

Presentations

Occupation and Humanitarian Aid

—A Case Study: The Channel Islands 1944-1945

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The Channel Islands lie just off the west coast of northern France, but for historical reasons they are part of British sovereign territory. They comprise Guernsey and Jersey together with the much smaller Alderney and Sark, and a few very small uninhabited islands.

In 1939, the main employment on the islands was tourism and intensive agriculture, much of it in the form of greenhouses—growing flowers, grapes, melons, and tomatoes for export; or farming, in particular the growing of potatoes (Jersey Royals) in open fields, and dairy farming with pedigree cattle. The islands had a combined population of just over 97,000 but in June 1940 following non-mandatory evacuation, 66,000 people remained, mostly older men, women, and children. A military decision was made not to defend the Channel Islands by the British following the fall of France in May/June 1940, for strategic reasons.¹ So, they became the only British territory in Europe occupied by German forces during the Second World War. This produced a highly unusual situation after the D-Day landings of June 6, 1944, and the Allied advance inland in July; the German garrison on the Channel Islands was cut off, with no possibility of escape or re-supply. On June 17, 1944 Hitler ordered that the Channel Islands must be defended to the last.² The German garrison refused to surrender; eventually humanitarian aid had to be provided, through the International Red Cross and with the agreement of the British government and the German military occupiers, to the civilian population.

Adolf Hitler took a keen personal interest in the occupation, which he regarded at first as a model for the planned subsequent occupation of the British mainland. As the war progressed, Hitler came to believe that, even before any Allied operation to liberate occupied Europe; the British would attempt to re-take the islands for their symbolic value as British territory. The possible need to reinforce the Channel Islands at short notice was specifically mentioned in Hitler's War Directive 33 of July 19, 1941, which was otherwise concerned with the Eastern Front.³ As a result of Hitler's opinion, the Channel Islands were flooded with German troops: the complete 319th Infantry Division, which by 1943 had been reinforced to number 40,000 soldiers, making it the largest division in the German Army.⁴ On Jersey, the ratio of occupiers was one German soldier to every three islanders, and on Guernsey the ratio was almost one to

¹ For the British decision see Barry Turner, *Outpost of Occupation: How the Channel Islands Survived Nazi Rule 1940-45* (London: Aurum, 2010) pp. 5-19.

² George Forty, *Channel Islands at War: a German Perspective* (London: Ian Allen, 1999) p. 9; this book includes a useful chronology of the major events of the occupation on pp. 8-9.

³ H.R. Trevor-Roper (ed.), *Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945* (London: Pan, [1964] 1966) pp. 139-142.

⁴ For the size and structure of the 319th Infantry Division see Samuel W. Mitcham, *Hitler's Legions: German Order of Battle in World War II* (London: Leo Cooper, 1985) pp. 219-20; Charles Cruickshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands* (London: Sutton, [1975] 2004) pp. 190-218.

one, while in occupied France the ratio of occupiers was approximately one German soldier to every 120 French civilians.

Because of the large number of German occupiers, accommodation was always a source of great anxiety for the islanders. From the start of the occupation German officers were housed in hotels, guest houses, or the many larger empty private houses. While other ranks were frequently billeted upon families, often the family was paid to provide services such as the washing of laundry or cooking. But the German soldiers' presence in family homes was greatly resented because of the loss of both domestic privacy and the feeling of a safe haven away from the war. Over time, some island families and German soldiers did establish a form of friendship, in particular if young children were present in the home, sharing food and fuel with the family. However such relationships were kept secret, not just from local island neighbours but also the German authorities. A constant fear for all islanders was that they and their families might be evicted from their homes without warning and few possessions because they were required for German military purposes.

The German Military Government and administration of the islands was complex, but in essence authority was split between the Military Commandant of the Channel Islands and the Government of Occupation located in Paris, which could override him in certain circumstances. The German garrison declared a state of siege in late July 1944 which was to last for 11 months, in which the local population was in effect held captive and faced the real threat of starvation. On July 22, the German Military Governor in Paris even contemplated the mass evacuation to Great Britain of all islanders not directly active in food production and essential infrastructure; this would have been mainly women and children. However a decision was made instead to contact the International Red Cross in Switzerland and seek food and medical relief for the civilian population, which in October 1944 had been reduced to 62,000, following the deportation of all British born people between September 1942 and February 1943. These deportations were carried out on the direct orders of Hitler, in retaliation for the internment of Germans living in Iran in late 1941. The "States," the Channel Islands' own civilian government, were required to draw up detailed lists which included children and any men who had served as British officers during the First World War; 2,200 people were deported from the islands to internment camps in Germany, where conditions were primitive and Spartan. This was a traumatic event for such a closed community, but it is ironic that the deportees would be receiving a higher ration of food and medical care in the internment camps than those that remained to experience the siege on the Channel Islands.

The Germans prepared their forces to defend the islands and issued instructions that the harvest, which had been good in 1944, and other foodstuffs intended for civilian distribution were to be seized, and the civilian rations which were issued would be minimum existence level only.⁵ However, milk continued to be distributed to the civilian population as it had from the start of the occupation. The States' greatest concern was preventing retribution and retaliation against the local population for any act of defiance or resistance against the German

⁵ Paul Sanders, *The British Channel Islands under German Occupation 1940-1945* (Jersey: Jersey Heritage Trust, 2005) p. xxvii.

occupiers. The States constantly sought a balance between not antagonising the Germans, and meeting the needs of the local population for increasingly scarce resources, including accommodation, medical supplies, fuel, and food. To this effect, in late July the States set up communal cafes and kitchens to feed the civilian population, which operated until their very limited food stocks were completely exhausted. These kitchens became vital once the domestic gas supplies ceased, which happened on Jersey on September 9, and on Guernsey on December 21.

Many civilian accounts go into considerable detail of the hardship and sufferings endured during the siege. Over four years, the majority of the population had adjusted gradually to the restricted diet and reduced calorie intake, using considerable skill and local knowledge to find alternative food sources. Although they were severely malnourished by 1944, diseases of malnutrition such as beriberi, pellagra, rickets, and scurvy were not present on the islands. The civilian medical services were very successful in containing infections, and no major epidemics occurred during the occupation. However typhus did break out on Guernsey in 1942, being carried by infected slave labourers, and a number of German soldiers died.⁶ In contrast to Jersey, Guernsey, and Sark, the small island of Alderney was turned into a military complex. Alderney's population was just over 1,500 in 1939, with cattle farming as the main employment, but only 20 people (the majority of them all members of the same family) stayed for the occupation. Instead, the island became home to a German garrison and a population of slave labourers that reached 3,000 at its height, including four concentration and prison camps.⁷ The Channel Islands and in particular Alderney became a strong point on the German Atlantic Wall, a system of coastal fortifications built by slave labourers by the Todt Organisation between 1942 and 1945. On Hitler's personal orders, one-twelfth of all the resources (steel and concrete) employed in this massive engineering project were used to defend the Channel Islands against a possible British counter invasion.⁸

We are missing any individual accounts of the German garrison's experience of the siege, together with any German official documents of the occupation, since these records were deliberately destroyed towards the end of the siege, being used as a fuel source. The German Military Commandant and his officers ordered their remaining men to carry out their full range of military duties; approximately 11,500 had left the islands to fight in Normandy before the siege was declared in late July. Over the next 11 months, the German soldier's physical stamina and general condition noticeably deteriorated, directly due to reduced rations. In October 1944, the German garrison consisted of 28,500 troops.⁹

The British government was aware of the worsening conditions on the Channel Islands. Regular escapes by boat had occurred from the islands since the start of the occupation. Such

⁶ Hazel R. Knowles Smith, *The Changing Face of the Channel Islands Occupation: Record, Memory and Myth* (London: Palgrave, 2007) p. 93.

⁷ Paul Sanders, *The British Channel Islands under German Occupation 1940-1945* (Jersey: Jersey Heritage Trust, 2005), p. xx; Tom Freeman-Keel, *From Auschwitz to Alderney and Beyond* (London: Seek, 1995).

⁸ H. Smith, *The Changing Face of the Channel Islands Occupation: Record, Memory, Myth* (London: Palgrave, 2007) p. 27.

⁹ Charles Cruickshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands* (London: Sutton, [1975] 2004) p. 285.

escapes were very difficult and dangerous, but become more frequent after July 1944. Very valuable military intelligence was provided to the British authorities; often the escapees had a military background, and great credence was given to their reports. On September 22, the British government sought an early surrender from the German occupiers, but they refused to meet the British envoys off the coast of Guernsey. On September 25, Vice-Admiral Friedrich Huffmeier was appointed as the island's Military Commander. He was regarded by the Nazi regime as more politically reliable and would without question carry out Hitler's order of "No Surrender." On September 27, the British government was officially informed by the Swiss authorities of the desperate food situation for the civilian population on the Channel Islands. British Cabinet papers of this time have a hand-written note in Prime Minister Winston Churchill's own hand that reads, "Let 'em starve. No fighting. They can rot at their leisure."¹⁰ This comment may have been directed to the German garrison and its stubborn refusal to surrender, but the Channel Islands civilian population was also condemned to starve.¹¹ Under International Law, the German occupiers were responsible for feeding the civilians. The British Cabinet at this stage of the conflict was seeking to balance the military objective of isolating the Channel Islands against wider humanitarian concerns for non-combatants in Western Europe, and the knowledge that any decision would be used for Nazi propaganda purposes. In addition, both food and shipping were very scarce resources, and recent experience in the Netherlands had already shown that the German occupiers were using food as a weapon of war. In September, Dutch resistance groups organised national railway strikes to assist the Allies advance, and in direct retaliation the German occupiers blockaded food and fuel deliveries to the Western provinces. This became known as the "Hunger Winter of 1944-45," and a famine was created affecting 4.5 million people. In April 1945, the German administration in the Netherlands allowed food drops by the Allies, known as Operations "Manna" and "Chowhound."

In October, the German Military garrison on the Channel Islands started large scale sweeps and raids, looking for food hoards rumoured to be held by the civilian population. By late October civilian medical provision had effectively stopped on the Channel Islands, the few drugs and medical supplies that had not been exhausted were being rationed by doctors and nurses for patients admitted to hospital, and only "life or death" surgical operations were being performed, often without anaesthetics being given. Any Channel Islanders with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, which was treated by insulin and had run out, had already died; and increased death rates started to be reported in the elderly civilian population. The German garrison held vast stocks of medical supplies including anaesthetics in their underground hospitals on Guernsey and Jersey, which had treated German wounded from the D-Day landings in Normandy from late July. None of these drugs or medical supplies was made available to the civilian medical staff on the islands.

Very long and protected discussions and negotiations continued for approximately four months between the States, the German occupiers, the British government, and the

¹⁰ Quoted in Charles Cruikshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands* (London: Sutton, [1975] 2004) p. 284.

¹¹ See Peter Tabb, *A Peculiar Occupation: New Perspectives on Hitler's Channel Islands* (London: Ian Allen, 2005) p. 159.

International Red Cross; agreement was finally reached between November 5 and 7. The German's gave approval through the Swiss diplomatic service and the International Red Cross that the States could request and accept food parcels and medical supplies for their civilian population only, and that a ship carrying these supplies would be allowed to pass through the British exclusion zone surrounding the Channel Islands. The Germans promised that the parcels and other humanitarian aid would be distributed to civilians, and that the basin food ration would continue to be issued; they would not confiscate or interfere with the distribution process in any way.¹²

The first of the Red Cross shipments arrived on December 27, 1944 at St. Peter Port, Guernsey, and on December 30 at St. Helier, Jersey, brought by the merchant ship SS Vega from Lisbon, with two International Red Cross delegates onboard to monitor distribution. The SS Vega was loaded with 750 tons of emergency supplies, which included 4 tons of soap, 5.2 tons of salt, and 96,000 cigarettes, together with medical and surgical supplies, and special diet supplements for children and the elderly. The individual food parcels had been packed in Canada and New Zealand, and contained tinned food such as tea, butter, meat, sugar, condensed milk, and dried egg. The SS Vega made six trips in total, the last being on May 31, 1945. The Germans respected the sanctity of Red Cross supplies and parcels, and did nothing to interfere with their distribution, despite being near starvation themselves, and military discipline held. But evidence does exist that the German Secret Field Police (often confused with the Gestapo) did consume some parcels in Guernsey and Jersey, and the theft of food parcels also occurred, blamed on German soldiers. Channel Islander's accounts of this time do reflect sympathy for the plight of the soldiers, but it was impossible to share their limited rations.

Although starvation of the civilian population was averted by the arrival of the SS Vega, the Channel Islands were still under German occupation, and in a state of siege conditions continued to worsen. On January 12, 1945, the telephone service stopped, followed by the electricity supply on January 25. The communal cafes and feeding kitchens closed on March 28 because of a lack of food supplies. The Red Cross parcels were now the only reliable food source for the civilian population. As the occupation continued, and news of Germany's military defeat became known (through illegally held radios on the Channel Islands), the civilian population became even more careful to do nothing to provoke the occupiers as the atmosphere became very tense. In March, the German garrison even carried out a small commando raid against Granville on the western Cotentin Peninsula, then far behind the Allied lines.¹³ As late as May 6, Vice-Admiral Huffmeier, summoned to surrender by the British, announced his intention to oppose any landings, broadcasting that, "The Commander in Chief, Channel Islands, receives orders only from his own Government."¹⁴

The German garrison surrendered on May 9, 1945, one day after Germany itself, under

¹² George Forty, *The Channel Islands at War: A German Perspective* (London: Ian Allen, 1999) p. 9.

¹³ Paul Sanders, *The British Channel Islands under German Occupation 1940-1945* (Jersey: Jersey Heritage Trust, 2005) p. 181.

¹⁴ Quoted in Barry Turner, *Outpost of Occupation: How the Channel Islands Survived Nazi Rule 1940-45* (London: Aurum, 2010) p. 231; see also Peter Tabb, *A Peculiar Occupation: New Perspectives on Hitler's Channel Islands* (London: Ian Allen, 2005) pp. 163-80.

Operation “Nestegg,” led by Brigadier Alfred Snow, two British destroyers, HMS Bulldog and HMS Beagle, steamed into St. Peter Port, Guernsey, so ending the occupation. The main Liberation forces arrived in the islands on May 12, the landing ships were loaded with food, medical supplies, clothing, and basic household items for the civilian population.

Once the German garrison had surrendered, they became prisoners of war and received from the British the full protection of the Geneva Convention which included being properly fed, and given many were suffering from borderline starvation, feeding them became a form of medical treatment. But despite the British efforts, in August 1945, the authorities recorded that 300 German soldiers had “died from malnutrition” while being treated at a hospital in Guernsey.¹⁵ The importance of the humanitarian aid supplied by the International Red Cross to the Channel Islands community is still remembered today, and the Red Cross is a very popular charity on the islands.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hazel R. Knowles Smith, *The Changing Face of the Channel Islands Occupation: Record, Memory and Myth* (London: Palgrave, 2007) p. 139.