



# A NEW CHAPTER IN OCCUPATION HISTORY

Dr Paul Sanders at Jersey Archive shortly after he completing his Official History of the Occupation. (Jersey Evening Post)

**The Jersey Heritage Trust commissioned Cambridge historian Dr Paul Sanders to write an official history of the Occupation of the Channel Islands in time for the 60th anniversary of the Liberation of Jersey. He explains why, despite the existence of numerous volumes on the subject already, his book will be truly novel in content and outlook.**

IT WAS MY INTENTION FROM THE VERY beginning to be as ambitious as possible and to provide a framework for discussion that would be regarded not only as entertaining but also as an authoritative reconfiguration of occupation history. The other ambition was to provide an account that would address the questions which make occupation history interesting and relevant today and to use the entire spectrum of available primary sources. What is quite noticeable today is how the workings of memory have impacted perceptions over the last sixty years. The past ten years have seen some remarkable developments, not merely in the Channel Islands but especially in Europe.

Many people in 'blame culture' jump to the conclusion that belated realisations have more to do with conceit than self-deception, that something sinister must be going on; what is patently clear however is that 'blind spots' are inherently human. We all have them.

The most dramatic example of the damage done by 'blind spots' is that of the Swiss watch industry which slept through the digital revolution of the 1980s. When they were introduced to the first quartz watches, the Swiss acted as a classical paradigm community, which frames and deals with a given problem in a similar way. They dismissed the whole digital idea as cheap, substandard and Japanese and predicted that it would never take off. What the Japanese did, in the end, was to couple low prices with quality. The Swiss managers were not dismissive because they were lazy, incompetent or decadent; the problem was the complacency brought on by sharing one and the same paradigm. They were no longer able to think outside the box.

The concept of 'paradigms' can be applied to many other contexts and it is particularly relevant to the memory of the occupation. What our generation seems to realise is that memory is not something that simply 'is'; memory is bendable and flexible and it works within certain political or social parameters, or boundaries. There were 'blind spots' in the historiography of the Occupation; and I find it pertinent to conceive of the memory of the Occupation as a forward movement, in progressive stages, whose course was determined by the elimination of blind spots.

What I hope is that addressing this issue in these terms will enable us to bridge the abyss between perceptions of the Occupation in the Channel Islands and in Britain.

Now a few remarks about the project itself: as you will realise the schedule was tight from the very beginning.

Primary research of this kind does not usually get written in a year, only compilation. It was clear that we wanted more than compilation, as there is enough repetition and repackaging already. If anything new was to come from this project it was absolutely essential to go back to the sources. The key was to structure the project in phases and adopt a very disciplined approach.

A large amount of time had to be dedicated to locating new materials and there have been some successes in this respect: about 500 pages of intelligence files, left by the late Captain Denning of MI5, were purchased by the IWM only last year; other discoveries were the Wehrmacht personnel documents at the Bundesarchiv and the file of the investigations against Kurt Klebeck, which the prosecutor's office in Hamburg made accessible one year before schedule. Once the materials were collected, they were arranged in a chapter layout that allowed me to proceed at a rate of one chapter every fortnight. This writing work began in earnest before Christmas.

Seven chapters in the book deal with the following themes: the economics of the Occupation, resistance, collaboration, the life of the civilians, the Germans, the slave labourers and the post-war enquiries of the islands in summer 1945. In addition there are two short chronological sections: one dealing with events during the period of Occupation from summer 1940 to autumn 1944 and another dealing with the siege period.

The book's overall 'architecture' (indicated in the chapters) is 'traditional'. I had originally planned to bring in historical geography and social psychology as a new layer of analysis. This would have meant, among other things, comparing the human and geographical make-up of the Channel Islands to that of other islands and creating a link between the Occupation and other periods of the Islands' history, but I already had enough trouble collecting material as it was, so that this overly ambitious scheme had to be abandoned.

The majority of changes are in outlook and the way in which I treat some of the themes. One major realisation is that a genuine analytical history of the Occupation has never been written. Charles Cruickshank's history is a Herodotian panorama of facts (and in some respects it is probably more exhaustive than my own book), but it is not an analytical or interpretive history of the Occupation (those among you familiar with Richard Overy's "Why the Allies won" will

understand what I mean by the term ‘analytical history’). There is a distinct, specific story behind the Channel Islands occupation, something which made this a unique event and my intent was to profile this more closely.

One of the principal dilemmas was how to reconcile perception of the Occupation in the Channel Islands with the overriding perceptions outside the islands – and I am referring here to the discussion of collaboration. I have myself, after many months of reflection, come to the conclusion that the term ‘co-operation’ or ‘maintenance of administration’ does not adequately describe the situation. Criticism is not levelled at the entire administration; but there is clear evidence that not all Channel Islands administrators always behaved in an absolutely exemplary manner; many of them relied excessively on principles such as ‘law is law’, ‘greater good’ or they became imbued with the new powers attributed to them.



Many evacuees wore as many clothes as possible so that they could fit more into their suitcases, June 1940. (Société Jersiaise)

use and definition is a rather ambiguous concept. Thus confusion arises. And where confusion reigns supreme, polemics are never far away.

My line is that while the Channel Islands should get used to the term ‘collaboration’, they also have a right for things to be called by their name (this means that they can not be put into the same category as for example Vichy).

Rather than asking ‘collaboration or not collaboration?’ the question I have asked is ‘which collaboration?’ Using a menu of options proposed by historian Peter Davies I interpret the Channel Islands as a case of ‘submission on the grounds of superior force’ tempered by elements of ‘shield philosophy’ and ‘tactical collaboration’.

Thus there is definitely no case for ‘heart and soul’ collaboration or the ‘wait-and-see’ approach which was common in other places in Europe; this is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated or even undervalued in its significance, although it testifies to the special status of the Islands. I wish to



In August 1940 the Luftwaffe conducted a victory parade through St Helier. (Société Jersiaise)

was absolutely nothing of this sort in the islands. A complete failure of seduction to the ‘New Europe’!

What I have also done was to juxtapose ‘collaboration’ with the impressive achievement of the Islands’ authorities in the areas of public health, finance and in the procurement of supplies from France. The indication is that the Channel Islands authorities indeed acted as a shield; that their presence made a considerable difference to the civilian population. Many other administrations in Europe made similar claims but achieved exactly the opposite: they made things worse for the civilian population.

I said previously that ‘Guernsey travelled somewhat further down the slippery slope of collaboration than her sister island’, and received a rebuke for this phrase afterwards, which shows just how sensitive the issue still is. It also brings us to another dilemma: the issue of Guernsey, the sister island.

What I meant with the above phrase was that this was not really one occupation, but at least two occupations; and that there was a difference in relations to the Germans; not so much a difference in philosophy, but definitely in tone. This is evident in the public notices which appeared in the Guernsey press during the Occupation and which contain an often very patronising undertone. Unfortunately, this did have practical implications: even before the Occupation the Guernsey authorities had decided that this occupation should be absolutely frictionless. In late June 1940 Jurat Leale went as far as stating that the person who resisted the occupation was the ‘worst enemy’ of the people. The authorities in Guernsey went further in cancelling out opposition to the occupation than in Jersey. The pinnacle of these efforts was Bailiff Carey’s £25 reward for information leading to the arrest of V-signs painters in 1941, a step equal to an exhortation to denunciation. Nothing of this genre seems to have taken place in Jersey; even the tone of notices to the public was more matter-of-fact and neutral, and they left no doubt as to which orders were German and which were local. Bailiff Coutanche also used the principle of ‘restraint and influence’ to intervene in favour of a number of people who were in deep trouble. One example that may not yet be known was his intervention in early 1945 that the foreign OT workers remaining in Jersey be included in the distribution of Red Cross parcels.

I am, as is the Jewish writer Primo Levi, of the opinion that one has to limit one’s criticism of individuals and that a lot of the blame has to go to the structures within which individuals operate.



A German blockhouse camouflaged as a seaside bungalow near Gorey Pier. (Courtesy of the Société Jersiaise)

One keeps coming back to the age-old philosophical issue of man's nature: whether the tendency towards good or to evil dominates. The Guernsey authorities may indeed have been under a lot more pressure than the authorities in Jersey. What is crystal clear is that if the Alderney occupation was the most brutal and the most militarised, and the Jersey occupation the most civilian, the Guernsey one was somewhere in the middle.

Still I feel that the amalgamation of the two occupation experiences has been to Jersey's disadvantage; but I also fear that criticism of Guernsey will lead to the inevitable contention that - because this was a Jersey sponsored project - the outcome could only be biased in favour of Jersey. Another dilemma.

I am fully aware that microstates such as the Channel Islands are more vulnerable, more susceptible to shocks and dislocation than larger communities. Myths perform a vital function in keeping the fabric of society intact and my other dilemma is that some of my findings go against some 'truths' which turn out to be myths.

One of these myths is that the Channel Islands occupation had the good fortune of being run by a group of aristocratic 'gentlemen officers' who were not Nazis and thus protected the islands from worse. While I can only confirm that many Germans were indeed positively disposed towards the Islands - without German support, Island purchasing in France would have had no chance at all - the first part belongs to myth. Von Schmettow's personnel files at the Bundesarchiv describe the man, rather typically, as an officer loyal to the tenets of Nazism whose principal 'weakness' - and this is a direct citation - was his occasional leniency. This would explain how one and the same man could have an open ear for Islanders, while at the same time showing no interest in the plight of the 'Untermensch' slave labourers (the latter episode is described in the memoirs of Lord Coutanche). The Manichean opposition of von Schmettow and his successor Admiral Hüffmeyer is probably a brainchild of Baron von Aufsess, another contemporary one cannot call an unbiased historical source. Personally I believe that what we are faced with here is an attempt similar to the attempt to whitewash the Wehrmacht and blame the SS, aptly described by Gerald Reitlinger as the 'alibi of a nation' in the 1950s.

Another myth is that what came across from France was smelly Camembert, in an often putrefied condition. We know now that the bulk of the supplies procured in France provided a vital complement to the Island resources. Where else were the islands to get diesel, coke, coal, seeds, flour, agricultural machinery and clothing? Another rather



On the 1st July 1940 the Bailiff, Attorney General and Governor's Secretary met the German invaders at Jersey Airport. (Société Jersiaise)

therefore the bulk of the cost of occupation was footed by the French state. Although the French government protested for two years, the Channel Islands had powerful protectors who made sure that supplies kept flowing and the French continued to pay and deliver.

Finally, the 'model occupation'; perhaps the most tenacious of myths. First, 'model occupation' was a concept formulated by Sherwill in Guernsey in 1940; it was based on the idea that strict observance of the Hague Convention would guide their island through these difficult times and that everything should be undertaken in order to not provoke the occupier. Second, there can be no 'model occupations' when the occupier is a dictatorship such as Nazi Germany which uses law in an utterly opportunistic fashion. The Channel Islands occupation was not a relatively benign occupation because of respect of international law, but because the Germans considered Channel Islanders their racial equals.

I don't want to be misunderstood here: this is not an attempt to belittle what islanders went through, but an attempt to arrive at an appropriate appreciation of a phenomenon; and this requires developing a comparative perspective, casting one's eye outside the islands. 'Relatively benign' means that the Channel Islands were not Lidice or Belsen; there were also no Christmas days such as 1941 in Leningrad, when 40,000 citizens of that city starved and froze to death.

As John Leale said in his speech to the States of Guernsey on 23 May 1945: "The occupation was not a reign of terror, but there was always anxiety." And we do good to respect their anxiety.

*The Channel Islands Under German Occupation 1940-1945 was published on 5th May 2005 and is available from the Jersey Museum and all good bookshops priced £19.95.*



Despite the heavy presence of foreign troops islanders try to carry on with life as best as they can. (Société Jersiaise)



The Red Cross ship 'Vega' arriving in St Peter Port. (Société Jersiaise)