

that the Germans enjoyed a considerable numerical advantage and were likely to continue to do so. The terrain of southern and central Italy is admirably suited for defensive warfare; the whole of the area between Rome and Naples, except for the Volturno plain at its southern end and the Pontine Marshes at its northern end, is mountainous and unfavourable to manoeuvre and offers on the east coast a continuous series of river lines. The weather in autumn and winter would hamper Allied offensive operations and curtail the value of our air superiority. To hold a line south of Rome was eminently practicable; from the German point of view, therefore, it was eminently desirable. The forces under command of Field-Marshal Kesselring had been engaged in a continuous retreat for almost a year, since November, 1942, a retreat which had brought them from just short of Alexandria to just north of Naples and it was time to put a stop to it. I have mentioned the other reasons which urged the retention of as much of Italy as possible; there was now an additional reason, to give a certain semblance of authority to the recently created Republican Fascist Government by retaining as much territory as possible for it to govern under German supervision.

The line which it was decided to hold, known as the "Winter Line"*, had been reconnoitred by the Germans before the armistice. It was based on the east coast on the River Sangro and on the west on the Garigliano backed by the Aurunci Mountains on the coast and the strong Cassino position rising to the *massif* of Monte Cairo; the centre of the peninsula, the rugged mountains of the Abruzzi, where bears roamed in the fastnesses of the National Park, was considered too difficult to admit of manoeuvre by large forces. On this line the Italian peninsula is at its narrowest, only eighty-five miles from sea to sea. Delaying positions could be held in front of it in order to gain time for the weather to deteriorate still further and allow artificial defences to be constructed to add to the natural strength of the position. There was little hope of holding permanently the Volturno and Biferno, but a stronger defence of these positions could reduce the Allied impetus and give still greater depth to the Winter Line. This new decision involved a reorganisation of the command. Rommel's Army Group "B" in the north was dissolved and on 21st November Kesselring assumed command of the whole theatre. The armoured divisions in North Italy, which would be of little use in the mountains, were relieved for employment in Russia, to be replaced by infantry, including a Mountain Division from the Leningrad front, and the remainder of the forces were put at Kesselring's disposal.†

This German decision to stand south of Rome did not affect my general plan of campaign though it was, of course, destined to affect its

* German "Winterstellung" which means more properly winter position; it was not a line but a series of defended positions in depth.

† Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, a regular artillery officer who transferred to the Luftwaffe when it was recreated, first came to the Mediterranean in late 1941 as commander of Luftflotte 2. In April 1942 he became "Commander-in-Chief South" with authority over all the shores of the Mediterranean and all arms; he was particularly responsible for the campaign in Africa. He now took the title of Commander-in-Chief Southwest (Oberbefehlshaber Südwest or OBSW); the Army ground forces under his command were known as Army Group "C".

timing. It was, as can be seen, a positive assistance to me in carrying out the Combined Chiefs of Staff directive, for if the Germans had adhered to their original intention it would have made it very difficult for me to carry out my mission of containing the maximum enemy forces. An orderly withdrawal up the peninsula would have required only a comparatively small force, aided by the difficulties of the terrain, and although a larger force would be eventually required to hold the selected line, even this would not be immediately required since our build-up in front of that line would be necessarily slow. This peculiar feature of the strategy of the Italian campaign remained unchanged to the end: we had the initiative in operations but the Germans had the initiative in deciding whether we should achieve our object since they were free, other considerations, psychological or political, being excluded, to refuse to allow themselves to be contained in Italy. Had they decided to withdraw altogether, for instance, they could have defended the line of the Alps, or one of the strong river lines in north-eastern Italy, with the minimum forces and, instead of us containing them, they would be containing us. All danger of such an alarming result was removed by Hitler's decision. From the moment of that decision the German Army undertook a commitment as damaging and debilitating as Napoleon's Peninsular campaign, the final result of which was that it saw itself next summer under the deplorable necessity of pouring troops into Italy to retrieve disaster there at the very moment when the Allied invading forces were storming the breaches of the crumbling Western Wall.

One further result of the German decision to stand was to remove the necessity, and the possibility, of a Balkan campaign. I had considered at one time a possible plan of first capturing Naples and Foggia and then, from this firm base in South Italy, launching an operation across the Adriatic. The Germans placed much greater importance on the retention of the Balkans than on the defence of Italy as was shown by the way in which, while withdrawing hastily from Sardinia and Corsica, they turned and struck with all the strength they could collect at a minor British incursion into the Dodecanese. If they continued to withdraw in Italy it would be difficult, as I have just explained, to contain any large force there but we should be certain of a violent reaction if we landed on the eastern shores of the Adriatic. We should also get some military support from the Partisans, though by October the Germans had a pretty firm hold on the coastal areas at least. It would have been a good way, therefore, of carrying out our directive, though we should have required a large increase in our allotment of amphibious equipment and reinforcement in troops. However, now the Germans had decided to allow themselves to be contained in Italy, there was no need for us to go further afield; Campania and Latium were far enough from France. And if there was no need there was certainly no possibility; now that all the German divisions in Italy were to be made available for the southern front we were actually outnumbered and would remain so for some months; there was even the possibility that the enemy might, if we let him, assume the initiative in an attempt to snatch a hasty victory,