Sir Harry Hinsley stated that from the outset of the Second World War, POWs were considered important sources of political and military intelligence, although it was not until 1942 that the various British military intelligence branches classified POW interrogations as among their more reliable sources of information. Indeed, according to Lieutenant-Colonel G. L. Harrison, a former commander of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (CSDIC) in Egypt, at least 40 per cent of British intelligence had been obtained from POW interrogations, ‘while most essential confirmation of that obtained from other sources’ had also been acquired from this source.¹ With the release over the last decade of voluminous amounts of intelligence material in British and overseas archives a more complete picture has emerged regarding the utilisation of material gleaned from POW interrogations. New research not only confirms Hinsley’s earlier contentions, but has also provided scholars with fresh and exciting avenues with which to demonstrate how useful POW intelligence was to the Allies in defeating the Axis powers.²

The significance of British efforts in extracting, collating and distilling material painstakingly collected from Italian POWs during the war is three-fold. First and foremost, Italian POWs were the largest single source of captives held by the British and her imperial partners between 1940 and 1943. As we have seen, the incarceration by mid-September 1943 of almost 500,000 Italian service personnel – 316,000 of whom were in British hands – provided the Allies with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of potentially useful information on a myriad operational, strategic and political matters. Secondly, it was the policies and procedures developed to cope with this large intake of Italians which provided the basis for a more systematic approach to processing intelligence material garnered from POW interrogations. This is especially true
in the area of political ‘re-education’. While historians have written extensively about the de-Nazification of Germany and its military after the Second World War, the ‘de-Fascisation’ of Italy’s armed forces has been woefully neglected. Nonetheless, it was the pioneering work involving the ‘re-education’ of these Italian captives which pre-dates those schemes subsequently directed by the Allies against their German prisoners later in the war. Finally, and running in parallel with political reindoctrination, it was the Italian POWs who first provided the raw material for British propaganda and psychological warfare experts to develop and sharpen their black arts in the all-important battle for hearts and minds. However, before an analysis of the specific procedures and problems can be undertaken, it is first necessary to sketch briefly the administrative structures which were established by each of the three British armed services to deal with the acquisition and integration of intelligence material obtained from Axis, in particular Italian, POWs in the formative years between September 1939 and the end of 1942.

The machinery for screening and intelligence gathering

It was not until the latter stages of the First World War that senior British intelligence experts realised the necessity of developing a long-term strategy for the screening and detailed interrogation of selected enemy captives. Although it had been understood by some British field commanders that POWs were a potential source of limitless but as yet untapped information on a whole range of technical and military subjects – information which they employed in their individual sectors of the Western Front – it was not until 1917, with the creation by the War Office of a small organisation in Cromwell Road, London, that the real general intelligence potential of enemy POWs was fully recognised.

The Royal Navy and British Army at first jointly operated the new sub-branch of the War Office’s intelligence directorate, designated MI1(a). Its primary task was to secure from those German POWs relocated to camps in the United Kingdom specialist knowledge which had not been revealed during their initial interrogations in France. Keen attention was paid to captured submariners and aircrew who possessed vital and complex technical knowledge. With the establishment of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in April 1918, bombing target intelligence became of ‘paramount’ importance. As MI1(a) extended its activities and consolidated its inter-service basis, new quarters were obtained in Wimbledon, complete with special listening devices, in order to deal with its increasing obligations. The formal opening of these facilities