

THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940-45 (I) EUROPE 1940-43



PHILIP S JOWETT STEPHEN ANDREW

First published in 2000 by Osprey Publishing,
Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford OX2 9LP
Email: info@ospreypublishing.com

© 2000 Osprey Publishing Limited.

All rights reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, electrical, chemical, mechanical, optical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be addressed to the Publishers.

ISBN 1 85532 864 X

Editor: Martin Windrow
Design: Alan Hamp/Design for Books
Origination by Colourpath, London
Printed in China through World Print Ltd

00 01 02 03 04 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR A CATALOGUE OF ALL TITLES PUBLISHED BY OSPREY MILITARY,
AUTOMOTIVE AND AVIATION PLEASE WRITE TO:
The Marketing Manager, Osprey Publishing Ltd, PO Box 140,
Wellingborough, Northants NN8 4ZA, United Kingdom
Email: info@OspreyDirect.co.uk

The Marketing Manager, Osprey Direct USA, PO Box 130, Sterling Heights,
MI 48311-0310, USA
Email: info@OspreyDirectUSA.com

Or visit the Osprey website at:
<http://www.ospreypublishing.com>

Dedication

To Buckweed

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help of a large number of people who have assisted me in many ways. I must record my gratitude to Stephen Andrew, Charles Buttery, John Carlin, Neil Champion, Paul Cornish, Rudy D'Angelo, Dino Di Masuo, Mark Dial, Ian Drury, Steve Kiddle, Darko Pavlovic, Glyn Roberts, R.Tomasi and Paul V.Walsh.

For their assistance with photographs I must thank Piero Crociani, Alexei Ivanov, Alessandro Massignani, Franco Mesturini, Marco Novarese, Robert Stedman and Rex Trye. Particular thanks must go to Nigel Thomas for his great help with the rank charts, and to Count Ernesto Vitetti for his hospitality. I would also like to thank James Burd, Marcello Ravaioli and Guido Rosignoli for their patience and for their willingness to share their great knowledge of the subject with a fellow enthusiast.

Author's note

For those unfamiliar with Italian Army nomenclature, note that Alpini (plural), Alpino (singular) refer to true mountain troops, with at least a degree of specialised equipment and training; and Bersaglieri (pl.), Bersagliere (sing.) to the light infantry; both categories are historically regarded as elite troops.

Designations suggesting specialist roles for infantry divisions (see key to Table A, page 38) – e.g. 'mountain' or 'semi-motorised' etc. – should be understood as largely theoretical, if not pure propaganda. In practice the issue of vehicles and other equipment fell far short of the level needed to give these titles any practical meaning.

The acronym MVSN refers to the Fascist Party's 'Blackshirt' militia units of the *Milizia Volontaria per Sicurezza Nazionale*. To avoid confusion we do not use here the Italian plural abbreviation CCNN for *camicie nere*, 'Blackshirts'.

In the photograph credits, USSME = Ufficio Storico Dello Stato Maggiore Esercito.

A short bibliography for the whole series will appear in the third volume. Details of the establishment of e.g. armoured and motorised divisions will appear in the second volume.

Artist's note

Readers may care to note that the original paintings from which the colour plates in this book were prepared are available for private sale. All reproduction copyright whatsoever is retained by the Publishers. All enquiries should be addressed to:
Stephen Andrew,
87 Ellisland, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow G66 2UA, Scotland
The Publishers regret that they can enter into no correspondence upon this matter.

TITLE PAGE A private of the 227th Infantry Regiment. His M1940 jacket bears the yellow-over-green collar patches of the 'Rovigo' Infantry Division; and on his breast the 'CSIR Cross' award identifies him as one of the quarter of a million Italian troops who served on the Russian Front. (USSME)

THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940-45 (1) EUROPE 1940-43

THE ITALIAN ARMY IN JUNE 1940

ITALY ENTERED THE Second World War on 10 June 1940, a full ten months after the start of the conflict. Since his appointment as prime minister – with considerable popular support – in 1922, the demagogue Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) had forged his Fascist Party government into a generally effective dictatorship under his own leadership as *'Il Duce'*; with the powerless King Victor Emmanuel III as a national figurehead. (While many outrages and murders were committed in its name, it should perhaps be noted that at least before 1943 Mussolini's regime was not guilty of the large scale, systematic barbarities of Nazi Germany.)

In May 1939 Mussolini had concluded the 'Pact of Steel', a military alliance with Germany. He had nevertheless held back from joining his Axis partner in hostilities against the democracies, because he knew that his country was ill-prepared to fight a major war against European opponents. Now, however, with France on the verge of defeat and Britain fighting alone against the might of the seemingly invincible German Wehrmacht, he took his chance. He believed that to delay any longer would put Italy at risk of losing out on the sharing of the spoils of victory. His gamble on a quick Axis victory was to prove ruinously costly for his country; it would lead to the overthrow of his 21-year rule, and to his own death.

* * *

On paper Italy had a large and fairly well-equipped army, and although Mussolini's much-quoted boast of 8 million Italian bayonets was not credible she could raise a large if unmodernised force. The Army's mobilised strength in June 1940 was 1,630,000; this would later rise to a peak of 2,563,000. The Italian Army was quite capable of fighting a one-campaign war when all the country's resources could be channelled into a national effort on one front. This had been the case in the First World War, when the Italian Army had managed to sustain a long and bitter struggle against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Now, however, she would be drawn into war on at least two fronts simultaneously, fighting large scale campaigns in both North Africa and the Balkans, and later providing a large contingent for Germany's Russian Front. This kind of total war was far beyond the capacity of Italy's limited resources.

At the outbreak of war the Italian Army had a strength of 73 divisions made up of 106 infantry regiments, 12 regiments of Bersaglieri (light infantry), 10 of Alpini (mountain troops), 12 regiments of cavalry, 5 tank regiments, 32 of artillery and 19 of engineers. The Italian Army was basically an infantry force with very little mechanisation and a shortage of the basic requirements for modern war. Much of the equipment dated

An officer photographed in a trench during the Albanian/Greek border campaign of 1940-41. He wears the M1940 grey-green uniform with captain's cuff ranking; the M1933 steel helmet with branch badge stencilled on the front in black; a holstered Beretta on a 'Sam Browne' belt; and double socks instead of puttees. He is not, however, an infantryman, but a member of a Finance Guard unit – some of these security troops would see stiff fighting in Greece (see Plate H1). In the background note the Finance Guard version of the Alpine felt hat; enlisted ranks wore black feathers from a yellow boss, officers white feathers from a metal boss. (Franco Mesturini Archives)



back to the turn of the century and the First World War, and many of even the more modern items were approaching obsolescence.

One telling statistic is that in June 1940 the Italian Army had a total of 7,970 pieces of artillery of which only 246 had been manufactured since 1930. A majority of the field guns in use were ex-Austrian models handed over as war reparations in 1918. Many of the guns had been improved by replacing the old wooden-spoked wheels with steel; they might look modern because of these cosmetic alterations, but the barrels were still 40 years old.

The Italian armoured force was quite formidable on paper, with over 700 tanks – a strength which compared favourably with the other powers. Closer examination, however, shows that the vast majority of these ‘tanks’ were in fact tankettes: tiny two-man vehicles armed with machine guns and with armour too thin to stop machine gun bullets. More modern types were in production; but as these newer models came into service they were quickly seen to be outclassed even by the British tanks – themselves hardly the most impressive in Europe – which they were to face in North Africa.

The Italian infantry division had a different structure from those of other contemporary armies in that it only had two infantry regiments and one artillery regiment on strength, whereas in most other armies a division had at least three regiments of infantry plus three or four groups of artillery. This so-called ‘binary’ type of division was a major weakness, even if on paper it gave the impression that the Italian Army had more formations. Many of the divisions were far from up to strength – out of the 73 on paper only some 20 were fully manned and equipped.

The MVSN

The ‘Blackshirts’ of the MVSN or ‘Voluntary Militia for National Security’ were the military arm of the Italian Fascist Party. Originally the militia had a public security role, but from the early 1930s it was militarised and was considered as Italy’s fourth armed service after the Royal Army, Navy and Air Force. Raised from volunteer members of the Fascist Party between the ages of 17 and 50 (in two age classes, the older men serving in Territorial battalions), it was supposed to provide a military force of unquestioning loyalty to Mussolini’s regime.

In an effort to integrate the MVSN with the Royal Army a Blackshirt ‘legion’ (two battalions, each nominally 670 strong) was added to each infantry division to act as a ‘highly motivated’ force within the formation. The introduction of the MVSN units into the order of battle of the Royal Army was greatly resented by Army commanders, who distrusted the MVSN and suspected their lack of military experience. In addition seven purely MVSN divisions were raised to fight in the Ethiopian campaign of 1935-36. Four MVSN divisions were also raised to fight in North Africa in 1940, and these were all destroyed in the early fighting. As the war progressed the more reliable

OPPOSITE A group of officers leave their HQ during a pre-war exercise. From NB right to left: foreground, an Alpini lieutenant-colonel – note chevron ranking just visible on side of hat; middle-ground, a general commanding an army; middle-ground, an Alpini colonel with a divisional shield on his left sleeve; background, a major of the Transport Corps. All these officers wear the ‘cordellino’ uniform, with two black velvet stripes down the breeches flanking a central piping in the branch colour. For rank insignia details see chart on page 41. (Rex Trye)

The crew of a M1935 81mm mortar during a pre-war training exercise. The caporale has the M1937 grey-green tunic with black felt collar facings and his divisional patches. His black sleeve chevrons are the larger pattern used from 1937 to 1939. Although we cannot see it, the lanyard around his neck is probably attached to a holstered 10.35mm Bodeo Glisenti 1889 revolver. This antique was still in widespread service with the Italian Army in 1940, and was to continue in use until the end of the war. (Vitetti Archive)



1940 Infantry Division Establishment

2 Infantry Regts
of 3 bns
Blackshirt Legion
of 2 bns + Support Coy
Artillery Regt
+ Pack Gun Coy
Mortar Bn
Engineer Bn

14,300 all ranks
270 x LMG, 80 x HMG
126 x 45mm mortars
30 x 81mm mortars
8 x 20mm AA, 24 x 47mm AT
8 x 65mm, 24 x 75mm,
12 x 100mm
45 x tankettes
86 x motor vehicles
71 m/cycles, 153 bicycles

ORDER OF BATTLE

WESTERN ALPS CAMPAIGN, 20 JUNE 1940

Army Group West

GOC: Gen Umberto di Savoia

CofS: Gen Emilio Battisti

Ist Army

GOC: Gen Pietro Pintor

CofS: Gen Fernando Gelich

II Army Corps

‘Forli’, ‘Acqui’, ‘Livorno’ Inf Divs

‘Cuneense’ Alpine Div

III Army Corps

‘Ravenna’, ‘Cuneo’ Inf Divs

Ist Alpine Group (3 Alpine bns plus 2 mountain artillery bns)

and combat-worthy MVSN units were given the title of ‘M Battalions’; some of these fought in both Russia and Yugoslavia as anti-partisan troops.

CAMPAIGNS

France

Italy’s declaration of war against France and Britain on 10 June 1940 was followed on the 20th by the opening of an offensive into French territory in the western Alps and along the Mediterranean coastline. The Italian army of 32 divisions made little headway in the difficult terrain of the mountains, and only managed to capture a few Alpine villages. On the coast they managed to capture the

small French Riviera town of Menton before the French surrender to the Italians was signed on 24 June. The Italian soldiers fought bravely enough, but were let down – as they were to be in future campaigns – by bad planning and organisation. (One small but telling example of the latter was the fact that the army field kitchens often did not have the necessary pots and pans to make the soldiers a hot meal in the freezing conditions in the Alps.) Italian losses for such a short campaign were heavy, with 631 killed, 2,361 wounded, 2,000 cases of frostbite and 600 men missing. This compares with the French losses of 40 killed, 84 wounded and 150 missing.