

Jersey 1940-45

A brief history of the Occupation

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During the Second World War the Occupation of the Channel Islands, lasting five years, probably came as a rude shock to many, with the big question for many islanders in the summer of 1940 being whether to stay or go.

After the German forces took St Malo on 22 June, and France surrendered, Jersey was in range of enemy guns, and when Britain decided that defending the islands was impracticable, and compulsory evacuation was ruled out, it was up to people to make their own decisions. About 10,000 decided to evacuate to the British mainland, leaving about 40,000 in Jersey when the occupying force arrived on 1 July. The island was demilitarised, with British troops withdrawn, the island's lieutenant-governor recalled and the Island Militia stood down, although the unit volunteered as one to go to England to join the main home forces.

On 28 June, German aircraft machine-gunned the island and dropped bombs, killing ten, and on 1 July an ultimatum was issued that white flags be flown and white crosses be painted on the ground. The Germans then arrived, with the Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche, who had been made Civil Governor, formally handing over.

At first, about 2,000 German troops were stationed in Jersey, but this grew to a much higher average over the five years, with at one time about 15,000 believed to be in the island. Although the military occupiers made orders as and when they saw fit, day-to-day government was in the hands of a devolved States 'Cabinet' known as the Superior Council, headed by the Bailiff and including politicians representing eight government departments.



Food was a vital concern, and with outside sources cut off Jersey had to become self-sufficient, although small quantities from France were permitted. Farming methods changed drastically, with potato fields given over to corn and disused mills put back to work. Sugar beet was planted, seawater boiled for salt and improvised tea and coffee became the norm. Despite five years of often-dire shortages, children at the end of the Occupation were found to be in better-than-expected health, possibly because of reduced sugar consumption and their regular, although small, rations of full-cream milk.

Fuel was another scarce commodity, both for heating and cooking, and thousands of trees were felled through the years to provide logs. Motor vehicles were commandeered and only essential vehicles were allowed on the roads.

Most daily commodities were in short supply and, not surprisingly, a black market soon surfaced.

The Occupation caused large numbers to become unemployed and the island authorities put many of them to work on road schemes. A factory was opened for women to produce makeshift clothes out of the sparse quantities of material available.

Economically, the period was a nightmare. The Germans flooded the island with Reichskreditmarks and pfennigs, which had no value elsewhere, and local and English currency soon became scarce, although islanders still 'thought' in sterling when doing their daily business. Income tax had to be raised to its highest ever level of four shillings in the pound (which it has stayed at ever since), and over the years banks had to bail out the island's government for about £6m, accepting bonds to cover debts. Large numbers of residents who had moved from the UK to live in Jersey had to be supported when their pensions were physically cut off and, to add insult to injury, under the terms of the Hague Convention the island was responsible for the expenses of the occupying force (including German soldiers' pay after D-Day).

Education was affected, with both Victoria College and the College for Girls commandeered for German use, and despite a shortage of teachers in Jersey, the school-leaving age was raised to 15 to keep youngsters off the streets. An order that all children should learn German was complied with, but apparently with little enthusiasm.

Although government responsibility had been devolved, the States still met to pass annual budgets, and the island's courts continued to function.

A year into the Occupation, work began to turn Jersey into a fortress amid German fears that the Allies might try to recover the Channel Islands. A population could not be obliged to work for an occupying force, and the Germans brought in thousands of slave labourers from throughout Europe to carry out their grand plans, including an estimated 1,000 Russian prisoners-of-war. Others came from Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Holland and even North Africa, and



endured harsh conditions in the island, many of them not surviving the treatment they received. Islanders were sympathetic, and often put themselves at risk by helping and hiding workers who tried to escape. In one case, a brother and sister who hid a Russian labourer and were informed on were sent to concentration camps, the sister dying in Ravensbruck but her brother managing to survive Belsen.

To counter any attempted Allied assault, beaches were mined in vulnerable landing spots, anti-tank walls of steel and concrete were built, large cliff-top guns put in place, camouflaged gun-emplacements installed, the walls of Elizabeth and Gorey castles reinforced, steel spikes planted in fields where aircraft might land and a radar station established at Les Landes. In order to ferry the vast amounts of concrete needed, a railway network was created to link with the Ronez quarries on the north coast. Tunnels were driven into hillsides for the storage of ammunition, and an underground military hospital was built with slave labour after D-Day, but was never used.

In 1942, islanders were deprived of wireless sets which, because their local newspaper was censored, had kept them in touch with the war's progress, and anyone not handing in theirs or continuing to use it was liable to a fine or imprisonment. One clergyman, who continued to hide a set in his organ loft, was sent to a German camp, where he died.

In the same year, a high-level order was made that all people not born in the island, along with their families, were to be sent to German internment camps, about 1,200 being dispatched, despite protests by the island authorities.

The worst period came in the final year, following D-Day in June 1944, which islanders believed might be a sign that liberation for them was also on the way. They were now, ironically, besieged by the British fleet, with no supplies at all being allowed in. Salt, sugar, butter and eventually bread ran out, gas and electricity failed and water was only pumped at intervals. The cloud lifted briefly when the Red Cross ship the *Vega* was allowed to call at New Year, bringing in 750 tons of parcels.

Despite hardship endured by both occupied and occupiers, the German forces had generally behaved decently towards islanders, directed by a commander deemed to be reasonable in his dealings, but three months before liberation came a more hard line officer, who resolved to hold out till the end, was put in charge.

A week after Hitler's suicide, the German forces in Europe surrendered, but Jersey was not to be liberated until a day later, 9 May, when British troops arrived in HMS *Beagle*.



A month later, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited Jersey and presented a silver cross and candlesticks for the Town Church.