The German Occupation of the Channel Islands

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Introduction

On 1st September 1939, German troops invaded Poland in a continuation and escalation of their gradual annexation of neighbouring countries.[1] Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany, triggering a global conflict that would last for nearly six years and claim millions of lives, and would become known as World War II or the Second World War. The following year, Germany invaded the Channel Islands (Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark), starting an occupation that would continue until – and slightly beyond – the official end of hostilities in Europe.

In this discussion we will be taking a broad overview of the five years of the German Occupation of the Channel Islands, with the occasional reference to the wider conflict where it impacts on the Islands. We will examine the state of affairs before the Occupation, and then move on what happened during the Occupation, including the fortifications and camps built on the Islands. Finally, we will discuss the aftermath of the Occupation, including the accusations of cowardice, collaboration and co-operation that were made against the Islanders and their governments.

The length of the Occupation means that we will skip over some periods, activities and individuals, or only mention them briefly. Some suggestions for further reading are provided for those who wish to examine the period in more detail.

Background

At the time of the Occupation, the Channel Islands were (and remain to this day) Crown Dependencies, a status shared with the Isle of Man, and therefore Charles III is head of state. They are split into two jurisdictions, the Bailiwick of Jersey (the island of Jersey and some uninhabited islets) and the Bailiwick of Guernsey (Guerney, Alderney, Sark and other islands which are not relevant to the story of Occupation). Both are self-governing, with their own legal system, however the UK government is responsible for foreign affairs and defence. After the war, during the time the UK was a member of the European Union (and its predecessor the European Economic Community), the Islands were considered to be within the EU for some purposes (primarily customs and free movement of goods), but were not a member state in their own right and were not subject to the rules on free movement of people.[2]

The Islands are in a currency union with the UK, although they issue their own banknotes. Notes are generally interchangeable within the Islands, e.g. Jersey pounds will be accepted in shops on Guernsey, however the acceptance of UK notes on the Islands is not reciprocal and Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney notes are not exchangeable at the Bank of England. As we will see later, the currency

[1] Austria had been annexed on 12th March 1938 (known as the *Anschluss*), but a policy of appeasement by other European powers meant that there were no real consequences for Germany.

[2] Brexit upended this arrangement, with the Channel Islands affected by the decision to leave the EU even though they did not take part in the referendum.

used on the Islands was changed during the Occupation, but reverted back to sterling after the war. The Islands are also part of the Common Travel Area, which has minimal border controls between the UK, the Republic of Ireland and the Crown Dependencies, although this arrangement was suspended during the war.

Before the Occupation

Although the United Kingdom declared war on Germany at 11:15 on 3rd September 1939, two days after the German invasion of Poland and as a result of no response to the British and French ultimatum at 09:00, there was little immediate change on the Channel Islands. Whilst residents of Great Britain were subject to conscription – assuming they were male[3] and aged 18 to 41[4] and were not in a reserved occupation[5] – residents of the Channel Islands were not included.[6] However, some Islanders travelled to England in order to sign up voluntarily. In the meantime, life continued much as before, and the UK government even encouraged tourists to holiday in the Islands, in a period that would become known as the Phoney War.[7]

Everything changed with the Battle of France (10th May - 25th June 1940), when the Germans invaded the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) and France. Suddenly the Channel Islands were no longer a peaceful idyll safe from the horrors of war, but instead right on the border of active operations. This was brought home when on 11th June 1940, the RAF carried out a sortie from airfields on Jersey and Guernsey during Operation Haddock, the first of many operations involving the Islands.[8]

Demilitarisation

Towards the end of the Battle of France, the British government decided to abandon the Channel Islands, judging them to have no strategic value, or at least insufficient value to warrant even a token attempt at defending them. This was against the wishes of recently appointed Prime Minister Winston Churchill,[9] who felt it was wrong to abandon the Islands without a fight. All troops were evacuated, as were all weapons. The local militia were disbanded and many of the men decided to head to England and enlist in the forces – sadly many would not return. During the demilitarisation, one man who would go on to become famous had a brief stopover on Jersey for refueling, namely Brigade General (*général de brigade*) Charles de Gaulle, on his way to London to make his first radio broadcast in exile known as the Appeal of 18th June (*L'Appel du 18 juin*). The final troops departed on 20th June, followed by RAF fighters the next day. By the end of 21st June 1940, the Islands were completely demilitarised and defenceless.

[3]Women were made subject to national service later with the National Service (No. 2) Act 1941.

[4]The maximum age was later increased to 51.

[5]The British government learned from the mistakes of the First World War, in which many skilled labourers were either conscripted or signed up voluntarily, leaving major gaps in key industries such as mining and engineering which were essential to either the military or keeping civilian infrastructure running.

[6]The legislation which introduced national service, the National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939, covered all British subjects, but only if they were in or subsequently entered Great Britain.

[7]Despite the name, there were operations carried out against the Germans, including the beginning of a naval blockade, but there were virtually no military operations on land on the Western Front.

[8]Haddock Force was a group of RAF bombers stationed in Southern France which were going to target industrial sites if Italy joined the war. Additional planes were located in England and the Channel Islands. Bad weather, and an initial refusal of the local French commander to allow the planes to take off, meant that limited damage was inflicted on the targets.

[9]Neville Chamberlain was Prime Minister when war was declared, but he was replaced by Churchill on 10th May 1940. Unusually, Chamberlain remained Leader of the Conservative Party after his resignation as Prime Minister, so there was a brief period when Churchill was Prime Minister but not party leader.

Civilian evacuation

The evacuation of the Channel Islands may have seemed an obvious course of action in hindsight, but the decision to remove much of the civilian population was left until the last minute. As a result, there was no clear plan for the evacuation: who should be evacuated, who needed to stay (e.g. to look after essential services, crops and animals), what would happen to belongings and pets that were left behind, and at what point would the evacuees return.

On Jersey and Guernsey, evacuation was offered to schoolchildren, children below school age (and their mothers), and additional men looking to enlist in the forces (many had already done so). However, evacuation was not compulsory, and many chose to stay. The authorities also did not want too many evacuees, both due to limited capacity on the boats and the need to retain a large enough civilian population to keep essential services going until everyone could return. The announcement was made late in the day (literally), with the boats due to depart the following morning, so families only had a single night to decide whether to send their children away for an unknown period of time, which ended up being five years. The process was so chaotic that many arrived at the harbour to see huge crowds attempting to board small ships taking on passengers more than three times their capacity. Unsurprisingly, some changed their mind and decided to stay.

On Sark, although evacuation was offered, no one native to the island wanted to leave, and only a few English residents decided to evacuate. This was probably just as well, as the population of around six hundred may have fallen below self-sufficiency limits had a significant number taken up the offer to leave. The Seigneur of Sark (known as the Dame of Sark when female), Sibyl Hathaway, was not in favour of evacuation, and would continue to run the island during the Occupation – often viewing the Germans as something of a minor inconvenience.

Alderney was the most extreme example of evacuation, where the entire population left (mostly voluntarily), although a few returned later. This was done in such a hurry that there was not time to deal with all the animals, and several trips had to be made to collect any livestock which were useful – mainly milk-bearing cattle – and kill the rest. Pets in particular had to be put down by the vet, until the medical supplies ran out and owners had to resort to more brutal methods.

Although many school children were evacuated with their parents, separations were common, with parents and children arriving in England at different times and being sent to different places – sometimes as far apart as Manchester and Glasgow. Attempts were made to reunite families, mostly successfully, but some would remain separated for the duration of the war.

It is perhaps just as well that thousands were evacuated, as later in the Occupation there would be severe food shortages, which would have been exacerbated by a larger population. It is not clear whether the Germans would have sent more troops as well, in order to keep the occupier to Islander ratio high. On Alderney in particular, would the population have been forced into the labour camps had they remained, or would they have been deported to German internment camps in Europe? With the benefit of hindsight, evacuation was probably the least-worst option for many Islanders – particularly school-age children.

The last official boat with evacuees departed the Islands on 23rd June 1940, and the last boats carrying mail and other cargo called on 28th June. After that point, the Islands were cut off and isolated, and would remain so – with the exception of occasional Red Cross letters and parcels – until Liberation.

Occupation

Although the Islands had been demilitarised and parts of the civilian population evacuated, news of this had not been publicised or even passed on to the Germans privately – possibly because this would damage morale by advertising that the British government had abandoned islands where it

was responsible for defence, and also it would alert the Germans that the Islands were free for the taking and they could just 'walk in' and occupy them. This may have seemed sensible at the time the decision was made, but it would go on to have devasting consequences for some of the Islanders.

As a result of not being aware of the situation on the Islands, the Germans initially approached with caution. Several reconnaisance flights were followed by bombing raids, where the major harbours of Jersey (Saint Helier) and Guernsey (Saint Peter Port) were attacked.[10] Unfortunately the trucks full of tomatoes for export – a key product of Guernsey – were mistakenly identified as troop transport by the Germans and attacked, resulting in serious injuries and 44 deaths.

Whilst the German armed forces (*Wehrmacht*) were planning Operation Green Arrow (*Grünpfeil*), a massive assault on the Islands as part of an invasion, the German air force (*Luftwaffe*) had suspected that the Islands were in fact not defended, and could be taken easily.[11] They landed at Guernsey Airport – which had only opened the previous year – on 30th June to find it deserted, and were eventually approached by a policeman who carried a message stating that the Island was demilitarised. Major Albrecht Lanz was taken to a nearby hotel where he informed the assembled Guernsey officials that the Island was now under German occupation. The surrender of Jersey took place the following day, Alderney was occupied on 2nd July, and Sark on 4th July. There was no serious resistance, and the Germans poured in troops until the Islands were securely occupied.

The first and immediate change was around legislation on the Islands. From now on any laws passed by the legislatures would have to be approved by the *Kommandant*, which initially was Major Lanz. Likewise, any German orders would be transposed into legislation. German courts were set up to try any breaches of German laws, but civil offences would continue to be tried by the local courts – though of course any decision would be *de facto* subject to the approval (or at least the lack of disapproval) of the Kommandant. Other changes included the adjustment of the timezone from the Islands from Greenwich Mean Time (used by Britain) to Central European Time (used by Germany) and, perhaps more dramatically, changing from driving on the left to the right.[12] A curfew was imposed and fishing was severely restricted in case the boats were used to help Islanders escape. German language lessons were also introduced to schools, with prizes given for pupils deemed to have made the most progress. Some of these changes were driven by military considerations and would be replicated elsewhere in Occupied Europe (e.g. the curfew), however others were an attempt to demonstrate that this would be a 'Model Occupation', that the Germans were not as evil as portrayed in the press of the Allies, and becoming part of the German Empire was a good thing.

Currency and price controls

A further noticeable change was that of the currency. Prior to the Occupation, the Channel Islands were in (and would revert to after the war) a currency union with the UK, and therefore used pounds, shillings and pence – albeit with their own notes and coins which could not be spent in the UK. The Germans introduced their own currency, *Reichskreditkassenscheine* (RKK, Reich credit notes), which was used throughout occupied territories. This was similar to, but importantly not the same as, the Reichsmark used in Germany.

Price controls were instituted by the Islands' governments, but these had the effect of disrupting the normal mechanism of balancing supply and demand. They also required a mechanism of policing, both to ensure that the price controls were being adhered to and that no one was hoarding goods. Naturally, a parallel unofficial (and illegal) market appeared, through which farmers in particular could sell food at a higher price. Even the Germans, who brought over goods from France, ended

[10] Perhaps unsurprisingly for small islands, the main harbours are in the capitals.

[11] Although the air force, navy (*Kriegsmarine*) and army (*Heer*) were all part of the *Wehrmacht*, each branch often distrusted the others, and would squabble over the recognition for successful operations and the attention of Hitler.

[12] The change of driving had less of an impact than would otherwise have been the case, due to the Germans banning or requisitioning most motor vehicles, and fuel was hard to come by anyway.

up using these routes to obtain some items. Price controls also necessitated the introduction of wage controls, but these were more effective as one cannot easily sell labour outside of official channels, and hoarding labour is even more difficult. As a result, wages did not keep up with increasing prices, causing major problems for many Islanders as the Occupation went on. The fact that working for the Germans avoided the wage controls also undermined the efforts to keep everything in balance.[13]

Response of Island governments

The immediate response of the civilian governments varied between the Islands. On Sark, Dame Hathaway waited for the German officers to arrive at her home, and even went as far as putting a desk at the far end of the room so the officers would be forced to walk the full length in order to reach it. The fact that she had a good command of the German language also made a positive impression, as did the fact that she appeared not to be particularly bothered about the fact that her island was now under enemy occupation.

On Guernsey a Controlling Committee was established, which was a smaller organisation than the full States that usually formed the government. The first President of the Committee was Ambrose Sherwill, who at the time was the Attorney General. Sherwill continued in office until later in 1940, when he was imprisoned due to his involvement in sheltering British servicemen who had landed on Guernsey in one of several botched commando raids (Operation Ambassador). Although Sherwill was later released, the Germans banned him from holding office and he was replaced by John Leale.

A similar exercise was carried out on Jersey, with the operation of the States being simplified and reduced to a smaller number of departments. Alexander Coutanche, the Bailiff of Jersey at the time of the German invasion, presided over the departments and committees as a whole, and was knighted shortly after the war (and later made a life peer).

The change of governments on the Islands, combined with the fact that none of the members had any experience of dealing with the situation they found themselves in, meant that mistakes would be made. Sherwill and Coutanche in particular saw their role as trying to shield the Islanders from the Germans as much as possible, but this forced co-operation would later lead to accusations of collaboration. Sherwill was persuaded to record a message for German radio to provide reassurance that the Islanders were being treated fairly, however this was broadcast in such a way to make it sound like he was praising the Germans as model occupiers.[14]

Antisemitic legislation

In October 1940, orders were promulgated to the Islands regarding Jewish residents. These were not resisted strongly by the likes of the Controlling Committee, on the grounds that it was thought that all the Jews on the Islands had been evacuated before the Occupation, and therefore the legislation, whilst repugnant, would have no effect. Unfortunately this was not the case, with some Jewish residents being registered as required, and others avoiding detection. Later orders did result in some protest, particularly one requiring Jews to wear the yellow Star of David, to assist in their identification by the Germans. Despite the initial lack of concern, several Jews were deported and ended up as victims of the Holocaust in Auschwitz.[15] Jewish-owned shops were also labelled as such, whilst others were simply taken over without compensation, although some were 'transferred' to non-Jews and then returned after the war.

[13]Wages offered by the Germans were often two to five times higher than local employers.

[14]Sherwill was not the only person to be manipulated by the Germans for propaganda purposes - the writer P. G. Wodehouse was also denounced as a traitor for a series of broadcasts which were seen to make light of the situation. Neither man however was a committed Nazi in the manner of Lord Haw-Haw (William Joyce).

[15]Tragically, some of these Jews had fled to the Islands from Occupied Europe to escape the Nazis.

Radios

The issue of Islanders owning radios was a sore point throughout the Occupation. At one point all radios were confiscated, only to be returned just before Christmas. At certain times, owning a radio was acceptable, but listening to the BBC (which no doubt the Germans would have seen as the Biased Broadcasting Corporation) was prohibited. In 1942, a complete ban on radios was brought in, and even listening to German stations could get an Islander sent to prison (or worse). This was only partially effective, as many Islanders either hid their existing radios and continued to listen, or built new ones from crystal sets. All sorts of ingenious ways were used to hide and power radios, including a collection of 100 jam jars kept in a bedroom cupboard. The need for earphones to listen to crystal set radios resulted in nighttime raids on the telephone boxes, which were effectively out of commission anyway during the war.

Fortification

A key concern, bordering on obsession, of Hitler was preventing the Allies (and particularly the British) from landing and taking back any occupied territory, including the Channel Islands. Starting in 1942, as a result of Führer Directive (*Führerbefehle*) 40, an almost continuous Atlantic Wall (*Atlantikwall*) of fortifications and weapons was to be built, from Norway down to France. However, even earlier than this, Hitler had issued orders requiring the Channel Islands to be fortified, as a response to several commando raids by the British.[16]

The amount of materials (rock and steel in particular) used to fortify the Islands compared to the rest of the Atlantic Wall was disproportionate to their size and, as it turned out, to their strategic significance, given that the Allies missed the Islands completely in the Normandy landings. Between 8 and 10 per cent of all the materials used in the Atlantic Wall were used on the Channel Islands, transforming the landscape and much of them remain visible today.

Camps and labour

Many camps were built across Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney during the Occupation, primarily for those working on the fortifications. Broadly speaking, there were three types of camps run by the Germans across the whole of the war:

Internment camps: For holding prisoners of war in unpleasant but generally not life-threatening conditions. When there were deportations from the Channel Islands, such as in retaliation for the British taking German captives in Iran, the deportees were usually sent to internment camps. These camps were not unique to the Germans, as the British also interned civilians on the Isle of Man in both the First and Second World Wars. Whilst some internees had committed offences, most had not been subject to any form of fair trial, and many were simply unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (e.g. German citizens in Britain). Internment camps were usually situated away from the front line, to reduce the likelihood of prisoners escaping (e.g. if the camp was bombed and the fences destroyed) and to ensure that if anyone did escape, they would have a long way to go for freedom, and would likely be recaptured before they reached a safe country.

Labour camps: For labour related to the war effort, such as building fortifications and manufacturing munitions. Whilst some labourers would be volunteers – and even paid – many were forced against their will. Conditions varied, but in general the forced labourers were treated as no more than slaves, and whilst in most cases the intention may not have been to work the inmates to death, there was no concern on humanitarian grounds (a camp with high mortality might be investigated on military grounds, since this would slow down work whilst replacements were found).

[16]The commando raids achieved very little of their objectives, and ended up causing a great deal of frustration to the Islanders. However, their unintentional side effect of alerting the Germans to weak points in their defences ended up being helpful, given how much time was spent fortifying the Islands.

Concentration camps: Places where people who were enemies of the Nazi Party were taken, either as forced labour or to be killed, including the victims of the Holocaust. Some concentration camps were setup to commit mass murder on an industrial scale – one of the key considerations in designing them was how to make the process as efficient as possible.

There was some overlap, such as forced labour being used within the concentration camps (e.g. the *Sonderkommando* units), and there is debate over the labels. Some consider the internment camps to be concentration camps, and the concentration camps to be death camps or extermination camps. Generally speaking, the people who were worked to death in the labour camps are not considered to be victims of the Holocaust, although views differ on this.[17] There is also a difference between labourers whom the Nazis were not bothered about whether they survived, and those who were deliberately worked to death (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit* or 'extermination through labour').

The camp workers came from all over Europe, and included Soviets, French Jews, Algerians, Morrocans and Slavs. Some were paid and treated reasonably, others were effectively slave labour and treated appallingly. The collaborators in the Vichy government in France, run by Marshal Pétain, were responsible for handing over hundreds of men.[18]

Alderney in particular has received attention for its four camps: Sylt, Norderney, Helgoland and Borkum.[19] These were initially labour camps, however Sylt and Norderney were later handed over to the SS and became concentration camps, as part of the Neuengamme network. Estimates vary as to how many labourers died – figures from several hundred to several thousand have been suggested, with a recent review putting the number at 641-1027, which would have been around 10-15 per cent of the total.

Organisation Todt (OT)

The camps on the Channel Islands were operated by the Organisation Todt, which was responsible for a wide range of engineering projects from 1938 onwards. Founded by Fritz Todt, who would be killed in an aircraft crash mid-way through the war, the OT was initially involved in civilian projects, although even in the early days it made extensive use of conscripted labour. Over time, it became more and more involved in the military side, until eventually it was almost exclusively involved in projects such as weapons manufacture and the construction of fortifications. From 1942 it was brought into the expanded Reich Ministry of Armaments and War Production, overseen by Albert Speer. At its peak, it had over one million labourers, the vast majority of whom were prisoners of war or taken from occupied territories.

Schutzstaffel (SS)

The *Schutzstaffel* ('Protection Squad'), usually known as the SS and identified by two lightning bolt runes, was the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party. Unlike the German army, where many soldiers would not necessarily have subscribed to all the ideals or been a member, everyone in the SS was a firm believer in, and paid up member of, the Nazi party. In March 1943, the SS took over Lager Sylt on Alderney, under the command of Maximillian List. This made conditions in Sylt even worse, as the SS would regularly beat prisoners, shoot those 'trying to escape' (often not the case but used as an excuse), and generally mete out brutal punishments. When Nazis were put on trial after the war, many were charged based on crimes carried out by the SS.

[17] Most Holocaust museums and similar organisations consider the Holocaust to cover Jewish victims of the Nazis, with others (e.g. LGBTQ+, people with disabilities and Slavs) often described as 'Non-Jewish victims of Nazism'.

[18] Pétain was put on trial after the war for his collaboration with the Germans, and sentenced to death (commuted to life imprisonment by De Gaulle).

[19] There may have been as many as nine camps on Alderney, however these four are the best attested.

Normandy landings

On 6th June 1944, Allied forces landed in Normandy as part of Operation Overlord.[20] Also known as D-Day (a generic term for the day when an operation commences), it marked a significant shift in the balance of power in the war, as the Axis powers were now fighting on two major fronts – the other being Eastern Europe where the Soviets were advancing. It was the beginning of the end for Germany in particular, even though the unconditional surrender would not occur for another 11 months.

Although the Channel Islands are close to Normandy – only 8 miles in the case of Alderney, well within the range of coastal batteries (and indeed one, *Battery Blücher*, did fire on Cherbourg) – they were circumvented by the Allies, with the vast majority of forces approaching from the east. Two airborne divisions flew close to the Islands as part of the Western Task Force, but made no attempt to land. Although the Islands could have provided a stepping point for the landings, the large number of German troops would have made this difficult, and the airfields would probably not have had sufficient capacity to hold many of the aircraft. It must have been very frustrating for the Islanders to see so much activity, whilst wondering why they would continue to be abandoned for almost another year.

Hunger and cold

A key outcome of the Normandy landings was that the garrisons on the Channel Islands were now cut off from their primary supply routes, although this was unlikely to have been something that the Allied forces were particularly considering. This caused immense hardship for both the Islands and the Germans, as fuel and food was hard to come by – the Islands never having been self-sufficient in either before or during the war. The situation was compounded by the winter of 1944-1945 being especially cold, which resulted in many buildings being ransacked for anything that could be burnt for heat, including floorboards, furniture and even doors. What had started as an easy victory for the Germans and a plum posting – especially compared with the conditions on the Eastern Front – had now turned into a nightmare where both occupiers and occupied were hungry, cold and saw no end in sight.

Liberation

Although Germany surrended unconditionally on 8th May 1945, and this applied to the Channel Islands, there was a short period in which the Islands were still under German control. On 9th May, the German garrison in Guernsey surrended, and a similar situation happened in Jersey. There was a small amount of pushback from the German commanders who were commmitted Nazis (one initially threatened to fire on the Royal Navy ship bringing the senior British officers), however in the event the process went smoothly and there were no casualties. Sark had to wait until 10th May to be liberated, and Alderney not until 16th May. There was a further delay before prisoners of war were removed from Alderney. Following liberation, the Home Secretary visited Jersey and Guernsey to explain in person why the Islands had been left undefended and never retaken, and a Royal visit took place the following June.

Homecoming

Although Islanders who had been evacuated from Jersey and Guernsey returned quickly, the situation on Alderney meant that residents did not return until 15th December 1945. On 2nd December, the first

[20] Overlord was the main operation, however individual codenames were given to specific tasks both as part of the landings and in the build-up, including Neptune (the initial amphibious assault), Pointblank (bombing campaign) and Bodyguard (a deception strategy to mislead the Germans into thinking that the invasion was going to take place elsewhere).

members of the community returned to prepare the island for the remainder. As a result, Alderney has a tradition of celebrating and remembering Homecoming rather than Liberation, due to the 7 month gap between the two.

Aftermath

The immediate aftermath of Occupation was a grim experience for many, and the shadow of it still lies over the Islands today – although this is perhaps fading as nearly everyone who can remember the Occupation has passed away. Many Islanders had lost significant amounts of weight due to the reduced quantity, quality and diversity of food available during the Occupation, and suffered both physical and mental hardship during and after the Occupation.

Damage and theft

The return to the Channel Islands was a jarring experience for many. Some returned to find their houses in severe disrepair, or with missing floorboards that had been stolen for fuel during winter – particularly 1944-45 which was very cold. Missing furniture was a common complaint, either having been used as firewood or stolen because a German or Islander liked the look of it – there were even accusations on Alderney that some items were stolen by the Allied soldiers who came to survey the damage before the residents returned. After returning to Alderney, lots of furniture was put out on an area called the Butes, and residents rushed to claim what they either thought was theirs or they liked the look of. The resulting scenes were so chaotic that some would refer to it as the Battle of the Butes.

Business owners also suffered, especially when their shops had been looted or, in the case of hotel owners, their premises had been taken over by the Germans. Compensation was often not forthcoming, or was insufficient to cover the cost of getting the business back into its pre-occupation state.

Repairs and making the Islands safe

Hundreds of German prisoners of war, especially those with skills such as carpenters and engineers, were kept on the Islands for months after liberation repairing the damage and making the Islands safe. Tens of thousands of mines had been laid to prevent enemy boats approaching, all of which had to be carefully removed – a task that could only be done safely by those who had laid the mines in the first place and therefore knew where they were located. In one case, some foresightful Germans had decided to hide the plans for mine laying instead of destroying them as ordered, which no doubt made the clearance easier. However, it was still a risky operation, and several men lost their lives during the process – as did some Islanders who entered areas before they had been made safe.

Death and dislocation

The isolation of the Islanders also meant that little news had got through, and some returning evacuees did not know whether their family members were still alive. Five years also meant that many things had changed, and some parents no longer recognised their children and vice versa. Those children who had been very young at the time of evacuation had often formed a closer bond with their foster parents than with their birth parents, which caused anguish on all sides. Even parents who had been evacuated with their children had sometimes been sent to different places in the UK, and had to work hard to be reunited.

Women

Women in particular experienced challenges on their return. For some their husbands had met another woman, and wanted a divorce. Others had to cope with the news of their husband having died in

battle – hundreds of Islanders who enrolled in the forces did not return. In some cases their husbands had been deported by the Germans, and did not survive the internment camps. Whilst in England, many women had taken up employment, managed their own finances, and generally led a more independent life, but on their return they were often expected to revert to their previous role of dutiful housewife.

Environment and nature

Even the natural environment did not escape, particularly on Alderney. Trees had been burned as fuel, birds and other animals had been killed for food. The arable land on Alderney was in such a poor condition that initially a communal farm was setup to grow food, although this arrangement did not work out and eventually farmers went back to looking after their own pieces of land. The fortifications were also a lasting reminder, and not easily removed. Many are still in place today, albeit with significant deterioration and overgrown vegetation, making them unsafe to visit.

Camps

On mainland Europe, many camps were retained and preserved, with perhaps the best known example being Auschwitz, which is now a museum and a World Heritage Site. However, almost all the camps on the Channel Islands were demolished after the war and either returned to agricultural use or built over with housing developments. In some places there is a memorial plaque and some small parts of the camp remain, e.g. the entrance posts to Lager Sylt on Alderney.

In May 2024, the Lord Pickles Alderney Expert Review, a detailed examination of the crimes committed on Alderney, was published. This attemped to ascertain the number of deaths (641-1027) and labourers (7608-7812), to shed light on why no Germans were tried for what happened, and to counter the argument that Alderney was a 'mini-Auschwitz' (no evidence was found for this).

Cowards, collaborators, co-operation and criticism

Many of the evacuees were branded as cowards, both during and after the war, for having left the Islands, and were seen to have enjoyed a better life in England than those who remained. On their return, and for many years after in some cases, they were reminded of the different experiences of the war, and any attempt to talk about the evacuation and time spent in England would be shut down by recollections of how tough life was for those who suffered under the Occupation.

On the other hand, some of the Islanders who had remained were seen as collaborators for having had what many thought was too close a relationship with the occupying Germans. This was primarily directed at the government, who were seen to have not stood up to the Germans sufficiently strongly and gone along too willingly with orders to arrest resisters, and particularly over the registration and later deportation of Jews. The fact that several members of the government received honours such as knighthoods after the war also went down badly with some Islanders.

Women who formed relationships with Germans were considered by many to have fratenised with the enemy, and some were openly attacked in the street by mobs who would cut off their hair (and sometimes their clothes) with scissors. They were referred to as *jerrybags*, and any who had the temerity to actually get pregnant by a German soldier would be called *troop carriers*. This was not unique to the Islands – the same anger played out in other parts of Occupied Europe, such as France – although in a small community it may have been easier to identify (sometimes incorrectly) those who had been 'too close' to the occupiers. In many cases this seems an overly harsh judgement and treatment, as the reduced numbers of young resident men (having volunteered for the forces) and the introduction of young German soldiers and officers, meant that relationships were bound to develop, and there was often genuine attraction – as opposed to using a relationship to obtain better standards of living or inform on others.

Later writers vary in their assessment of how the Islanders – and particularly those involved in the government – handled the Occupation. Views range from 'it would be difficult to voice any criticism of their conduct of affairs'[21] to 'behaved in a manner that can only be described as treasonous' and 'brazen collaboration'.[22] Very broadly, earlier authors have been sympathetic towards the Islanders, whereas later authors – some writing decades after the Occupation and when most of the people concerned had died – tend to be more critical, although of course there are exceptions.

However, we must bear in mind that there were few opportunities for resistance on small islands. Unlike on mainland Europe, where resistance factions could blow up railway tracks and then disappear silently into the night (though that is not to understate the risks they took), any serious resistance on the Channel Islands would result in a search and severe consequences when the perpetrators were caught – as they undoubtably would be. The ratio of occupiers to occupied was often higher than in other parts of Europe as well, meaning that any resistance involving force was likely doomed to failure.[23] Being in effectively a confined area for years also meant that some relationships would naturally develop. One German / Islander couple got married shortly after the war and were still together seventy years later, so not all the stories were negative.

Undoubtably there were some Islanders, such as Gerrit Timmer, who did take advantage of the occupation to profit, and perhaps the government could have stood up more to the Germans. However, it is easy to judge from a point more than 80 years later, and the vast majority of the Islanders seem to have made the best they could of an extremely difficult situation. There is a wide spectrum from active collaboration and profiteering to armed resistance, and most Islanders fell somewhere between the two extremes.

The various governments, including the UK, could reasonably be criticised for failing to plan for the possibility of an invasion, even if not the specific scenario that played out. The Island governments may have been naïve in their interactions with the Germans, although they had no experience of, or training for, dealing with such a situation, and therefore had to tackle each challenge as it played out.[24] They were also completely cut off from the outside world, and therefore had no opportunity to ask for assistance or advice from the UK government.

Heroes and resistance

Despite the accusations of being too friendly with the Germans, many Islanders did make small but meaningful acts of resistance – everything from painting V for Victory symbols to running underground news networks.[25] Some took great personal risks, such as Albert Gustave Bedane, who helped shelter and hide those persecuted by the Germans (including a Jewish woman), and was posthumously named Righteous Among the Nations[26] and a British Hero of the Holocaust.[27] Other Islanders helped to hide and feed escapees from the labour camps, and punishments were severe for those who were caught doing so by the Germans.

[21] Charles Cruickshank, The German Occupation of the Channel Islands

[22] Robert Bard, The Channel Islands at War

[23] Areas of Occupied France had over 100 civilians for each German soldier, whereas on the Channel Islands the ratio was often 3 to 1 – or even 1 to 1 at times on Guernsey.

[24] The Channel Islands were affected by the First World War, both in sending volunteers for the armed forces and also suffering as a result of restrictions on supplies, rationing etc. However, there was no occupation or enemy troops between 1914 and 1918.

[25] The Guernsey Underground News Service (GUNS) in particular was a risky operation.

[26] Righteous Among the Nations is a recognition by the State of Israel of non-Jews who took personal risk, and without reward, to save Jews from the Holocaust.

[27] British Hero of the Holocaust is an award from the UK government recognising British citizens who helped or rescued Jews from the Holocaust. Its criteria are slightly different from Righteous Among the Nations, so some individuals were eligible for one award but not both. Nicholas Winton, one of the organisers of the *Kindertransport* (childrens' transport), was another recipient of both, though not from the Channel Islands.

Justice (or lack thereof)

The key Nazi leaders largely escaped justice, committing suicide before capture (Hitler, Goebbels), during custody (Himmler), or after their trial but before sentence could be carried out (Göring). Ernst Kaltenbrunner was the highest ranking member of the SS to face trial and be executed. Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, initially escaped and lived under a false name, but was eventually caught, tried and executed. Albert Speer, Hitler's close friend and architect, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his part in the use of slave and forced labour in the manufacture of weapons for the German armed forces.[28] Rudolf Hess, Deputy to the Führer (*Stellvertreter des Führers*), received a life sentence and was imprisoned in Spandau Prison until his death in 1987.

Whilst some other high-ranking Germans were brought to trial and punished for their activities during the war, very few appear to have been tried specifically because of the crimes that took place on the Islands – particularly Alderney. For example, Maximilian List, who was the SS commandant of Lager Sylt for a period during the Occupation, never faced trial, even though there was evidence collected about his role. However, SS officers *Obersturmführer* Adam Adler and *Lagerführer* Heinrich Evers were tried and received prison sentences for their part in Lager Norderney.

There are many reasons for the low number of prosecutions for crimes carried on the Islands, including: a lack of witnesses who could be identified and were willing to provide evidence, a desire amongst some to forget the Occupation and 'put it behind us', and difficulty in extraditing Germans who had gone to live in other countries. The amount of time that has now passed means it is extremely unlikely that any new prosecutions will take place.

Conclusions

The Occupation used up tremendous amounts of German resources for the construction of the fortifications – around 10% of the entire Atlantic Wall – and tied up thousands of troops who could otherwise have been posted to one of the major scenes of operations – particularly towards the end of 1944 when the German armed forces were scrambling for additional men. With the hindsight of knowing that the British – Churchill's fantasies aside – had no serious plans to retake the Islands, this was a complete waste militarily and whilst it may not have been decisive, it was certainly helpful to the Allies. There seemed to be little strategic purpose in taking the Islands, and what propaganda value they had was outweighed by the sheer cost of retaining them.

Had another leader been in charge, they may not have shared Hitler's obsession with the Channel Islands – not withstanding the fact that he never visited them. A more sensible option might have been to send a small taskforce to secure the Islands, but with a clear plan for evacuation if the British did attempt to retake them. There was not much in the way of resources on the Islands – no major sources of oil or coal, no mineral deposits to speak of etc. – so financially the Occupation was a net negative by a significant margin.

Ultimately, the Occupation has to be seen as a strategic blunder for which Hitler must take the majority of the blame, given that it was his personal obsession with the Islands that led to the Occupation and the amount of resources that were spent on it.

Chronology

- **1st September 1939**: Germany invades Poland.
- **3rd September 1939**: Britain and France declare war on Germany.
- **10th May 1940:** Beginning of the Battle of France.

[28] Several judges wanted Speer to face the death penalty, but a lack of agreement meant that a lengthy prison sentence was instead handed down.

- **11th June 1940**: RAF bombers depart from the Channel Islands to bomb Italy.
- **18th June 1940**: Charles de Gaulle's first broadcast from exile.
- **21st June 1940**: Last British troops leave the Islands, now demilitarised and defenceless.
- **23rd June 1940**: Last official boat with evacuees leaves the Islands.
- **30th June 1940**: Germans land at Guernsey airport.
- **October 1940**: Antisemitic legislation promulgated to the Islands.
- **8th May 1945**: VE Day, German forces surrender.
- **15th December 1945**: Alderney evacuees return.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented. There is also some further reading for those who wish to explore the subject further.

Further reading

For those who wish to delve into this time period in more detail, there are some specific works which may be of interest.

Guernsey Evacuees, Gillian Mawson.

A Peculiar Occupation: New Perspectives on Hitler's Channel Islands, Peter Tabb.

The Channel Islands at War: A Dark History, Robert Bard.

The British Channel Islands under Occupation 1940-1945, Paul Sanders.

Outpost of Occupation: How the Channel Islands Survived Nazi Rule 1940-45, Barry Turner.

The German Occupation of the Channel Islands, Charles Cruickshank.

The Jews in the Channel Islands During the German Occupation 1940-1945, Frederick Cohen.

The Model Occupation: The Channel Islands Under German Rule, Madeleine Bunting.

Videos

A series of three videos has been made about the evacuation and liberation of Alderney by Eye Film: Alderney The Evacuation, Alderney The War Years, and Alderney The Homecoming.

Podcasts

We Have Ways of Making You Talk, a WWII history podcast, has a three episode series entitled Britain's Nazi Invasion.[29]

Notes

The notes from this and other talks can be found online at www.modernhistory.org.uk and www.ancienthistory.org.uk.

[29] www.ww2headquarters.com/series/britains-nazi-invasion