6 The Crisis of the Mediterranean Command, June–December 1944

THE AFTERMATH OF ‘ANVIL/DRAGOON’

The period leading from the fall of Rome and the tortuous end to the ‘Anvil’ debate, ushered in a new phase in the history of AFHQ and its management of the Mediterranean Command, culminating in the Athens revolt and subsequent upheaval in Greece in December, and producing great strains in Anglo-American relations. With the Normandy landings of 6 June 1944, the Mediterranean had effectively become a strategic backwater in the war against Germany. Nevertheless, despite these fundamental changes in the military and strategic position, the political significance of developments in a widened Mediterranean theatre was assuming ever larger proportions, making the activities of AFHQ of continued concern to decision-makers in London and Washington.

The gradual withdrawal of German forces from south east Europe and the arrival of the Red Army in the Balkans gave added impetus to the need to tackle questions about post-war settlements in the countries concerned. At the same time indigenous communist resistance movements were also asserting their respective voices and claims to power, in Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece and northern Italy. Increasingly pre-occupied with their post-war interests in the eastern Mediterranean by the summer of 1944, the British were determined that AFHQ’s resources should be employed in ways which could underwrite their political influence in the region, as well as speed the end of the war. This provoked disagreements in British circles over the best methods of securing American acquiescence that revealed much about the nature of the Anglo-American partnership and changing notions of seniority.

The conclusion to this period of often intense diplomatic activity was the intervention of British forces in Greece in October 1944 and the opposition that arose from EAM/ELAS. The outbreak of fighting in Athens in December 1944, a result of British ‘active and aggressive action’ according to Admiral Leahy, precipitated an awkward moment in Anglo-American relations with latent images and suspicions flooding...
to the surface along with heavy criticisms of a 'reactionary' British policy and intervention in the internal affairs of other states, contrary to the declared principles of the United Nations.¹

As AFHQ undertook its long-awaited move to Caserta in mainland Italy during July 1944, its staff had few ideas that its very future as a theatre-wide, integrated command was under threat from London.² Any sense of satisfaction brought to the Prime Minister by the capture of Rome had been short-lived, and his temper worsened as Alexander’s attempts to deliver a decisive blow in Italy were frustrated by stubborn German resistance and the withdrawal of American and French forces for 'Anvil'. The failure of the British to convince the President and the JCS to give up the invasion of southern France for the sake of an ambitious plan to strike through north east Italy toward Vienna was a bitter blow to Churchill, underlining the extent to which the Americans were now in a position to virtually dictate strategic policy irrespective of opposition from an increasingly dispensable ally.³ In a final protest to the President over the 'Anvil' decision, which the COS persuaded him not to send, the Prime Minister had talked about the one-sided control of events being exercised by the Americans and his view that

... we are entitled to press for better and more equal treatment ...

Otherwise, it would be necessary, in particular, to devise some other machinery for conducting the war, including the separation of the commands in the Mediterranean... ⁴

In his own frustration at the limitations of British power, Churchill had begun to entertain the prospect of abandoning the system of a unified, Mediterranean-wide command structure, argued for so eloquently by the COS and himself in the period before the 'Sextant' meetings at the end of 1943.

A major British concern was that Washington eventually intended to pull the entire US troop presence out of Italy, leaving only British-controlled forces with the prime responsibility of carrying on the campaign.⁵ By mid-1944 the British knew full well that with their manpower and resources already stretched to beyond safe limits, such a development would spell the end for major offensive options in Italy. Alexander appealed to the CIGS not to relegate the Italian theatre to any kind of secondary status, but Brooke could offer nothing more than consolation. As 5th Army formations began to leave Italy for 'Anvil', doubts were also cast over the fight left in French units soon scheduled to be withdrawn from the land battle. To compensate for the losses in Italy, Alexander and Wilson scoured the Mediterranean in July 1944 hunt-