

Responses of the Anglo-American military authorities to the eruption of Vesuvius, March 1944

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Abstract

Vesuvius, which last erupted in 1944, is one of the world's most perilous volcanoes and around 600,000 people live on its flanks. In March 1944 the Anglo-American Allies had still to complete their conquest of southern Italy from the Axis forces and, although in control of Naples and the region of Vesuvius, civil administration had only recently been established. Economically the region was severely depressed and much of its population was destitute. Notwithstanding these difficulties, a fine volcanological description of the March 1944 eruption was produced by Professor Giuseppe Imbò, Director of the *Reale Osservatorio Vesuviana*. In contrast, although some valuable accounts were published at the time and subsequently, the management of the emergency by members of the Allied Control Commission was neither comprehensively described nor evaluated. In this paper a day-by-day – at critical stages an hour-by-hour – chronology of the effects of the 1944 eruption on the local population and the role of the military authorities in responding to it, is presented, based primarily on archival research, together with written and oral testimony from British and American personnel directly involved. Material has also been compiled from newsreel films and previously unused, in some cases unpublished, archival photography. Meteorological data-bases have been interrogated to provide information on the effects of weather conditions on plume directions and tephra deposition. Finally, using

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all these sources plus information collected from local authorities (*comuni*) in the areas affected by the eruption, we describe and discuss recovery and reconstruction following the eruption and the dangers faced by the population today. We conclude that, despite all the problems of wartime, management of the emergency by the Allied Control Commission was both impressive at the time and holds important lessons about the manner in which eruptions may be handled in the future.

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Introduction

Mount Vesuvius in southern Italy is one of the world's most dangerous volcanoes, with around 600,000 people living on its flanks and an estimated 3 million within range of a future eruption.¹ Observations of Vesuvius by literate observers stretch back to the classical era and two letters written in AD 79 by Pliny the Younger to Tacitus are the first reliable accounts of an eruption and the destruction it wrought on the surrounding countryside, Pompeii and Herculaneum being but two of the many settlements affected.² Vesuvius is one of the cradles of volcanology, as increasingly detailed study over the centuries has not only advanced knowledge of this particular volcano, but also the science of volcanology more generally.³

The March 1944 eruption was the latest, but probably not the last, eruption of Vesuvius. In spite of its relatively recent date, the responses of the population and the authorities to the eruption have neither been fully recorded nor have they been properly evaluated. March 1944 marked the climax of the campaign by the Anglo-American Allies to capture southern Italy from the Axis forces. Italian science and social science were in a parlous state due to the exigencies of war, and civil administration had only recently been re-established. Conditions across southern Italy were grim. There was a severe lack of food and this was exacerbated by problems of disease, wartime destruction, dislocation and lawlessness. Yet in spite of these problems, we will argue that the management of the emergency by the allied authorities was impressive at the time and also holds important lessons about the manner in which similar eruptions may be handled in the future.

Notwithstanding the problems faced by scientists observing the eruption, detailed volcanological descriptions of events in March 1944 were made at the time and published over the

¹ C. Kilburn and B. McGuire, *Italian Volcanoes*, Harpenden, 2001, 23; D.K. Chester, C.J.L. Dikken and A.M. Duncan, Volcanic hazard assessment in western Europe, *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 115 (2002) 423–426.

² H. Sigurdsson, S. Carey, W. Cornell and T. Pescatore, The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, *National Geographic Research* 1 (1985) 332–387.

³ J.E. Guest, P. Cole, A.M. Duncan and D.K. Chester, *Volcanoes of Southern Italy*, London, 2003, 10–19, 36–38.

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