



AIR CAMPAIGN

# THE ITALIAN BLITZ 1940–43

Bomber Command's war against  
Mussolini's cities, docks and factories

RICHARD WORRALL | ILLUSTRATED BY GRAHAM TURNER



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# INTRODUCTION

The crowd gathered at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome to hear Mussolini's declaration of war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940. Launching his 'parallel war' in the Mediterranean, Italy's war required German assistance from early 1941. (Getty Images)

**This is a grave hour for our Fatherland. The hour [of] irrevocable decision. The Declaration of War is already decided ... We are going to war to break the chains laid upon us and we shall defend our territories everywhere. Only thus can a people of 52 millions remain free ...**

Benito Mussolini, 10 June 1940

After nine months of 'belligerent neutrality', Mussolini declared war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940. Italy's 'parallel war' thus began in the Mediterranean, a conflict for dominance of the central sea in a war for empire: the maintenance of one and acquisition of territory for the other. As the last British Ambassador to Rome, Sir Percy Lorraine, wrote:

... one must win the other must lose. Our lengthwise communications in the Mediterranean cannot co-exist with Italian north-south communications in the same sea in war.

Within hours, the Air Ministry in London had despatched a 'Most Immediate' telegram to its Commands and establishment, both at home and abroad, that stated:

As from 0001 hours British summer time Tuesday 11th June a state of war will exist with Italy.

One of the recipients was Air Marshal Sir Charles Portal, then head of RAF Bomber Command. Right from the beginning, it would be involved in the war against Mussolini's Italy, and 4 Group's Whitleys and 3 Group's Wellingtons went into action that night or, in the latter's case, attempted to.

## A forgotten air campaign

The strategic bombing of Italy has been, and continues to be, a topic that has been examined by a considerable number of Italian historians. Yet for English-speaking readers it has been, and still remains, a neglected episode of the aerial conflict during World War II. Whilst many volumes have examined the combined bomber offensive against Germany and the American air campaign against Japan (including the atomic bomb attacks), the bombing offensive against the third member of the Axis coalition has received little coverage at all. Such an omission makes this volume unique, with its detailed examination of Bomber Command's campaign against Italy, which lasted from June 1940 to August 1943. Many titles on Bomber Command show this tendency towards neglecting the campaign against Italy – often covering it only in passing. This is perhaps no surprise given that certain sources, used heavily by subsequent authors on Bomber Command, say little about the bombing of Italy. In his official *Despatch on War Operations*, Sir Arthur Harris, C-in-C of Bomber Command, devoted little space to this campaign, an indication that he remained unenthusiastic – though certainly not obstructive – about it. The only exception is the bold claim he made as to the outcome:

The last stages in the bombing of the industrial cities of Italy were extremely successful, both in causing material damage and in finally destroying what little inclination remained in that country to continue a disastrous war ... The bombing produced quite hysterical accounts of woe in the press and radio, and *there is little doubt that it was the principal factor contributing to the downfall of Mussolini's regime.* [my emphasis]

Such sentiments, overblown if not completely incorrect, were presented with little additional detail, and were not critiqued by subsequent authors, apart from Richard Overy and Claudia Baldoli. Harris' memoirs followed a similar path, with only three pages out of 288 covering Italy, and astonishingly only Bomber Command's campaign of autumn 1942 'to throw the Germans out of Africa' was mentioned. Yet because his book was written for public consumption, there was still sufficient space for the claims to have got even bolder:

there is no doubt that the panic caused by Bomber Command's attacks on industrial cities in North Italy, though the weight of the attack was insignificant compared with that of the offensive against Germany, did as much as any other single factor to bring about the downfall of Fascism in that country.

Other memoirs by senior officers in Bomber Command, namely by Air Vice-Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, Deputy C-in-C Bomber Command, or the commanding of the Pathfinder, Air Vice-Marshal Donald Bennett, shed little light on the bombing of Italy, either. Indeed, Bennett wrote that he perceived Bomber Command 'as a mighty weapon for striking at the heart of the enemy – that is to say, at Germany itself'. Even Churchill – in many ways *the* central figure in directing the war in the Mediterranean – said little in his mammoth history of World War II (12 volumes in paperback) about the bombing of Italy, despite his pivotal role in ordering it.



Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The Duce believed that it was Italy's destiny to dominate the Mediterranean by carving out a New Roman Empire in Africa and the Near East. (Getty Images)



Winston Churchill in August 1941. The Prime Minister frequently pressed for bombing attacks on Italy, but this was with a political goal in mind, namely to break civilian morale and force Italy's capitulation. (Getty Images)

The other source heavily utilised by authors on Bomber Command was the British Official History. Published in 1961, the *Strategic Air Offensive against Germany (SAOG)* was an epic study comprising four volumes. Yet Italy featured little, apart from a brief mention in passing to complete the narrative. This is no surprise given the official historians' comment that 'the Italian diversion did not amount to much' – no doubt made to conform to the official history's title that only stated Germany – but which, as this volume will show, is an inaccurate judgement. Nonetheless, the *SAOG* had set the idea that Bomber Command's offensive against Italy was 'a non-event', which could not be further from the truth. Subsequent accounts, which drew heavily on the official history, added little to our understanding of this campaign, which was often merely 'reviewed', not analysed. The exceptions were Stephen Harvey's journal article, the excellent work by Claudia Baldoli and the recent book by Richard Overy, who writes that the bombing of Italy 'has remained on the margins in most narratives of the conflict ever since' (see Further Reading). Such a trend is a considerable omission which this volume aims, at least, to partly fill.

Under-researched and scanty coverage does not translate to unimportant. Indeed, the campaign against Italy is far more interesting and important than has been given credit, revealing a number of fascinating aspects about Bomber Command's war: its methods, tactics, strategy and targeting philosophy. It contained debates and decision-making on to the extent of Bomber Command's support of amphibious operations in the Mediterranean or whether to attack such cities as Rome, Florence, Verona and Venice, and controversies, such as the use of the *Duomo* (cathedral) as the aiming-point on raids on Milan. Perhaps most significant was the fact that by late 1942 Bomber Command's campaign against Italy was blended with the civilian leadership's conduct of strategy in the Mediterranean – a theatre where Harris was subject to the authority of no military commander. These issues are covered by this volume; to do so, the author has gone back to the archival files, some of which have been listed in Further Reading.

Certainly, Bomber Command's attacks on Italy were closely connected to the military campaigns in the Mediterranean and North Africa, as shown by the operations to support Montgomery's El Alamein offensive and the *Torch* landings in autumn 1942, or the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily (Operation *Husky*) in July 1943. Here, Bomber Command was tasked with attacking Genoa to prevent Axis convoys sailing to North Africa, and later the battleships of the *Regia Marina* (Royal Italian Navy) moored at La Spezia. Strategic bombing was thus part of the Allies' combined effort to defeat the Axis in the Mediterranean. Yet, at the same time, Bomber Command's attacks on Italy – as perceived by the airmen – were also conducted in a way to fulfil the ambitions of the so-called 'Bomber Barons' who believed airpower could destroy Italian war industry and civilian morale, and thereby bring about Italy's collapse. This accounts for why Harris, even in late 1942, opted to switch the focus of his Italian operations away from Genoa to Turin, with its restive and strongly left-wing workforce that toiled in the city's war industries. The political mood and rising discontent in Turin only served to make this an ever more attractive target for Bomber Command in 1942/43. In essence there were a number of reasons for Harris' operations against Italy, some being tactical and concerned with supporting land and sea operations in the Mediterranean theatre, and others strategic and concerning Italy's continued status as an enemy power.

Bomber Command's offensive south of the Alps can therefore be divided into a number of phases, each having a particular goal, which are explained in Campaign Objectives.

Ultimately, what part would Harris's force play in Italy's capitulation? Certainly the evidence suggests Bomber Command's attacks on the northern Italian cities from late 1942 to mid-1943 increasingly worsened Italian morale. Yet a note of caution is needed here. By 1943, Italy was a society suffering from hardship and low morale owing to its disastrous fortunes in the war. The crucial question, therefore, is whether the bombs dropped on a people who were already collectively depressed by the regime's inept handling of the war?

These issues will be analysed in the final chapter. Stephen Harvey concluded that 'the bombing had a decisive effect on the ... willingness to continue the war'. The same author also highlighted how the bombing impacted on Italy's 'ability' to continue the war. This refers to the damage to Italy's war industries, which by summer 1943 was extensive, inflicted on a country that Sir Percy Lorraine had called 'the most vulnerable and the weakest link, militarily, morally and economically, in the chain of our enemy'. Ultimately, both these dimensions – attacking war industry and civilian morale – were pursued to bring about the same thing, namely Italy's defeat, and were enthusiastically encouraged by the British War Cabinet. For Churchill, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and Sir Archibald Sinclair (Secretary of State for Air) maintained substantial control over the bombing campaign against Italy, including its timing, targets and rationale. Perhaps encapsulating this best was Churchill's Directive of 3 December 1942 that ordered 'the heat should be turned on Italy'. This sanctioned Bomber Command to deploy 'shock and awe' tactics to affect a political outcome in the war against Italy, alongside attacks to help the military campaigns in the Mediterranean. Churchill – very much at the heart of British bombing policy during winter 1942/43 – therefore held ambitions that closely aligned with the ideas of the 'Bomber Barons'.

In the beginning, Bomber Command's early attacks on Italy were light 'pin-prick' efforts, a nuisance but hardly devastating to the Fascist regime. This changed in autumn 1942. Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister (until February 1943), recorded in his diary on 9 October 1942 a long conference with General Cesare Amè, head of the Military Intelligence Service. It was a gloomy and pessimistic conversation that, Ciano noted:

lead[s] one to conclude the Anglo-Saxons are preparing to land in force in North Africa, whence, later on, they intend to launch their blows against the Axis. Italy is geographically and logically the first objective. How long shall we have the strength to resist a determined, strong, and methodically aerial and naval offensive?

An answer was not long in coming. Within a year, Mussolini had fallen and Italy had capitulated. This is the story of Bomber Command's three-year role in bringing about that outcome.



The damaged La Scala Opera House in Milan in August 1943. Italian cities contained many religious, cultural and artistic treasures, which Bomber Command did try to avoid targeting. But the nature of area bombing meant that some bombs inevitably went astray. It is partly for this reason that Bomber Command's Italian target list remained limited to the northern industrial cities of Turin, Milan and Genoa. Rome, Florence and Verona were placed off-limits for fear of the RAF facing domestic and international condemnation and accusations of 'vandalism'. (Getty Images)



# USSR

## GERMAN-OCCUPIED EASTERN EUROPE

- Major Italian targets
- Minor Italian targets
- Italian targets considered by the Air Ministry for attack by Bomber Command, but rejected
- ✈ British airfield
- ✈ Italian nightfighter airfield
- ← - - - - Route to Milan on 24/25 October 1942 operation
- ← - - - - Route to Turin on 12/13 July 1943 operation
- ← - - - - Route to Leghorn "Shuttle" raid on 24/25 July 1943 ("Operation *Bellisosa*")
- Boundary between SQA1 (HQ Milan) and SAQ2 (HQ Padua) Italian Air commands, with the SQA1 area
- ⚓ Naval Base
- 🛢 Oil refinery
- ▭ Zone of operational responsibility of Luftflotte 3 and its nightfighter units based in northwest France, Belgium and the Netherlands
- - - - Border between German-occupied France and Vichy France until November 1942

1. Italy attacks Greece on 28 October 1940
2. Crete — taken by German paratroopers in May 1941
3. British take Tripoli 23 January 1943. Axis forces withdraw to the Mareth Line in southern Tunisia. Italian rule ends in Libya
4. Tunisia: final Axis surrender in North Africa on 13 May 1943
5. Blida and Maison Blanche airfields near Algiers. These airfields were used by Bomber Command Lancasters on the 'shuttle' attacks (Operation *Bellisosa*) on 23/24 June (target: La Spezia) and 24/25 July 1943 (target: Leghorn)
6. Malta: RAF Wellingtons were based there but it was also an emergency landing area for Bomber Command aircraft
7. Operation *Husky* — the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily — 10 July 1943
8. Rome contained the Comando Supremo (the Italian High Command) and the Ministero Dell'Aeronautica. The centre of the Fascist government, Rome was rejected as a target for Bomber Command due to concern over damaging the city's religious and cultural sites
9. Salon and Vallon airfields, near Marseilles. RAF Bomber Command used this for the short-lived 'Haddock Force', comprising Wellingtons, for operations against Italy during June 1940
10. Switzerland: throughout the war the Swiss submitted protests about Bomber Command's violation of their airspace. This does affect the routing of operations to Italy in 1943, which had to continue through South-East France
11. Battle of El Alamein (from 22 October—11 November 1942). RAF Bomber Command is asked to support the offensive by bombing cities in Northern Italy, especially the port of Genoa
12. Operation *Torch* — the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa — from 8—16 November 1942
13. Lac de Bourget (left) and Lake Annecy (right); important physical features that were used as navigation aids by RAF Bomber Command. Pathfinders dropped flares above the lakes to indicate their location to the Main Force
14. Channel Islands — Bomber Command's Whitley aircraft refuel here before attacking Italy in mid-June 1940
15. Italian nightfighter bases of Venegono (north-west of Milan) and Lagnasco (south south-west of Turin)
16. Cassibile, Sicily: Italians sign armistice on 3 September 1943. Announced five days later as American forces conduct the Salerno landings and British come ashore at Taranto



# CHRONOLOGY

## 1940

**31 May** Anglo-French Supreme War Council's tenth meeting passes Resolution to bomb Italy immediately after it enters the war.

**10 June** Mussolini declares war on Britain and France. HQ Bomber Command issues Operation Order No 36 and the Italy target list to 3 Group.

**11/12 June** Operation: Turin (36 Whitleys of 4 Group). 3 Group's Wellingtons ('Haddock Force') prevented from taking off from bases in southern France by local French authorities.

**15/16 June** Operation: Genoa (eight Wellingtons of 'Haddock Force').

**16/17 June** Operation: Genoa, Milan (22 Wellingtons of 'Haddock Force'). British aircraft return to the UK in view of French surrender.

**24/25 June** France signs armistices with Germany and Italy.

**13/14 August** Operation: Milan, Turin (35 Whitleys).

**15/16 August** Operation: Milan, Turin, Genoa (four Whitleys).

**18/19 August** Operation: Milan, Turin (four Whitleys).

**24/25 August** Operation: Sesto San Giovanni, Sesto Calende, Busto Arsizio (ten Whitleys).

**26/27 August** Operation: Turin, Sesto San Giovanni (11 Whitleys).

**27/28 August** Operation: Turin, Sesto San Giovanni (ten Whitleys).

**1/2 September** Operation: Turin, Sesto San Giovanni (five Whitleys).

**2/3 September** Operation: Genoa (five Whitleys).

**5/6 September** Operation: Turin (two Whitleys).

**3 October** War Cabinet informed about Swiss complaints of Bomber Command's violation of national airspace.

**6 October** Air Ministry signal to HQ Bomber Command: continue to bomb Italy.

**20/21 October** Operation: Turin, Sesto San Giovanni, Aosta, Savona (six Whitleys).

**28 October** Italy attacks Greece. Bomber Command ordered to undertake 'maximum effort' against northern Italy that night, weather depending.

**30 October** Evill sends signal to Peirse: 'In addition to these primary tasks for your offensive against Germany, I am to request that your offensive against objectives in Northern Italy may be continued whenever favourable conditions occur.'

**5/6 November** Operation: Turin, Milan, Aosta (19 Whitleys).

**8/9 November** Operation: Turin, Milan (ten Whitleys).

**11 November** Directive to 4 Group stating northern Italy should be attacked with all available aircraft, whenever weather conditions are favourable.

**23/24 November** Operation: Turin (seven Whitleys).

**26/27 November** Operation: Turin (eight Whitleys).

**4 December** 3 Group's Wellingtons take over bombing Italy role, owing to 4 Group's shortage of Whitleys. They are specifically instructed not to send more than 15 aircraft.

**4/5 December** Operation: Turin, Milan (15 Wellingtons).

**18/19 December** Operation: Milan, Genoa (seven Wellingtons).

**21/22 December** Operation: Porto Marghera (five Wellingtons).

## 1941

**11/12 January** Operation: Turin (11 Wellingtons).

**12/13 January** Operation: Porto Marghera, Turin (nine Wellingtons).