

**The History of the Twentieth Century**  
**Episode 390**  
***“Benito è finito”***  
**Transcript**

[music: Fanfare]

*For in war just as in loving  
You must keep on shoving  
Or you'll never get your reward.  
For if you are dilatory  
In the search for lust or glory  
You are up shit creek and that's the truth, Oh, Lord.*

George Patton.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 390. *Benito é finito*.

In May 1943, Hitler and Stalin and their respective military commanders were plotting their 1943 offensives.

That same month, Winston Churchill came to Washington to meet with Franklin Roosevelt for the third time. The UK and the US were plotting their joint 1943 offensive as well; they had already agreed that the next step would be an invasion of Sicily, but their military leaders were once again at odds over what should come afterward.

You'll recall that American military commanders agreed to the invasion of North Africa only reluctantly. Did I say agreed? No, they never agreed. Operation Torch only happened because

Churchill had convinced Roosevelt, who in turn ordered his military to proceed with the invasion against their better judgment.

But that was all behind them now. The Americans had grudgingly agreed to go forward with the next operation proposed by the British—the invasion of Sicily. Operation Husky, they were calling it.

The chief American military commanders, General Marshall and Admiral King, were once again feeling that the British were selling them a bill of goods. Sicily? Okay, the rationale for invading Sicily was hard to dispute. The Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica were using the island as a sort of giant aircraft carrier, anchored in the middle of the Mediterranean and ready to strike against any Allied—read “British”—convoy that had the audacity to attempt to travel between Gibraltar and Suez, leaving the British with no choice but to send soldiers, supplies and equipment bound for Egypt and points east all the way around South Africa.

The Americans, too. American aid to British forces in the Middle East and to the USSR via the Persian Corridor also had to go around South Africa. The Axis had failed to capture the Suez Canal, but even so, they had effectively closed it to Allied shipping by closing the Central Mediterranean.

Longer shipping routes require more cargo ships to transport supplies at the same rate. More cargo ships along this route meant less shipping available to transport soldiers and supplies in any future military operation; the invasion of France for instance. By mid-1943, the US Army had only managed to deliver about three divisions to Britain. Granted, the British had persuaded them to send three other divisions to North Africa, but even so, it was a disappointing start for an army that was supposedly ready, willing, and eager to invade France.

The British had figures showing that reopening the Mediterranean would free up about a million tons of Allied shipping for other uses, like building up American forces in Britain, or building up British forces to oppose Japan in Burma, something the Americans were after the British to get started on.

So an invasion of Sicily was logical and reasonable. But what next? When the British suggested the next step should be an invasion of mainland Italy, the American military resisted fiercely. Now they were convinced that what the British really had in mind was keeping the US military in the Mediterranean, supporting and protecting British colonial interests in Egypt, the Middle East, and India, rather than confronting Germany. The Americans wanted to proceed with the invasion of France.

The British side had their own grievances. The American buildup in Britain was slow, as I mentioned, while they were pouring more and more troops into the battle against Japan, encouraged as they were by the outcome at Guadalcanal. They had committed to a “Germany first” strategy, but, as Churchill ruefully observed, their hearts were in the Pacific.

The Washington conference was a difficult one. Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Alan Brooke, suggested that an invasion of France might not be possible until 1945. Churchill didn't help matters acting, as he often did, as a walking brainstorm. He'd bring up an invasion of Norway. Then an invasion of Sumatra to interdict the Japanese oil supply. Then an invasion of the Balkans. A Balkan invasion had ended the last war, hadn't it? Plus it would threaten German supply lines into Russia, and a powerful Western force in Eastern Europe would deter Stalin from staking a claim to the Balkans after the war.

Talk like that only confirmed the Americans' suspicion that Churchill was more interested in *shaping* the post-war world to his liking than he was in *getting to* the post-war world.

Eventually, the two allies struck a compromise. Yes, after Sicily there would be an invasion of Italy, but with certain conditions. One was that 29 US, British, and Canadian divisions would be stationed in Britain and train in preparation for a landing in France in May 1944. The second was that once Sicily was secure, seven divisions would be transferred from the Mediterranean to Britain, also in preparation for next year's invasion of France. Germany would be defeated by the end of 1944, and in 1945, the Allies would turn their attention to Japan.

As these disagreements were thrashed out, planning was underway for Operation Husky, which created its own set of conflicts. The Allies discovered that the Germans had deployed two divisions to the island: a panzergrenadier division and the Hermann Göring Panzer Division, the Luftwaffe's elite armored division.

Yes, you heard that right. The German air force had an elite armored division. The Army had its elite Großdeutschland Division and the Waffen-SS had their elite Leibstandarte Division, so naturally the Luftwaffe had to have one, too. Remember this the next time someone tries to tell you that fascism produces an efficient military, or an efficient anything.

By the way, just because it's a Luftwaffe armored division, that doesn't mean it's deployed out of airplanes. When you hear that, if you're like me, the image that comes to mind is that of a tank drifting toward the ground under a parachute. It's nothing like that. It's just that all the Luftwaffe's ground forces were designated paratroops, therefore the Hermann Göring Division was designated a paratroop division.

Anyway, when Dwight Eisenhower learned that there were two German divisions stationed on Sicily, he considered calling off the invasion. Winston Churchill could hardly believe it. If the Americans had had their way and invaded France this year, they would obviously have had to face more than two German divisions.

Eisenhower, an American, would be in overall command of the invasion, with British General Sir Harold Alexander as his deputy. Alexander would also command the Allied 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group, the force assigned to Operation Husky. The 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group consisted of Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army and George Patton's I Armored Corps, which would be

redesignated the US 7<sup>th</sup> Army. Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, would be in command of naval operations, and Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder would lead air operations.

Operation Husky was set to become the biggest amphibious invasion ever attempted, and remember that recent experience with amphibious operations has not been encouraging. The Operation Torch landings in French North Africa were a success almost in spite of themselves, because the French defenders were not strongly motivated to resist. If you set aside that example, two of the most important British amphibious operations in recent history were the Gallipoli campaign of the last war and the Dieppe raid in France in 1942, both of which ended badly for the invaders.

The preliminary plans for Operation Husky settled on a strategy of dispersion. Allied units would land at various points around Sicily, in order that Allied units could seize as many ports and airfields as possible as quickly as possible. Ports were needed to supply the invasion force; the rapid capture of airfields would deprive the Italians and Germans of the use of the sizable air units they had stationed on the island.

But when these plans were shown to the commanders meant to carry them out, they were not satisfied. Bernard Montgomery in particular was outspoken in his criticism. Forces dispersed around the periphery of the island could easily be picked off one by one by the centrally located Axis ground forces. Montgomery proposed instead that the landing forces be concentrated on the southeastern corner of the island. That way, they could support each other against any Italian or German attack.

The difficulty with that plan is supply. The major port of Syracuse is near the landing site, but it would take time to capture it, repair it, and begin using it to offload supplies. Until then, supplies for the Allied landing forces would have to be delivered to them on the beaches, and whether that would be enough to keep them fully in supply against an Axis counterattack was debatable.

In the end, Montgomery got his way. Under his plan, the British Eighth Army would land on the southeast corner of Sicily and then advance rapidly north along the eastern shore of the island toward the port of Messina, where the island comes closest to the Italian mainland. The goal would be to cut off Axis units on the island and force another huge surrender like the one in Tunisia.

And what about the other half of the force, the American Seventh Army? Like most British commanders, Montgomery had been less than impressed with the performance of the US Army in North Africa, and judged them in need of further seasoning. Since the Americans couldn't be trusted with any critical responsibilities, Montgomery proposed that the Seventh Army land on the southern shore of Sicily, on the Eighth Army's left flank, then march north along a line parallel to the path of the Eighth Army, but to the west, farther inland. Their responsibility would

be shielding the Eighth Army's left flank against Axis attacks from the west, the interior of the island.

George Patton, commander of that American force, was less than thrilled about an assignment that amounted to guarding Montgomery's flank while he marched to glory. Air Chief Marshal Tedder sympathized. He is supposed to have confided to Patton his opinion of Montgomery: a little man of average ability who thought he was Napoleon. Patton began to wonder aloud whether the Anglo-American alliance might be *too* close. Maybe it would be better if the two militaries fought on different fronts, rather than side by side.

Ever since the fall of Tunisia, Allied bombers were attacking military and industrial targets in Italy. These bombing attacks were deliberately spread across the country to avoid tipping off the Axis about the invasion. The Italians and Germans were expecting some kind of attack on Italy, but the Allies were determined to keep them ignorant of where the strike would land. Bombers from North Africa attacked targets in Sardinia, Sicily, and southern Italy. Bombers from England attacked targets in northern Italy, and bombers in the Middle East attacked targets in Greece.

The British employed other deceptions to conceal the target of the coming operation. In the Middle East, they created a fake army, the Twelfth Army, out of decoy tanks and trucks. Phony radio transmissions were broadcast to create the impression of a large military force assembling. The British put out a call for Greek interpreters, all for the sake of giving the Axis the impression that the invasion force would land in Greece, like the Balkan campaign of the last war.

But the most famous—and most intricate—deception was Operation Mincemeat. A British naval intelligence officer named Ewen Montagu developed a plan that involved depositing a corpse into the waters of the Western Mediterranean, where it would be washed ashore in Spain. The corpse would be dressed as a British officer and would be carrying a briefcase containing documents, including a letter that would indicate that the Allies were planning an assault on Greece, while also using mentioning efforts to create a false appearance that the invasion would actually be against Sicily—in other words, the opposite of the truth. Another letter hinted the invasion would land on Sardinia. Both of these letters were put in sealed envelopes. One of the letters was folded with a single eyelash inside it.

When the corpse reached Spain, Spanish authorities would likely share this information with the German Abwehr, military intelligence, who could be made to believe it if the corpse and the documents on it appeared sufficiently authentic.

Montagu approached a London coroner to see about getting hold of a body. The coroner wryly remarked that dead bodies were the only commodity not in short supply in wartime, but pointed out the difficulties. Corpses belong to people who have families; when those families learn that their loved one has passed on, they generally want to claim the corpse for burial.

The coroner eventually came up with the body of a homeless man of military age who had died in London and had no known relatives. It would not be enough for the corpse to be carrying the one document the British wanted the Germans to see. It would have to be carrying a whole range of papers the existence of which would make the corpse's identity as a military officer plausible.

They settled on the name Major William Martin of the Royal Marines, because there were several officers named Martin in the Marines. The rank of major would make him sufficiently senior that it would be plausible he was carrying sensitive documents, but not so senior that German intelligence would wonder why they'd never before heard of him.

Major Martin's backstory was fleshed out with a range of supporting documents, including identification papers, a letter and photograph from an invented fiancée, a receipt for an engagement ring, and theatre ticket stubs that indicated Martin had recently been in London.

The corpse was delivered to the Royal Navy submarine HMS *Seraph*, which we came across before. *Seraph* dropped the body into the waters off the southwestern Atlantic coast of Spain at 4:15 AM. Barely five hours later, it was recovered by a Spanish fisherman.

Spanish authorities notified the local British consul, who was in on the deception and began an exchange of pre-arranged messages with the British Foreign Office. The Foreign Office told the consul that it was urgent that the papers on the corpse be recovered. This message was sent in a code that was known to the British to have been broken by the Germans.

The following day, the body was released to the British consul and was buried with military honors in a Spanish cemetery.

Spanish authorities retained the briefcase found on the corpse and forwarded it to Madrid. The Abwehr requested the Spanish pass the briefcase on to them. This the Spanish refused to do, although they were willing to extract the letters inside by inserting a narrow probe into the envelope under the flap and using it to wind the letter into a tight cylinder, which could then be slipped out of the envelope without tearing it.

Once the letters were removed, the Spanish photographed them and turned the photographs over to the Abwehr, then put them back into their envelopes by the same method.

The briefcase was then returned to the British consul, who sent it on to London. Another message was sent back to the consul, informing him that investigators had examined the briefcase contents and found no evidence of tampering. This message was also sent in the code known to have been broken by the Germans.

In truth, the investigators who examined the contents concluded the opposite. When the envelopes were opened and the letters examined, the eyelash was no longer there. Close examination of the paper showed evidence of curling from the method the Spanish used to extract it.

So the Spanish had taken the bait. A subsequent Enigma decrypt confirmed the Germans had seen the letters and were expecting an invasion in the Balkans. In fact, as you may have noticed from past episodes, Adolf Hitler had always been paranoid about a possible Allied presence in the Balkans and the possibility of Allied bombers based within range of Romania's crucial oil fields. The Operation Mincemeat deception successfully played to those fears. The military sent a message to Churchill that said, "Mincemeat swallowed rod, line, and sinker by the right people."

If you're thinking all this sounds like something out of a Hollywood spy movie, well, you're almost right. In fact, one of the naval intelligence officers involved in planning Operation Mincemeat was the 35-year-old Lieutenant Commander Ian Fleming, who after the war would go on to write the James Bond novels, based on his experiences in naval intelligence. These novels were subsequently made into a series of successful and influential films. So saying that Operation Mincemeat sounds like a Hollywood spy film is putting the cart before the horse. It would be more accurate to say that Hollywood spy films sound like Operation Mincemeat.

[music: "Spy Music"]

The Operation Mincemeat deception continued to mislead Hitler, Mussolini, and their commanders right up until Allied boots landed on Sicilian shores. Hitler ordered military, air, and naval units diverted to Greece, while Mussolini concentrated on building up defenses in Sardinia. Only Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, now overall commander in the southern theatre, continued to believe that Sicily was the most likely target, but he was unable to persuade Hitler.

The invasion began the night of July 9. The weather was favorable when the invasion force set out, but winds kicked up and the seas grew choppy. Aboard the landing craft, soldiers vomited. Landing craft often came ashore at the wrong places, as had been the case in North Africa.

Inland, early in the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup>, paratroopers from the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and the US 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division also ended up in the wrong places and often injured, the result of the high winds, up to 70 km/h. But even as the paratroopers were landing in southern Sicily, in northern Sicily, Luftwaffe planes were taking off for transfer to bases in Greece, a sign of how effective Operation Mincemeat truly was.

The main objective for the British paratroopers was the Ponte Grande bridge, which allowed easy access to the port city of Syracuse, just north of the British invasion beaches. Most of the paratroopers assigned to this objective found themselves landing in the sea, but thirty of them were able to reach the bridge, disable the demolition charges, and hold the bridge against the Italians for most of the day.

The poor weather gave the Allies one advantage: the Axis side was caught by surprise, because the weather had been so bad their commanders assumed no invasion would be possible until it cleared, so they were unprepared when it came. Allied supply fears proved unfounded, thanks to

the General Motors DUKW, popularly known as “ducks.” These are watertight amphibious trucks, with six wheels, two propellers, and a six-cylinder engine capable of powering either. Thus these “ducks” could not only carry supplies and equipment ashore from vessels at sea, but once ashore carry them across the beach, onto roads, and directly to the units that needed them.

Remember that the Germans and Italians are still using horses to transport their supplies.

Montgomery’s Eighth Army captured Syracuse and fought its way north along the east coast of Sicily, with the armored XIII Corps fighting along the road and the XXX Corps inland to its left.

Farther west, the American 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, known as the Big Red One after its unit insignia, found itself under attack on the 11<sup>th</sup> by armored units of the Hermann Göring Division, equipped with the latest Tiger tanks. The Americans lacked tanks, and quickly discovered that their bazookas were ineffective against the Tigers’ heavy armor, but were saved by naval gunfire from US Navy ships offshore.

Kesselring flew to Sicily on the 12<sup>th</sup> to take stock of the situation first hand. His conclusion? That the Italians were barely fighting at all, and German forces on the island were insufficient against the nine divisions the Allies were employing.

This same day, the 12<sup>th</sup>, Adolf Hitler ordered an end to his Operation Citadel offensive on the Eastern Front. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, he ordered the II Panzer Corps withdrawn from the Eastern Front and sent to Italy to bolster Italian defenses. At long last, two years into the war in the East, Stalin got what he wanted: An Allied threat in the West sufficient to force the withdrawal of German units from the East.

The Americans got a break when the Hermann Göring Division was ordered east to block the British advance. Good news for the Americans, not so good for the British. Kesselring was coming around to the view that holding Sicily was not possible. Therefore, his goal would be to avoid another Tunisgrad. This time, there would be an orderly evacuation of Axis forces from the island. That required holding Messina to the very end, and since Montgomery’s Eighth Army was clearly driving north along the coast toward Messina, they had to be stopped.

The Germans took advantage of Mt. Etna. Etna is an active volcano on the east coast of Sicily. Its snowcapped peak rises to an elevation of nearly 3,400 meters, or 11,000 feet, above sea level. Obviously, the Eighth Army isn’t going over the mountain; it would have to squeeze through the narrow strip of coastland between the mountain and the sea to its east. This chokepoint was the perfect place to set up a defensive line.

With the British stymied there, General Alexander authorized Montgomery to send XXX Corps around the western side of the mountain in an effort to outflank the Axis defense. This meant moving the corps into the zone assigned to Patton, who had not been consulted ahead of time. Patton was not pleased about this. One of his corps commanders, Major General Omar Bradley,



was angrier still and urged Patton to go over Alexander's head and complain directly to Eisenhower. Patton would not, however, much to Bradley's surprise. George Patton was not one to take kindly to this kind of treatment; why was he allowing Alexander and Montgomery to push him around?

The simple answer was, Patton smelled an opportunity. He persuaded Alexander that, with Eighth Army moving west, his army should also move west and capture the port town of Agrigento, on the southwest coast of Sicily. Alexander agreed, and Patton captured Agrigento on July 16. The following day, Patton flew to Tunis to meet with Alexander personally to make the case that the American Seventh Army was being wasted. With its huge inventory of jeeps and trucks and self-propelled artillery, the Americans could move faster than the British. Patton wanted to use that advantage to advance on the port of Palermo, in the northwest of Sicily, and shamed Alexander into giving him permission to proceed.

On July 18, at the Wolf's Lair, Adolf Hitler complained to his doctor once again of chronic stomach pain. This was no doubt stress related, but for the first time, his doctor prescribed oxycodone, an opioid drug manufactured in Germany. It did what oxycodone does, alleviating Hitler's pain while also giving him feelings of euphoria. That afternoon, Hitler flew to Salzburg, and then the following day, on to Treviso, in Italy, to meet with Mussolini and Kesselring and discuss the situation in Sicily.

The atmosphere at this meeting was noticeably chillier than at previous summit meetings between the two fascist dictators, not that Hitler seemed to notice. He ran through another of his long monologues, in which he assured Mussolini that it was normal that the fortunes of war flow back and forth, but the Axis remained in a strong position and would ultimately triumph.

Hitler's harangue was interrupted by the news that for the first time, the Americans had bombed Rome, a development that shocked and frightened the Italians. The city of Rome was in a panic. Hitler dismissed the news as unimportant and instead encouraged Italy to mount a fanatic defense of Sicily. He told Mussolini that if he was willing to do this, Hitler would send the Wehrmacht to support him, but if not, sending more units to Sicily would be a wasted effort.

Mussolini was not inspired by this speech; he seemed depressed, not at all the vigorous and confident optimist he had once been. He suggested to Hitler that the Allied threat in the Mediterranean was a greater danger than the Russians and proposed that Hitler agree to an armistice with Stalin and redeploy his military to defend Italy. Hitler dismissed the idea and told Mussolini all that was needed to assure victory was an iron will. You know, like the one he had.

The meeting was scheduled to last for three days, but the news of the American bombing prompted Mussolini to cut it short, to Hitler's annoyance, and hurry back to Rome. He knew by now that his own political position was on the line.

In elite Italian military and government circles, the invasion of Sicily had set off something like panic. It was hard to see how Italy could resist the Anglo-American alliance on its own, and they were mindful of the Allies' Casablanca declaration that they would accept nothing short of unconditional surrender. The future of Italy itself was on the line, and the situation called for something drastic.

This was the background to Mussolini's suggestion for an armistice in the East and an all-out defense of Italy. Some in Mussolini's cabinet had urged *il Duce* to go farther, to present Hitler with an ultimatum: either end the war in the East and commit fully to the defense of Italy, or else Italy would have no choice but to quit the Axis and seek a separate peace with the British and Americans. But Mussolini was either unwilling to push Hitler that far, or perhaps was afraid to.

Even as the two dictators were conferring, Patton was leading the Seventh Army on its advance to Palermo. The Americans were shocked by what they saw. Sicily was a lovely land of undulating hills, olive groves, and quaint old villages, but its beauty was marred by the wretched destitution of its people, far worse than what they had seen in North Africa. Dirt and disease were everywhere, and the half-starved inhabitants begged the Americans for food.

On July 22, the Seventh Army entered Palermo. The Americans were shocked to find themselves swarmed by cheering crowds of grateful civilians, calling out "Down with Mussolini!" and "Love live America!" Women kissed the soldiers and showered them with flower petals; men shook their hands and offered gifts of almonds and lemons. George Patton, who fancied himself the reincarnation of eight military leaders of the past, put himself up at the Royal Palace of Palermo, where he drank champagne with his field rations. Meanwhile, the Eighth Army were still fighting their way around Mt. Etna.

In Rome, political skullduggery was afoot. Those political and military elites I mentioned before, the ones who feared for the future of Italy—and their own positions—were coming around to the view that Mussolini had gotten Italy into this mess, and if Mussolini was not willing to do something to save the nation, then Mussolini had to be removed. Strikes and protests, mostly in the north of Italy, suggested that the Italian public was also dissatisfied.

Mussolini had in fact instructed his diplomats to use the Vatican as an intermediary to contact the Allies and discuss terms for Italy's capitulation. Friends of the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III were urging him to exercise the authority he had, at least on paper under the Italian constitution, to dismiss Mussolini as prime minister, but the King hesitated to take such a drastic step, considering it might just as easily lead to him losing his crown as it might to Mussolini losing his job.

And then there was Marshal Sir Pietro Badoglio, the former commander of the Italian military, who had been forced to resign after the disastrous Italian invasion of Greece, episode 335, never mind that the invasion had been Mussolini's idea and Badoglio had been the only senior military commander to oppose it. He was the one who was forced to resign.

On July 22, the same day the Americans entered Palermo, Mussolini met with the King to brief him on the meeting with Hitler. Mussolini also reported on his diplomatic efforts to strike a deal with the Allies and told the King it would take time to lead the nation away from war, but that he expected to conclude a peace deal by September. The King expressed his approval, and Mussolini left the meeting convinced he had the King's support.

Mussolini did not have the support of Dino Grandi, a Fascist politician who had been an early supporter of Mussolini and had served in his government. Grandi had never approved of Italy's entry into the war, and he had been dismissed from Mussolini's cabinet last February, when Mussolini reorganized his government. Grandi had been given a seat on the Grand Council of Fascism, the Fascist Party's highest authority. Now he used that position to call for a meeting of the Grand Council to debate Mussolini's conduct of the war.

This would be the first meeting of the Grand Council in four years, and Mussolini went into it apparently little concerned about what might happen. Grandi came armed with a resolution calling on the King to reclaim his powers as commander in chief of the Italian military, an obvious swipe at Mussolini. Other Council members came with resolutions more friendly to *il Duce*.

The meeting came to order at 5:00 that afternoon, and ran past midnight. Speaker after speaker criticized, or occasionally defended, Mussolini, who was himself strangely quiet. Near midnight, Grandi called for a vote, which was itself unprecedented. The Grand Council had never before held a vote. That was old fashioned and democratic. Customarily, the Grand Council just debated and *il Duce* made the decisions. At 2:00 AM the vote was held. Grandi's resolution passed, 19-8. Among those who voted in favor was Marshal Emilio de Bono, the old and respected military leader who had led Italian troops in the 1911 war against Turkey, the First World War, and the invasion of Ethiopia. Also voting in favor was Mussolini's own son-in-law and ex-foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano.

Mussolini spent the rest of the night discussing the meaning of the vote with his supporters. They concluded that the resolution merely amounted to a recommendation to the King, and since the King was on Mussolini's side, there was little to be concerned about.

*Il Duce* went to work the next day, July 25, without having slept. He scheduled an audience with the King to discuss the resolution, then met with the Japanese ambassador to Rome. In that meeting he urged the Japanese government to join with him in calling for Hitler to end the war in the East. Then he went on a visit to inspect the damage done by the American bombing of Rome.

At 5:00 that afternoon, it was time to go to the palace and meet with the King. His wife Rachele, tried to talk him out of going through with the appointment, warning him, "You won't be back." He told her that the King was his friend.

When Mussolini arrived for the meeting, he began to tell the King about the resolution. The King, who knew all about it, cut him off and told him that circumstances required that he submit his resignation. Marshal Badoglio would succeed him as prime minister. When Mussolini left the meeting, the Army took him into custody. For his own protection, they said. Maybe they even meant it.

And just like that, Mussolini's twenty-year rule over Italy ended.

When the news was announced that evening, the reaction across Italy was jubilation. Crowds poured into the streets, singing and chanting "*Benito è finito*," that is, "Benito is finished." In Milan, they stormed the prison and released anti-Fascist political prisoners. Across Italy, they tore down Fascist propaganda posters. Protesters armed with hammers and chisels attacked Fascist emblems and statuary on public buildings. Protesters tore Fascist Party pins off the clothes of anyone caught wearing them and stomped the pins into the sidewalk.

What would come next? The Allies could guess that the removal of Mussolini was the first step in a process that would lead to an Italian peace offer, but what should the response be? Roosevelt and Churchill had already laid down a marker: unconditional surrender. Would they really stick to that and carry on a war against a nation that was asking for an armistice?

In Berlin, the news came as a shock. You have to understand that to a committed Fascist or Nazi, fascism was the wave of the future. It was the modern, twentieth-century system. To see a fascist government overthrown in a day, and the news greeted by cheering crowds calling for a return to discredited old-style bourgeois democracy was a shock. That was supposed to be impossible.

Hitler was furious, not only because of how the Italians had treated his comrade Mussolini, but by the clear implication that Italy was poised to abandon the war. The new government was publicly swearing it would remain loyal to the Axis alliance, but Hitler didn't believe it for a minute. He was talking about dropping paratroopers into Rome.

What would happen next? Well, that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank David for his kind donation, and thank you to Tom for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like David and Tom help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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The end of year holidays are upon us, so it's that time of year when I remind you that donations to and patronages of *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift...for me. You never have to worry if it's the right size or the right color or if it's to my tastes, and I can promise you it will never be returned.

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As is my custom, I'm going to release a special Christmas episode this week on the 25<sup>th</sup>. This episode is my gift to you, my listeners. In past years, I've used these Christmas episodes to talk about scientific topics, and I will this time as well, but again, this being 1943, the obvious science topic is the atom bomb project. Not exactly a Christmas-y topic, but the best I can do in wartime.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we talk some more about mass murder. Sorry, I held off as long as I could. The Warsaw Ghetto rises up against the Nazis and the German Army finds out where the bodies are buried. Katyn Forest, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As part of the Operation Mincemeat deception, notice of the death of the fictitious Major Martin was included in the regular list of war casualties published in the June 4, 1943 edition of *The Times*. Coincidentally, that same issue of *The Times* noted the death of the English actor and writer Leslie Howard.

Howard was one of the best known film stars of the time, and I will have some more to say about him when I get back to talking about Hollywood films. For now, I'll just note that he was best known for playing the title role in the 1934 British film *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and as Professor Henry Higgins in the 1938 British film *Pygmalion*, based on the play by George Bernard Shaw. The latter performance earned him the second of his two Academy Award nominations for Best Actor.

In America, he was remembered first and foremost for his portrayal of Ashley Wilkes, the dashing Southern gentleman whom Scarlett O'Hara wishes to marry but can't in *Gone with the Wind*, the 1939 film adapted from the novel of the same name by Margaret Mitchell.

Howard was one of the 17 people, thirteen passengers and four crew members, who died on June 1, 1943 when German fighter planes shot down their airliner over the Bay of Biscay. There were no survivors.

The flight in question was BOAC flight 777. (That's BOAC as in British Overseas Airways Corporation, which was later merged into British Airways.) The plane was an American Douglas DC-3 owned by the Dutch airline KLM and operated by BOAC. Flight 777 flew four times per week between Lisbon and England.

Lisbon is, of course, the capital of neutral Portugal. During the war, both sides respected Portuguese neutrality and both sides flew civilian passenger flights in and out of Lisbon's Portela Airport. Spies of many nations maintained surveillance over the passengers arriving and departing on these flights. One BOAC employee who worked at the airport at the time described it as "like *Casablanca*, but twentyfold." He was referring to the 1942 American film.

BOAC Flight 777 came under particularly close scrutiny from Axis spies because it was a known route used by British spies entering and leaving Europe. The British also used it to ferry home British POWs who'd escaped from Occupied Europe.

Leslie Howard left Hollywood for England in 1939 to help support the British war effort. He made anti-Nazi films and was on this aircraft returning to England after a tour of Portugal and Spain, during which he promoted those films and the British cause.

Flight 777 was shot down by a squadron of German Ju-88 heavy fighters, which were patrolling the Bay of Biscay to identify returning German U-boats and escort them back to their bases in France.

The downing of Flight 777 became a worldwide news story, mostly because of the death of the celebrated film star. The British government denounced the attack as a war crime, which it was, but this being wartime, other news stories, like the invasion of Sicily, soon took over the front pages of the newspapers.

Why did the Luftwaffe shoot down Flight 777? Howard's son Ronald—not that Ron Howard—firmly believed that his father's death was ordered by Joseph Goebbels because the German propaganda minister saw Howard's work as dangerous to the Nazi cause. Another theory suggests that Howard was doing espionage for British intelligence while in Portugal and Spain, which may well have been true, and he was killed for that reason, or simply to demoralize the British public.

Another theory posits that the Germans believed Winston Churchill was on the plane. Churchill had just concluded that meeting with Franklin Roosevelt in Washington that I mentioned at the beginning of the episode and was on his way back to Britain. It has been suggested that Leslie Howard's agent and friend, Alfred Chenhalls, who was traveling with him and who bore a resemblance to Churchill, including a fondness for cigars, was seen boarding the plane by a German spy who mistakenly concluded that Churchill was attempting to return to Britain incognito aboard this plane.

But why shoot down an unarmed plane, when it would have been easy, and perhaps more valuable to the Germans, simply to intercept the plane and force it to land in France. The more prosaic, and more likely, explanation for the attack is that it was a mistake. Long after the war, researchers tracked down some of the German pilots involved. They said they did not know they were attacking a civilian plane and expressed anger that they were not informed prior to their mission that a civilian airliner would be in the vicinity.

[music: Closing War Theme]