



The Allied Invasion of Sicily: The History of the Largest Amphibious Campaign of World War II

Charles River Editors

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The rugged island of Sicily, dominated in the east by the snow-crowned eminence of the active volcano Mount Etna (which rises to a height of 11,000 feet), lies in the ocean just off the “toe” of the “boot” of Italy. This spectacular setting witnessed one of 1943's pivotal battles as the theater of Allied operations shifted from North Africa to Europe – Operation Husky, a mixed victory wresting control of Sicily from the Axis. The action also caused Benito Mussolini's downfall, his imprisonment, and subsequent dramatic rescue by the scar-faced Otto Skorzeny – removing significant portions of Italy from the fascist camp but nevertheless failing to prevent a long and costly Italian campaign. Germany's North African defeat opened up the possibility of taking the war in the west to the European continent for the first time since France's lightning conquest by the Wehrmacht in 1940. The British and Americans debated the merits of landing in France directly in 1943, but they ultimately opted against it. The Soviets railed at the Westerners as “bastards of allies” – conveniently forgetting that they aided and abetted Hitler's violent expansionism in eastern Europe for over a year, starting in 1939 – but a 1943 “D-Day” style landing in France might have proven a strategic and logistical impossibility. As it turned out, the lackluster Allied showing on Sicily and the escape of most of the island's garrison would encourage Hitler to alter his plans and defend Italy vigorously. With its rugged mountain ridges, deep valleys, and numerous rivers, Italy contained tens of thousands of natural defensive positions. The Wehrmacht exploited these to the full during the ensuing campaign, bogging down the Anglo-American armies in an endless series of costly, time-consuming engagements. Even the rank and file German soldiers showed a clear awareness of the Italy's strategic significance: “‘The Tommies will have to chew their way through us inch by inch,’ a German paratrooper wrote in an unfinished letter found on his corpse at Salerno, ‘and we will surely make hard chewing for them.’” (Hastings, 2011, 408). On paper, Sicily's garrison appeared as a formidable obstacle to the Allies' plans, but in actuality, most of the resistance came from the small number of German troops on the island. The vast numbers of Italian soldiers accomplished little other than to flee or surrender en masse, but even this delayed the Anglo-American forces long enough for Hitler to greatly reinforce the Wehrmacht in Italy. In the memorable words of a war correspondent, the campaign resembled “a thirty-eight day race with the Italians in the lead” (Porch, 2004, 445). The Allied Invasion of Sicily: The History of the Largest Amphibious Campaign of World War II chronicles the crucial 1943 campaign. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the invasion of Sicily like never before, in no time at all.

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