Redefining Resistance: the German Occupation of the Channel islands During World War II

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During World War II, the only part of Great Britain occupied by the German forces was the Channel Islands. Over the past seventy years, the Channel Islands have been discredited for their lack of large scale resistance similar to that found in many occupied European countries. Instead, this paper will explore how the residents showed their defiance through small scale, unorganized acts of passive resistance such as disobedience of German laws, minor sabotage, sheltering and aiding escaped slave workers, illegal news from wireless radios and leaflets, the “V for Victory” campaign, speaking their native languages, and paying homage to Britain in postage stamps. This type of resistance did not turn the tide of the war, but it allowed the people of the Channel Islands to take a stand against the German occupation and boosted their morale. While many people continue to view any collaboration by the Islanders with the Germans as treason, it should be seen as necessary for survival. By examining diaries, letters, interviews, memoirs, and monographs, this paper will demonstrate that although their outward collaboration contrasted with their resistance efforts, it was these efforts that showed the true loyalties of the residents of the Channel Islands.

The Channel Islands are located in the English Channel between England and France and are remnants of the Duchy of Normandy that became part of England in the Norman Conquest of 1066. They are British Crown dependencies but not part of the United Kingdom; they are
self-governed, but acts of Parliament do apply to them through special provisions.¹ The main islands of the Channel Islands are Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney, Sark and Herm. During the war, Great Britain demilitarized the Channel Islands before the German invasion and left the Islanders without plans for defending themselves against the occupation. Nevertheless, because the Islands were the only part of Great Britain occupied by Germany during WWII, they became extremely valuable as a symbol of German dominance over all of Great Britain regardless of their actual size and significance; and Hitler felt the Islands could remain under German control indefinitely because of their similar Norman heritage.² The occupation lasted from 1940-1945 and did not end until a year after D-Day and 7 days after Hitler’s suicide.

The difference between active and passive resistance and organized and non-organized resistance has been constantly debated by historians since the end of World War II. Generally, active resistance denotes armed, militant resistance while passive resistance encompasses all other types of resistance. Organized resistance is resistance, active or passive, that requires cooperation between groups of people under some type of hierarchy of authority. Non-organized resistance is resistance that is carried out collaboratively or individually, but the people involved do not answer to any type of authority. In the Channel Islands, the only resistance during the German occupation was passive and non-organized. While many people collaborated in their resistance, there was no hierarchical, organized resistance like the European Resistance Movements; and there is no evidence of any active, armed resistance at all.

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on the Islands. Rather than an excuse for not creating an organized, active resistance movement, passive resistance often shows the true loyalty of those involved because it is often a spontaneous reaction against the situation without the necessity of organization.\(^3\)

The Channel Islands did not mount a large scale resistance movement for several reasons. First and foremost, Britain enumerated its policy that the Channel Islands should remain peaceful in a commentary from the War Office in London charging residents that “obedience to the occupant is one of the implied conditions of the special position accorded to the peaceful inhabitants.”\(^4\) In contemporary views, obedience was synonymous with collaboration; and thus, Britain forced Islanders to collaborate with Germany especially considering the demilitarization of the Islands before the Germans even arrived. Demographically, most of the young men who would have made up a resistance movement had either left to help fight the war or had evacuated before the arrival of the Germans so that they comfortably outnumbered the men of military age who were left on the Islands; and geographically, the size of the Islands left its residents nowhere to run and no place to hide.\(^5\) Finally, some Islanders argued against any type of large scale resistance based on morality. In his diary, Bernard Baker of Jersey noted, “I can of course kill a German, sabotage an aeroplane \([sic]\), destroy a number of Lorries, but if by so doing I bring heavy punishments to bear on 40,000 people...am I a patriot? Or am I a traitor?”\(^6\) The lack of a large scale resistance movement did not mean that the Islanders approved of the Germans or wanted to

help them in any way, but rather, they had to resort to passive resistance because it was the only feasible form of resistance available to the Channel Islanders.\textsuperscript{7} As Charles Cruickshank puts it, “The Islanders cannot be criticized for not starting a resistance movement. They are rather to be congratulated on their good sense.”\textsuperscript{8}

One of the most prevalent forms of passive resistance on the Islands was the general disobedience of German orders and laws. Although this type of resistance was seen by many as pointless, the Islanders’ disobedience of German orders did save some lives and showed their true loyalties to Britain.\textsuperscript{9} Many of the orders that were disobeyed dealt with livestock and produce as the Islanders tried to survive by supplementing the food rations regulated by the Germans. Peter Le Prevost, who lived out the occupation as a child on Guernsey, remembered how his father reported to the Germans that their family cow had either been lost or stolen when in reality she was slaughtered and the meat distributed to friends and family.\textsuperscript{10} Others disobeyed orders that would indirectly aid the Germans such as when the Superior Council in Jersey refused to repair a road that led to an ammunition dump.\textsuperscript{11} John Crossley Hayes described in his memoir how one of his neighbors hid his car under a haystack for all five years of the occupation rather than surrender it to the Germans.\textsuperscript{12} Another example is a small booklet printed by the Allies and distributed throughout the Islands entitled \textit{Stiegel the Woodcutter}.

\textbf{The booklet was} written in German and abandoned the story of Stiegel

\textsuperscript{7} Hastrup, 145.
\textsuperscript{8} Charles Cruickshank, \textit{The German Occupation of the Channel Islands} (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 152.
\textsuperscript{10} Peter Le Provost, “A Child’s War: The German Occupation of Guernsey,” \textit{WW2 People’s War}, \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/78/a4185678.shtml#top}.
\textsuperscript{11} Cruickshank, 157.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 62.
after the first page. The rest of the booklet provided soldiers and workers with comprehensive instructions on how to fake symptoms of shingles, jaundice, backache, digestive disturbances, and even partial paralysis so they would be considered unfit for work. By faking sickness and injury, Islanders could avoid doing work that would aid the German cause. Similarly, John Leale recounted a time in which he could not with a good conscience hang posters with anti-Russian propaganda because Russia had recently allied itself with Britain; instead, Leale sent the posters back with the excuse that hanging posters was not the job of the local administration.

Along with general disobedience, several Islanders took resistance one step further and engaged in minor sabotage. Minor sabotage did not appear until almost nine months after the start of the occupation, but it continued to occur until the Germans left. In the last eighteen months of the Occupation, sabotage increased and was not limited to the Germans. Instead, it included painting swastikas on homes of Islanders accused of collaboration. Sabotage was most easily achieved by Islanders employed by the Germans, and like disobedience, many acts of sabotage concerned food supplies. Some were acts of omission in which merchants failed to mention that rats had nibbled on the melons bought by German soldiers or waitresses who failed to inform the Germans that they spit in their soup. Others stole food directly from the Germans by breaking bags of macaroni or flour and hiding some in their shoes while they unloaded supply boats. One Islander remembered sewing up “the arms and legs

14 Leale, 223-224.
16 Ibid., 68.
18 Cheryl de la Mare, “Memories of the Occupation of Guernsey as Told by Ira Le Savuage,”
of the underclothes they gave [her] aunt to wash, so that when there was an alarm, and they had to get out of bed quickly, they couldn’t get into their clothes.” Other acts of sabotage were carried out by children, mostly boys between the ages of 15 and 20, who stole German bicycles and food, defused mines, and cut telegraph wires and railway lines. Finally, the most impressive act of sabotage was carried out on the island of Jersey where the Airport Controller, Charles Roche, ordered the chief groundsman to cut the grass much shorter than normal so that German pilots would not touch down quickly enough and instead crash into the fence. Twenty-eight planes were damaged within the year, and the Germans resorted to cutting the grass themselves.

Another act of passive resistance carried out on the Islands was sheltering and aiding escaped slave workers, but the extent to which this occurred is unknown because of the inherent secrecy and the immediate one-way ticket to a concentration camp it typically earned if discovered. Over 16,000 workers were brought to the Channel Islands from both Western and Eastern Europe to work in the Organisation Todt, but the workers from Eastern European countries, such as Britain’s ally Russia, faced much worse conditions. Many Islanders helped Todt workers by handing out food and warm clothing whenever possible even though such contact was forbidden by the Germans. On the island of Jersey Mrs. Metcalfe and her sister led an informal network of families and safe houses hiding escaped slave workers so that at the end of the occupation there were approximately 20 in hiding, and some of those escaped workers

19 Bunting, 195.
20 Ibid., 199.
had been in hiding for almost two years. 23 Some Islanders took these workers, many who were Russian, into their home, taught them to speak English, and gave them new identities in order to escape notice from the Germans. 24 They used disguises like eyeglasses and hair dyes as necessary, and Islanders helped them obtain identity cards by requesting duplicates of their own “lost” or “stolen” cards. 25 While the total number of escaped workers may never be known, this is one area in which resistance did make a significant difference to the individuals who were saved.

Aiding escaped workers may not have been widespread, but listening to the BBC became the most prevalent form of passive resistance in the Islands. 26 Throughout the five years of German occupation, the Germans confiscated and returned the residents’ wireless radios several times. When the radios were outlawed, residents of the Channel Islands continued to listen to the BBC on hidden radios or crystal receivers – homemade radios they made using instructions aired on the BBC. 27 Islanders who had to hand in their radios rushed to buy others, if possible, being careful to change the hiding places often showing the importance the Islanders placed on hearing news from the country to which they remained loyal. Frank Falla commented in his memoir, “To have heard the BBC news inspired us with a feeling of knowing the truth, and gave us a heart to carry on.” 28 News from Great Britain also arrived by British planes that would fly over the Islands and drop leaflets which would then be passed around and used to create underground newspapers like the Guernsey Underground News Service, or GUNS. 29 GUNS published daily

23 Wood, 126; Bunting, 217.
24 Bunting, 219.
26 Bunting, 208.
27 Cruickshank, 151.
29 Cruickshank, 151.
leaflets from May 1942 to February 1944 frustrating the Germans who viewed the news leaflets as evidence of organized resistance.\textsuperscript{30} The leaflets were hidden in empty milk cans taken around by the milkman and pre-arranged books at the library that people could casually read, and three copies were sent daily to the neighboring island of Sark.\textsuperscript{31} The Guernsey newspaper came to an end after a raid on the house of Charles Machon, the linotype operator, and the subsequent imprisonment and death of him and Joseph Gillingham in a German concentration camp.\textsuperscript{32}

In the summer of 1941, the BBC made an appeal for people to put up “V for Victory” signs as part of the general resistance campaign in Europe. This campaign irritated the Germans because it was tangible evidence of the loyalty of millions of regular listeners to the BBC showing not only the determination of the Islanders to remain part of Great Britain but also how many Islanders had access to banned radios. In the Channel Islands, people drew “V” signs at various places including German street signs, houses, doors, gateposts, and walls. In Guernsey, a man named de Guillebon even chalked a “V” on German soldiers’ bicycle seats so that when the German soldiers sat down, their pants were marked with the ‘V’.\textsuperscript{33} For this act of defiance, De Guillebon was caught and sentenced to a year in prison in France.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, two teenage sisters, Kathleen le Norman and Mrs. Lilian Kinnaird were seen making a “V” sign with their fingers and sentenced to nine months in jail.\textsuperscript{35} Some Islanders took to wearing badges cut out of old pennies in the shape of a “V” and pinned undetected to the underside of their lapels.\textsuperscript{36} However, the magnitude of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Bunting, 212.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Wood, 177.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Willmot, “The Channel Islands,” 72.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Bunting, 204.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Wood, 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Bunting, 204.
\end{itemize}
this act of resistance is in question with both Louise Willmot reporting that only a minority of the Islanders took part in the campaign and Rab Bennett stating that it was absent altogether. 37

Another act of passive resistance on several of the larger Islands was speaking their own languages which were incomprehensible to the Germans during the Occupation. Guernsey, Jersey, Alderney, and Sark all had their own dialects of Norman French that had been spoken for over 1,000 years. 38 As an act of resistance, the Islanders spoke derogatorily to the Germans in these dialects while the Germans just smiled in ignorance. 39 Speaking their native dialects also gave the residents of the Channel Islands a “language of solidarity and secrecy” in a time when many Islanders were in need of communicating without fear of the Germans overhearing. 40

The final act of passive resistance, and arguably the least significant, was hiding symbols of British loyalty in the newly authorized postage stamps. On Jersey, the first stamps were designed by Major N.V.L. Rybot. When asked, he almost refused rather than to aid the enemy, “but it then occurred to him that he could insult the Germans in the design – ‘hence the insertion of four minute ‘A’s in the corners of the design, which were intended to stand for ‘Ad Avernum Adolfe Atrox’; that is to say ‘To Hell with You Atrocious Adolph.’” 41 Another stamp designer, Edmund Blampied, incorporated the Royal cipher G.R., George Regent, in the scroll-work of the 3 pence Jersey postage stamp to pay homage to King George VI. Both of these stamp designs went apparently unnoticed by the

37 Willmot, “The Channel Islands,” 67; Bennett, 247.
40 Sallabank, 122.
41 Cruickshank, 128.
The reports on resistance in the Channel Islands during the German occupation of World War II continue to be divisive with many researchers disregarding any form of passive resistance during the occupation. Because the Islands did not have a large scale resistance effort similar to that of France or other countries on the continent one such researcher, MRD Foot, concluded, “An embarrassment for an English writer on resistance remains: the Channel Islands…. virtually no resistance.” Even those who agree the Islanders participated in passive resistance disagree over the extent in terms of the percentage of the population that participated. Some reports show that only a minority of Islanders, less than a thousand out of a population of 60,000 during the war, participated in organized resistance. One local resident, John Hayes described in his memoir the Islanders’ attitude as “not acceptance of [the Germans’] presence (collaboration) or denial of it (resistance) but rather indifference to it.”

On the other hand, many historians argue the Islanders went above and beyond in their loyalty to the British. Even though the Channel Islands were exempt from military service outside of the Islands and were not required by the Constitution to send a single man to help Britain fight the war, they still “instantly and unhesitatingly reaffirmed their loyalty to the Crown, and for the second time in half a century waived their traditional right of exemption from military service overseas.” This act of extreme loyalty was one of the key reasons why large scale resistance was not possible in the Islands rather than a lack of resistance being evidence.

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42 Foot, 270.
44 Hayes, 67.
45 Cruickshank, 326.
of disloyalty. In terms of the number of people involved in resistance efforts, historians have a hard time defining “organized resistance” and determining which individuals participated. On the Islands, many people may have participated individually, and most participated anonymously, because of the severe punishments given to those who were caught. John Hayes was “granted a special favour” of six months in jail on the Islands rather than in Germany for being in the possession of a wireless radio.46 Others such as Canon Cohu, Peter Painter, and Louisa Gould were sentenced to several years in prison on the continent and died in concentration camps for the same transgression.47 Perhaps the most telling comment came from Frank Falla who lived through the occupation on the Islands until being sent to the continent for his part in GUNS. Falla commented in his memoir,

My own feeling is that ninety-eight percent here were loyal to Britain and their neighbours. The two percent who weren’t did damage beyond all proportion to their number. But a lot of those who came back didn’t know what they were talking about, when blaming some of those who remained for “collaboration.” You only know what they went through if you have been through something like it yourself. No one else has any right to judge.48

For those who did not live through the occupation on the Islands, it is hard, if not impossible, to draw the line between treasonous collaboration in order to aid the enemy and patriotic collaboration in order to obey Britain’s mandate and endure the war without inflicting punishments on fellow citizens. Any acts that could be viewed as collaboration erred in judgment rather than loyalty. The Islanders’ cooperation with the Germans came because they felt it was the best way to “endure the war,

46 Hayes, 57.
47 Wood.
48 Ibid., 235.
without thereby forfeiting any of their patriotism.”

Passive resistance in the Channel Islands was significant because it boosted the morale of a people under enemy occupation and gave them the confidence that they were not allowing the Germans to take advantage of them. The Islanders gave little, if any, thought to how they would be perceived by their contemporaries, much less by the generations to come. Historians tend to agree that their small acts of passive resistance had no impact on German military strategy or the progress of the war in Europe, but these acts should not be underestimated. They showed the Islanders’ true loyalty to Britain and allowed them to maintain their nation’s honor. Even acts of petty sabotage were seen as small annoyances to the Germans that boosted the morale of the Islanders involved. Jean-Paul Sartre, who participated in the resistance movement in France, wrote shortly after the liberation: “Resistance was only an individual solution and we always knew it…Its value in our eyes was above all symbolic.” Even without a large, organized resistance movement like that in continental Europe, the Islanders chose the only avenue that they had available to fight the occupation – the symbolic resistance of disobeying orders, sabotaging the Germans, helping escaped slave workers, listening to the BBC, participating in the “V for Victory” campaign, speaking their native languages, and incorporating their loyalty into postage stamps.

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49 Hayes., 339.
50 Willmot, “The Channel Islands,” 78.
51 Bennett, 275.