



Leading Myths: “Churchill was Silent About the Bombing of Monte Cassino”

RICHARD M. LANGWORTH • A DISCUSSION AND SOURCES

I have some questions about Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s silence over the 1944 bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey, and his later, contradictory reconstruction of facts.

(1) Immediately after the bombing, on 15 February 1944, Churchill officially said nothing about an event on newspaper front pages all over the world. By contrast, Roosevelt tried to explain it in the White House press conference by revealing an Eisenhower letter about Italian historical monuments versus military necessity.

(2) Churchill remained silent about the bombing of the Abbey in his speech in Parliament on 22 February, although he went into great detail about the Italian military and political situation.

(3) As far as I know, Churchill described the Monte Cassino bombing only after the war, in *The Second World War*: “The monastery dominated the whole battlefield, and naturally General Freyberg, the Corps Commander concerned, worked to have it heavily bombarded from the air before he launched the infantry attack. The army commander, General Mark Clark, unwillingly sought and obtained permission from General Alexander, who accepted the responsibility....”

This is very different from what Mark Clark claimed in his book, *Calculated Risk*. Clark wrote that the bombing was a “tragic mistake.” This was echoed in the U.S. Army official history by Martin Blumenson, whose account of Monte Cassino was based on the diary of Gen. Alfred Gruenther, Clark’s chief of staff.

—NANCO TASCIOTTI

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May I recommend *Total War: The Story of World War II* by Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard (London: Penguin, 1985). A tragic mistake it may have been, but these authors state that most of the Abbey’s treasures had been removed before its destruction.

See also Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, volume 7, *Road to Victory 1942-1945* (London: Heinemann, 1986), available in Italian, for a full account of Monte Cassino. Some excerpts are attached.

Churchill was the only major World War II leader to question strategic bombing. In February 1945, Dresden was bombed at the request of the Soviet’s, who were quickly asking why it hadn’t been bombed yet. (See the Churchill Centre website: <http://xrl.us/bgy3hy/>.)

In May 1944, after the bombing of French railway marshaling yards, at Roosevelt’s request, Churchill wrote to Eden, “Terrible things are being done.” When Air Chief Marshal Tedder told him they were picking “the best targets,” Churchill replied: “You are piling up an awful load of hatred.” (Gilbert, 784.) There is no doubt about Churchill’s moral qualms over such bombings.

On 15 February 1944, after three days of intense attacks, Monte Cassino remained in German hands. Meanwhile the Germans launched their counterattack on the Anzio bridgehead. On the 18th, Churchill was grilled about Anzio (but not Monte Cassino) during Question Time. Anzio was the issue for Parliament.

Despite American claims that they were doing all the fighting in Italy, Churchill noted in February that over 50,000 British troops were engaged. His private secretary, John Colville, wrote in his diary, “Actually it is the unen-

terprising behaviour of the American Command at Anzio that has lost us our great opportunity there.” (Gilbert, 681). Mark Clark had his critics, too.

In answer to your questions (1) and (2), then is that Churchill was receiving intense press and political grilling over the Italian campaign when Monte Cassino was bombed, His friend Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary:

I am sickened by the absence of gratitude towards him. The fact is that the country is terribly war-weary, and the ill-success of Anzio and Cassino is for them a sad augury of what will happen when the Second Front begins. (Gilbert, 720-21)

As Minister of Defence, Churchill was more directly involved in operations than Roosevelt, and far less likely to call press conferences. Unlike presidents, prime ministers have to answer questions in Parliament.

On question (3): Churchill *did* mention Cassino before his war memoirs. In April 1944, for example:

“Although the fighting at the bridgehead and on the Cassino front has brought many disappointments,” Churchill told Marshall in his telegram of April 12, “you will I trust recognize that at least eight extra German divisions have been brought into Italy down to the south of Rome and heavily mauled there.” The Enigma decrypts, Churchill pointed out, showed that Hitler had been saying “that his defeats in South Russia are due to the treacherous Badoglio collapse of Italy which has involved thirty-five divisions.” (Gilbert, 736-37)

Churchill again referred to the fall of Cassino in May. He may not publicly have mourned the destruction, but he did consider the larger picture:

On May 18, after severe fighting which had lasted for six days, the town and monastery of Monte Cassino fell at last....He hoped, Churchill commented, that between thirty to thirty-five German divisions would be kept in the Italian theatre and “away from Overlord.” (Gilbert, 774)

If by “tragic mistake” Mark Clark meant that General Eaker was wrong in concluding that the Abbey was not occupied or fortified, you need to determine who was right. Calvocoressi’s book appeared much later than Clark’s, and had the advantage of later information:

General Ira C. Eaker, who was one of a number of senior commanders to make a personal air reconnaissance, reported that he had seen German troops in the abbey. The allied command declared that the abbey would no longer be spared(Calvocoressi, 536)

I think we tend to look at these matters knowing what we know now, rather than what was known at the time. For instance, who knew then that the Abbey was evacuated of its treasures and most of its personnel? You

say it is clear the Germans weren’t in the Abbey. Clear then, or clear now?

The leveling of a historic and religious symbol was a tragic event. So was the leveling of Coventry Cathedral by the Luftwaffe in November 1940. War is hell, which is why we try so hard to avoid it. War is also, as Churchill said, a “catalogue of blunders.” But I think it wrong to consider Churchill culpable over Monte Cassino. —RML

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Only on 22 February did Churchill speak about the Italian military and political situation (Badoglio government, etc.), not mentioning Monte Cassino at all—his silence noted by the Nazi- and fascist-controlled Italian newspapers. Historians have documented Gen. Eaker’s flight over the Abbey, when he confused the building’s many lightning conductors with German radio antennas. The question remains: who made the final decision? All the many books I read avoid this decisive aspect.

Calvocoressi writes: “The allied command declared that the Abbey would no longer be spared and although American, British and French generals opposed its bombardment it was attacked.” Who they were? If they opposed it, who overruled them? It is well documented that the Indian Gen. Taker and New Zealand Corps Commander Gen. Freyberg requested the bombing. The chain of command was: Gen. Clark, Field Marshals Alexander and Wilson.

I would appreciate information to explain Churchill’s silence. Granting Hitler’s enormous primary responsibility in provoking the event, the fact remains that there were no German troops in the Abbey. This is historically clear, as is Gen. Eaker’s blunder. Naturally, Italians remain grateful to the Allied leaders and their soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our liberty. —NT

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I do not understand why such emphasis is placed on Churchill’s “silence” over the bombing of the Abbey. I am convinced neither that he was silent, nor that the bombing of Monte Cassino outweighed everything else in the Italian campaign, chiefly Anzio. It is natural that German propaganda made the most of it—but the Germans were hardly innocent bystanders.

In fact, much was said in Parliament about Monte Cassino. Given what most Members said, we have a clear picture of how the British regarded it at the time—which may differ from how we regard it in hindsight.

Here are excerpts from Hansard (Commons and Lords) and a subsequent exchange over Kosovo in 2001.

16 February 1944, House of Lords: Viscount Simon quoted Churchill directly. While admitting that there was “no excuse” for believing works of art do not matter, >>

The Myth About Monte Cassino...

Simon quoted, “it is universally accepted and everywhere understood that the necessities of war must be put far in front of any consideration of special historical or cultural value at all...the necessity of getting victory—victory as complete and as quickly as possible—make it ridiculous to compare the needs of that claimant with any artistic or cultural matter whatever.”

Simon also quoted Eisenhower’s order to troops in the Italian Campaign (the same quoted by Roosevelt): “If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men’s lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go.” There is nothing wrong in saying this, Simon concluded: “But...the choice is not always so clear-cut as that.”

22 February 1944: Churchill himself spoke about Monte Cassino: “The bitterness and fierceness of the fighting now going on both in the bridgehead *and at the Cassino front* surpass all previous experience.” (Italics mine.) If that was true, it seems logical that he would not want to get into the bombing debate, since this was an ongoing operation which did not end until May.

Churchill scarcely needed to comment when another MP said the same day: “We ought not to have thought about ancient monuments or anything like that. If it is a matter of military tactics to get our men through, then warn the people to get out and get on with the job.... When our men are fighting and sacrificing everything and then we say ‘We cannot attack a certain places because of its historical value,’ and we sacrifice men’s lives because of that, I claim that that is wrong to the men we are asking to give so much to the nation.”

7 March 1944: The Secretary of State for War, Sir Percy Grigg, was asked if the Abbey was yet occupied by Allied troops. He replied, “No, Sir.”

20 March 1944: Churchill questioned the bombing of the Abbey in a telegram to Gen. Alexander: “I wish you would explain to me why this passage by Cassino Monastery Hill, all on a front of 2 or 3 miles is the only place which you must keep butting at....It seems very hard to understand why this most strongly defended point is the only passage forward.” Alexander replied:

Along the whole main battle front from Adriatic to south coast there is only Liri Valley leading direct to Rome which is suitable terrain for deployment of our superiority in artillery and

armour. The main highway known as route six is [] only road except cart-tracks which lead from the mountains where we are into Liri valley over Rapido river and this exit into plain is blocked and dominated by Monte Cassino on which stands the Monastery. (Churchill Archives, CHAR 20/160)



New Zealand General Freyberg helps WSC over the ruins of Cassino, June 1944. Gerald Hensley, who writes of Freyberg on pages 18-24, notes: “The abbot would not speak to them.”

Alexander Turnbull Library

Now, we may choose to reject Alexander’s conclusions, *but this was what he believed at the time*. It seems relatively unimportant “who gave the order.” This was what the commanders thought. The order would have worked its way through the chain of command to the U.S. Army Air Corps, which sent the B-17s.

6 June 1944: At Question Time, a question was asked about restoring Monte Cassino Abbey as a memorial. Churchill was not present and Mr. Attlee replied on his behalf that the question was premature.

October 1944: It became apparent that German troops had looted churches and art treasures throughout Italy virtually at will. While the Germans had claimed to have moved Monte Cassino’s treasures out of harm’s way, the boxes were “opened by people who had the inventories at their disposal and knew very well what they were doing, and the best of their contents removed, generally to be replaced by something that the experts did not consider worth taking.” A long list of filched art treasures followed.

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Churchill’s critics state that the monastery was not militarized and that Gen Eaker mistook lightning rods for radio antennae. I read numerous statements in Hansard and elsewhere stating that the Germans were in the Abbey and firing on Allied troops from its commanding heights. I have yet to read a source that disputes the statements in Parliament, or the books I have cited.

It seems fair to consider that Monte Cassino was a tragic episode in a military campaign that helped end a terrible war. German propaganda took full advantage of the Abbey’s destruction, promoting the image of Allied vandalism when they themselves were the vandals. Goebbels was a clever man. But that does not outweigh the fact that the commanders *at the time* thought there was no other way to advance in that sector.

Perhaps a more appropriate investigation should be of the Nazis, who made propaganda out of the supposed vandalism they had purposely set up, while stealing the pick of the Abbey’s collection. ☹