

# The Background to the Occupation

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## The Reasons

11 November 1918 is generally regarded as being the day that the Great War ended although one could argue that it was also the day that the Second World War began. This is because the seeds of the Second World War were sewn in the various treaties signed after Versailles and the impossible demands made upon the losers by the victors. One of these demands was that the Germans should pay £6,600,000,000 in reparations. This amount was determined in 1921 yet by the following year, the Germans were unable to pay this and so the French seized the Ruhr valley, the heart of Germany's coal and steel industry. The country's economy was unstable and so the currency went into decline. - In 1914 the exchange rate had been 20 marks to the £ sterling, by 1920 it was 250, in 1921 it was 1,000, in 1922 it had fallen to 35,000 and by the end of 1923 the mark was valueless

The French would use the profits from these industries to pay the reparations. This had the result of bringing Germany's industry to a standstill which in turn sped up the decline of the value of the mark and the country went into hyper inflation which wiped out the savings of the large middle class. It was from amongst this group now reduced to beggary by the intransigent and callous behaviour of the French that Hitler drew his support.

Between 1924 and 1929 the German economy was put on a firm footing as a result of an economic rescue package put together by the victorious allies but by this time the damage had been done. In the elections held in September 1930 Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party polled more than 6,500,000 votes and won over 100 seats in the Reichstag. Germany was on the road to establishing a dictatorship and the blame for this can be traced back to the humiliation heaped on the German people by the Treaty of Versailles. The one thing that Hitler and his National Socialist party offered the electorate that the other parties failed to recognise was the restoration of national pride.

## Who was Adolf Hitler and what did he stand for?

Although an Austrian, Hitler had begun his political career in Bavaria in 1919, by 1923 his party had attracted the support of General Luddendorf and the military reactionaries. An early attempt at seizing power by force was thwarted and Hitler and most of his political officers were imprisoned. While in prison he was able to formulate his ideas for the future of his party. On his release he set about reorganising the party structure - in the 1924 elections he won 32 seats and four years later the stabilising of the German economy saw a lessening of support and a drop to 12 seats. It was at this point when the Nazis were losing support that the world slump or economic depression came to the aid of the flagging party. The flow of loans from the USA dried up which meant that Germany's true economic position was exposed and unemployment soared which led to the German people realising that the payment of £100,000,000 per year in War reparations was preventing the long term economic recovery of the country. Hitler supplied the answer - repudiate the treaty of Versailles, stop the reparations and use the money to rebuild the economy. It was an attractive option. The 1932 election saw the Nazis gain 230 seats in the Reichstag, many of those who voted for them were amongst the 6,000,000 registered unemployed. The German government resigned and after much discussion President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor.

## The Thirties and the rise of fascism

On 30 January, 1933 Hitler and the National Socialist Party came to power in Germany. At first as part of a coalition government, but Hitler ordered a new election and just before it was due to be

held the Reichstag building was mysteriously burned to the ground. This allowed the government to order the rounding up of their main opponents - the communists.

The election in March 1933 saw an increase in the number of seats to 288, not a complete majority but enough to ensure Nazi policies were pushed through. Virtually immediately concentration camps were set up to contain the opponents of Nazism and by the end of the month the Reichstag had given Hitler dictatorial powers which he used to abolish trade unions and every non-Nazi party organisation - Germany had become a one party state. In the elections held in November 1933 Hitler gained 92% of the votes. When President Hindenburg died in August 1934, the offices of President and Chancellor were merged.

Now in complete control the policies set out in his manifesto (Mein Kampf) written during his imprisonment were brought into play. As far as the rest of the world was concerned the most ominous was the declaration that German minorities living in neighbouring lands must be brought within the Greater German Reich. The Treaty of Versailles was repudiated and the rearmament programme started.

In March 1935 Hitler ordered the German army into the Rhineland although they had orders to withdraw should the French show opposition. There is no official reaction from France or Britain - appeasement is the order of the day and Hitler knew the way ahead was open for him. At the same time Hitler introduced conscription to create an army of 550,000 men - the largest in Europe. Hitler's economic rejuvenation of the German economy depended a lot on this growing militarisation, the growing autobahn system employed hundreds of thousands in the construction of military freeways, the development of the Volkswagen - the people's car - mobility for troops.

13 March 1938 aided by Austrian Nazis, Hitler annexes Austria into the Greater German Reich. May 1938 Hitler threatens to annex the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, despite threats of a military response from France, Russia and Britain. Throughout the summer the Nazis engineer a series of "incidents" during which Hitler announces that the Sudeten Germans must be protected and that the only way this can truly happen is if Czechoslovakia cede the Sudeten German lands to the Greater German Reich. With war looking imminent the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and the French Premier, Daladier, meet with Hitler and his Italian ally, Mussolini. Hitler's brinkmanship pays off, Britain and France back down Chamberlain returns from Munich with the famous piece of paper promising "... peace in our time" and on the 24 November German troops march into Sudetenland.

## **The countdown to war**

Despite the continuing International crisis, everyone tried to put on a brave face in the hope that a war would be avoided. Jersey was visited by the new *HMS Jersey*, Jersey Airways took delivery of its latest airliner, a de Havilland Flamingo; the Battle of Flowers went ahead and the notorious safe breaker Eddie Chapman was arrested in the island.

## **The war**

In the early hours of 1 September 1939 the German air force began a series of attacks on military targets within Poland. At 6:00am German troops crossed the Polish frontier. By the following day the Luftwaffe had control of the skies over Poland. On the following day, 3 September Great Britain and France declared war on Germany in defence of the Poles. France who shared a common border with Germany should have been able to exert some form of military pressure on Hitler but their mobilisation system was so out-moded that there was no possibility of a French strike until 17 September at the earliest. It was on this date that The Russians invaded Poland as part of a secretly negotiated deal with Germany and the Polish armies had collapsed.

### **The Day that War broke out**

At 11:00am on Sunday, 3 September the nation heard the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain say "*... from this hour a state of war existed between Great Britain and her allies and Germany.*" Immediately after the broadcast, air raid sirens were sounded throughout Britain 1.5 million mothers and children were evacuated from the more vulnerable parts of the country and another 2 million moved on their own accord. As part of the blackout regulations car headlights were forbidden although the main effect of this last measure was that the number of road casualties in 1939 was double that of the previous year.

Jersey's response to the outbreak of war was swift - cinemas were closed, gas masks were issued, petrol rationing was introduced, bus services were reduced and the black out was enforced. Several buildings were sandbagged and Springfield was turned into one of several First Aid posts around the island, little was done in the way of erecting air raid shelters yet following the Spanish Civil War and Guernica everyone knew that this was where the real and most immediate danger would come from. There was a run on black out materials and fire fighting materials in local shops. French reservists left the island to rejoin their regiments just as their fathers had done in 1914. Hundreds of young islanders took the mail boat over to the mainland to join up.

### **The phoney war**

After bravely defending themselves for almost three weeks, Poland fell to the combined German Soviet onslaught. On the Western Front French troops manned the Maginot line and reinforcements were rushed to support them - altogether the french had 72 divisions available.. A British Expeditionary Force of 4 divisions was dispatched to Northern France and was stationed in villages whose names had been so familiar only twenty five years earlier to a different generation of British soldiers and - nothing happened. No air raids, no action and so a reaction set in and this period was known as the Phoney War or the *Sitzkrieg* The first British casualty did not materialise until 13 December. By Christmas many islanders who had joined up were able to return to the island on leave. When they did return the Evening Post photographer was at hand to snap them for posterity.

On the Home Front, scrap metal drives were organised, women produced knitted comforts for the troops and schools raised money to provide mobile canteens and cigarettes for the troops. People began to complain about shortages and restrictions and Air raid wardens were generally regarded as officious busybodies when they tried to enforce the black-out regulations.

### **The Blitzkrieg**

Everything was to change radically when on 9 April 1940, German invaded neutral Denmark and occupied Copenhagen. The Danish army had been reduced to minuscule proportions by years of pacifist government pruning military budgets to the extent that it was unable to put up any real resistance. On the same day, neutral Norway was also attacked - German seaborne troops landed in Oslo, Kristiansand, Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik while paratroops attacked Oslo and Stavanger airports. These were occupied but the Norwegian army which was, mainly a militia army continued to mobilise and were joined a week later by an Expeditionary Force of 13,000 British and French troops. The Germans were in control of Southern and Central Norway after 4 weeks but the iron deposits around Narvik were still held by the allies. However, with the defeat in France the expeditionary force was withdrawn on 7 June and the Norwegian army finally admitted defeat on 9 June.

The German tactic of Blitzkrieg which had showed its worth in the capture of Poland in September 1939 and again in Denmark and Norway in April 1940 was based on the theory that an enemy could be demoralised, confused and defeated by a combination of fast moving, mechanised, armoured

forces, supported by air attack using terror bombing tactics on civilian targets. The irony was that it was originally thought out in Britain during the 1920s.

The die had been cast and on 10 May 1940 the Germans invaded neutral Holland in an effort to outflank the Belgian and Franco-British armies. Within four days the army in Rotterdam had surrendered and by 17 May the whole country was occupied. On the same day as Holland was invaded, another German army crossed into Belgium. This drew a Franco-British army over the frontier to counter the threat while a second German army group pushed through the Ardennes, crossed the Meuse on 12 May to outflank the Maginot line and were able to come behind the Allied forces in order to race towards the Channel ports to cut the Allied force off from resupply and reinforcement. It was the success of this plan that directly led to Dunkirk where between 26 May and 4 June nearly 340,000 troops including 140,000 French troops were lifted off the beaches and out of the German trap. Unfortunately they left behind them hundreds of thousands of tons of military supplies and equipment, including 90,000 rifles and 84,000 motor vehicles and motorcycles. Of the 860 ships engaged in this operation, 243 were sunk while on the skies the RAF lost 474 aircraft.

With all resistance in France effectively reduced to piecemeal diversions the Germans raced towards Paris which they occupied on 14 June. A week later France surrendered.

As the Germans pressed westwards towards the Channel coast the weather was glorious - blue skies, warm and sunny - weather that everyone recalls. It was against this bright blue sky that the first signs of the approaching German armies were seen for on 9 June a massive pall of smoke was seen beginning in the east and eventually clearing in the west in the late evening - the French authorities were burning the fuel installations at Cherbourg.

### **The Evacuation of St Malo**

On Sunday, 16 June the Bailiff was informed by the Lieutenant Governor, General Harrison, that the BEF was to be brought out of Western France in a re-run of a Dunkirk style operation. The Bailiff asked the commodore of the St Helier Yacht club if he could organise a convoy of yachts to assist with the evacuation from St Malo. Four yachts and the States Harbour Vessel were able to leave immediately and reached St Malo on the Monday. A second convoy of 13 yachts left on the Monday evening tide and arrived the following morning. By 4:00pm the evacuation had been completed, the dockyards installations had been blown and all the Jersey boats had left the outer roads as the Germans were entering the port area. The first sounds of war could be heard in the island on Monday, 17 June when heavy gunfire was heard all day from the nearby coast of France. That night many people left St Helier to go to sleep with relations or friends in the country parishes.

The following day it was learnt that Cherbourg, Rennes and St Malo were all occupied by the enemy.

### **The situation in Jersey**

#### **JDV**

With the collapse of France in May and June, the invasion of Britain was a distinct possibility. The British army was in disarray following Dunkirk so the Home Secretary, Anthony Eden, called for the creation of a citizen's army made up of all males between the ages of 16 and 65 - the Local Defence Volunteers unfortunately the initials soon meant that this body became known as Look, Duck and Vanish. It was later renamed the Home Guard.

In Jersey the equivalent was created and called the Jersey Defence Volunteers and for ten days many old soldiers and some elderly gentlemen who had never carried weapons before stiffened by the Royal Jersey Militia mounted guard on the island's coastline.

### **The treatment of aliens**

Just as today, the 1939 Jersey tourism and agricultural industries were heavily dependant upon foreign labour. When war broke out, the Grouville Holiday camp was requisitioned by the military, surrounded with barbed wire and converted into an internment camp for those German, Austrian and Italian nationals who were working in the island. In the terminology of the day it was officially known as a Concentration Camp. However, this term did not have the same connotation in 1939 as it was have five years later. At the time it simply meant a place where prisoners were concentrated.

With the arrival of the German army in July 1940 the inmates were released and their places taken by those British servicemen who had been trapped in the island and who remained in the camp until they were transferred to a prisoner of war camp in Silesia.

### **Demilitarisation**

On the Wednesday, 19 June when the last of the Jersey yachts were returning from St Malo, the British cabinet met and knowing that it would be impossible to defend the Channel Islands against German long range guns and aerial attack without sustaining massive civilian, as well as military, losses declared that the islands should be demilitarised and declared "Open Towns". This meant that the islands would be abandoned militarily and could be taken over without a fight.

The decision along with the message from His Majesty King George VI was read out to a special sitting of the States. The Lieutenant Governor, Major General Harrison was recalled to England and the Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche was sworn in as Civil Governor.

The fact that the islands had been demilitarised was neither announced to the outside world nor communicated directly to the Germans. The Government felt that to do so would be in effect an open invitation to the Germans to take over the islands.

### **The evacuation**

On the same day it was announced that there would be ships made available for those civilians who had special reasons to leave the islands - these included wives and families of serving British troops, pensioners, men of military age and Jews. In addition to these groups there was a blind panic with over 20,000 registering to be evacuate. Shops, farms and houses were abandoned, cars were given away or abandoned on the quayside. The Bailiff and other politicians did their best to allay people's fears and this along with a shortage of boats meant that in the event just over 6,500 islanders left for the mainland.

Amongst these were all 11 officers and 193 men of the Royal Jersey Militia who sailed off on 21 June to join the 11th Battalion of the Hampshire regiment. The other members of the Regular Army who had recently arrived in the island left the same day along with the boys of the Army Apprentice School at St Peter's Barracks.

Within a week the peak of the evacuation was over, an air of normality returned and an uneasy or expectant calm settled on the island. The 1940 Potato season had been disrupted with the regular cargo boats having been diverted to the evacuation of Dunkirk and then St Malo. When these were once more available the "strings" of potato lorries were even longer than usual. It was this scene that the crews of German reconnaissance planes spotted as they flew over the island at 10,000 feet.

### **28th of June The Air raid**

These flights had been especially ordered by the German High Command who realised that they knew very little about the defences in the islands and what the flights showed was the harbours of both islands crammed with lorries either loading or unloading from cargo ships.

On the evening of Friday, the 28th of June the Luftwaffe mounted a reconnaissance in force designed to draw any fire from the island's defences should they exist. Accordingly just before 7:00pm six Heinkel bombers approached the island from the east strafing and dropping bombs at La Rocque killing three people, they proceeded to St Helier where they attacked the harbour area where a further six people were killed. The tenth victim was a crewman on the Guernsey lifeboat which was rounding Noirmont when it was attacked.

It was ironic that at 9:00pm the BBC news carried the announcement from the British Government that the Channel Islands had been demilitarised and were undefended - that is nine days after the decision had been taken. The following day a Guernsey politician asked whether the Germans had been informed of this situation, this was passed on to the mainland where eventually on the 30th of June 1940 - eleven days after the decision was taken - Joseph P. Kennedy, the US Ambassador in London was asked by the Foreign to be good enough to pass on to the German Government via the US Embassy in Berlin that the Channel Islands were indeed demilitarised.

The Luftwaffe flew over the island and dropped copies of an ultimatum demanding that white crosses of surrender be painted in prominent places such as the Royal Square and the Airport and white 'flags' be displayed from all buildings. The following morning, Monday 1 July 1940 the Germans arrive in the island.

## **The Occupation had begun.**