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The Reconstruction of the Postwar Italian Armed Forces

For the British government, an active involvement in the reorganisation of the Italian armed forces and the cultivation of close ties with the Italian military were important components of its foreign policy towards Italy in the immediate postwar period. British reconstruction plans for the Italian Army had several goals. These were, to build an armed force that would be properly equipped and adequately trained to preserve law and order in Italy and to defend its frontiers from a localised Yugoslav attack once Allied forces were withdrawn after the signing of the Italian Peace Treaty. At the same time, a fine balance had to be struck between Italy’s legitimate defence needs and the necessity to curb any menace it could pose to its neighbours.¹ In addition to these obvious aspirations there were others. The British saw involvement in Italian military and police matters and the fostering of close links with these circles as a means for preserving their influence in post-treaty Italian affairs, bolstering Britain’s position vis-à-vis the ascendancy of American power in the region and Soviet encroachment, whilst, at the same time, checking the influence of the PCI in the new Italian forces establishment.² Finally, there was the desire for Italy to become a client state of the British arms industry through procurement from Britain of standardised equipment since this would perpetuate an Italian reliance upon British equipment and reinforce the British export drive on which domestic hopes of economic up-turn were based.³

This chapter will evaluate the contribution of Britain to the reconstruction of the armed and police forces of liberated Italy. It will analyse the thinking behind British involvement in Italian military and police matters. It will identify the factors that frustrated the implementation of British policies in the postwar period despite Britain’s deep involvement in these areas during the period 1943–5. It will assess the impact
of the presence of the PCI in all Italian governments up to spring 1947 and the reluctance of the Italian government to commit itself to the various schemes offered by the British. It will also look at the impact of Britain’s own financial problems during this period and the change in American policy towards the Mediterranean during the second half of 1946, which signalled the beginning of the transition of the Mediterranean from an area of British patronage into one of American hegemony.  

The historical background

One of the first projects of reconstruction and rehabilitation undertaken by the Allied military authorities was to create new armed and police forces for the new Italy. There were two factors pressing the Allies to undertake this project. First, they needed to ensure that the Allied forces that were deployed in maintaining law and order in the Italian South could be kept to a minimum so that men could be freed up to assume active duty in the war against Germany. Second, there was the urgent need to bolster the shattered confidence of the Regno del Sud. The war was not being waged in a political vacuum and the powers that were soon to be victorious were positioning themselves with the postwar order already in mind. Italy had been liberated by the West and as the manoeuvrings behind the creation of the Allied Control Commission had shown, the Western powers were not prepared to relinquish their influence in the region to the USSR.

The task of equipping and reorganising new military and police forces for the Regno fell on British shoulders because of Britain’s numerical superiority in the Mediterranean theatre and its desire to assume a ‘senior partner’ status in the Allied administration of Italy. Every aspect of the Regno del Sud was in chaos. Nothing of the old military structure of Italy remained. There was no organisation and few military records. The war had inflicted savage losses on the Fascist armed forces. In addition, approximately one million former Italian combatants were detained as POWs in various countries. Italy found itself divided after its capitulation and the remaining rump of the Italian army that was loyal to the ‘cobelligerent’ regime of the South, the King and Badoglio, came under the direct control of the Allied Command; in contrast, the forces in the North which remained loyal to Mussolini, obeyed the Salò Republic Command, a front for the Wehrmacht. Above all, however, successive humiliating defeats during the war had eroded the morale of the Italian forces. Initial efforts at reconstruction, understandably