans could still have been prolonged for some time; but there was one serious miscalculation which they undoubtedly regretted bitterly later on and but for which they would probably have postponed their offer of capitulation. Lacking a proper appreciation of the difficulties of amphibious warfare, and grossly misinformed by their Intelligence services of the strength and capabilities

* There was, of course, the insurrection of 25 April 1945; but this was after the German armies had been destroyed in battle south of the Po, after they had opened negotiations for surrender and only a week before their final capitulation. I do not wish to disparage in any way the gallant efforts of the Italian Partisans but it is a fact that, up to this date, they did not present a serious military problem to the Germans and were kept in check mainly by second quality troops such as Czechs, Slovaks, Cossacks, etc.