

The OSS and Italian Partisans in World War II

Excerpts from an article written by Peter Tompkins



Italian partisans marching after helping Allied troops capture village.

The contribution of Italian anti-Fascist partisans to the campaign in Italy in World War II has long been neglected. These patriots kept as many as seven German divisions out of the line. They also obtained the surrender of two full German divisions, which led directly to the collapse of the German forces in and around Genoa, Turin, and Milan.

These actions pinned down the German armies and led to their complete destruction. Throughout northern Italy, partisan brigades in the mountains and clandestine action groups in the cities liberated every major city before the arrival of combat units of Fifteenth Army Group.

The partisans' success was largely attributable to the arms and supplies parachuted to them by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the OSS and to the brilliance of the intelligence networks developed by members of the Resistance in constant touch with Fifteenth Army Group headquarters via secret radios.

Intercepted German signals and the Ultra deciphering at Bletchley Park in England went far toward assuring final victory, but little credit has been given to the vast amount of detailed intelligence collected and rapidly transmitted by individual partisan spies in Italy. Strategically, Ultra may have saved the day, but tactically its information was far slower in getting to where it was needed in the field than agent signals.

During the crucial battles of Anzio in January and February 1944, for example, Ultra signals warning of Hitler's plans and of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's attacks would arrive regularly at Allied headquarters in Caserta as many as three days after the attacks had already taken place. On the other hand, extremely accurate information gathered by the partisans, often directly from Kesselring's own headquarters, was sent via a secret OSS radio in Rome, on the air as many as five times a day, to be received simultaneously in Caserta and on the beachhead in time to repel these attacks.

After Rome's liberation, as Kesselring retreated to his mountain defenses straddling the Apennines from Carrara on the Tyrrhenian to Rimini on the Adriatic, a barrier known as the Gothic Line, intelligence became a priority for Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander, who was intent on launching an attack against these defenses. Gen. Mark Clark, whose Fifth Army would have the job of cracking Kesselring's mountain strongholds, exhorted partisans operating further north to increase their activities.

To organize such operations, the OSS infiltrated individual Italian partisan agents by submarine behind the German lines, landing them along the Adriatic coast at the mouth of the Po River. One agent, 20-