

Topic: 'Political prisoners' in the Channel Islands during the German Occupation (brief overview of facts & discussion questions for the classroom)

During the German Occupation of the Channel Islands, the occupiers registered more and more Orders governing daily life. As time wore on, one diarist wrote that one could be 'arrested for breathing in when one should be breathing out'. This is how it felt to live during the German Occupation. One of the main difficulties of daily life is that the occupiers took most of the food in the Islands, meaning that shortages and hunger quickly became common. People turned to the 'black market'. This was not a physical place, but a way of buying or bartering for food illegally, often at extortionate prices. The poor inevitably suffered. People could be arrested for dealing on the black market, or for slaughtering their own animals if they were not registered, because it was feared that these animals would be sold on the black market.

The only means of contact with the outside world was the radio. The Germans confiscated them in June 1942 and it was declared illegal to own one or listen to the BBC. Many islanders defied this ban and consequently were convicted by German courts and deported to Nazi prisons, labour and concentration camps on the continent. Many were sent to French prisons for short sentences for various offences. Others were transferred from these to other places of incarceration in Germany and further afield. Around 1300 people from Jersey and Guernsey were imprisoned locally, although we cannot possibly know how many people defied German Orders and were not caught. Of those imprisoned, at least 220 were deported to prisons and camps. Of these, 21 from Jersey and 8 from Guernsey died. These people are referred to today as the 'Jersey 21' and the 'Guernsey 8' and are commemorated on memorials in St Helier and St Peter Port. They are also remembered on Holocaust Memorial Day, even though these deported people were not Jewish. Many were witnesses to, and co-victims with, Jewish persecution in their prisons and camps.

Acts of protest, defiance and resistance against the Germans included:

- Listening to the radio after June 1942;
- Protesting against the deportation of English-born Islanders in 1942;
- Offering humanitarian assistance to foreign forced labourers;
- Painting V-signs on roads, walls and doors to symbolize an Allied victory;
- Sabotage and intelligence-gathering;
- Stealing German weapons;
- Stealing food or goods from Germans;
- Hiding Jews;
- Preaching anti-Nazi sermons from the pulpit;
- Refusing to teach German to school children.

While it used to be thought that military resistance against the Germans, or resistance that 'furthered the war effort', was the only 'real' resistance that counted, today we understand more about the value of civilian resistance. It boosted morale, created closer bonds between people (thus lessening the chances of denunciation), and helped people remember the importance of ethical behaviour when fighting the Nazis. Such behavior has been labelled as the 'weapons of the weak'.

Those who were put in prison for defying the Germans often called themselves 'political prisoners', although their opposition was not necessarily political. Because the Germans

made so much of daily life illegal, it was easy to break the rules. After the war the title of 'political prisoner' was reclaimed with pride. Some use this today as a shorthand, but we must remember that not all of the offences were actually political. Some people were falsely charged; many were simply trying to survive. How should we refer to them? We can talk about those who committed 'offences against the occupiers'. We should avoid the word 'crime', as the acts were only 'crimes' in German eyes. For those imprisoned and especially those deported to the continent, we can talk about 'victims of Nazi persecution'.

In the Channel Islands the occupiers were referred to as 'Germans' rather than 'Nazis'. This is not the case anywhere else in Europe. The myth is that all of the occupying soldiers were 'ordinary Germans who just wanted to go back to the farm and play no part in the war'. This ignores the fascist regime that each soldier helped to reinforce. It also ignores the fact that many of these 'ordinary soldiers' were involved in deportations.

Things to discuss in class:

- Why didn't the local civilian authorities in Jersey and Guernsey fight more strongly to represent in court those who broke German Orders and prevent their deportation? What do you think would have happened to those who tried to do this? What other courses of action could they have taken?
- By failing to complain about the increasing illegality of so much of daily life in the Channel Islands, did this make the Islands' authorities complicit in any way in the persecution of Islanders?
- Some people informed upon those who disobeyed the Germans. Why do you think they did this? Were they necessarily Nazi supporters? Should we label them 'collaborators'?
- While some people were arrested for genuine anti-Nazi or patriotic offences, others were arrested for less 'honourable' offences such as stealing from Germans, physically assaulting German soldiers or dealing on the black market. Some were even falsely imprisoned. Should we remember and honour equally all of those deported to Nazi prisons and concentration camps today? Discuss why / why not.
- There are various roles to which we might use to categorize people during the Occupation: victim, perpetrator, bystander, upstander, rescuer, facilitator. You might be able to add to this list. In what roles would you place the following people: people who committed acts of resistance but were not caught; people who committed acts of resistance who were caught; people who hid those on the run from the Germans; local policemen who arrested those who broke German Orders; local people in positions of power or influence who did not try to help Islanders convicted by German courts. You might wish to add to this short list. Is it easy to categorise everyone? Do some people belong to more than one role? What choice did people have about how they chose to act / react? What would have been the ideal response and why? What would you do in this situation if something similar happened today? Is it fair to judge people in the past? Why / why not? Is it fair to judge the German soldiers? What about those of high rank? What about their leaders in Germany? Can we blame everything only on Hitler? Does ultimate responsibility for action lie with the individual soldier or civilian? Why / why not? Must we always obey orders in all circumstances? What are the advantages and disadvantages of independent thinking?
- How can we take a stand against far right politics today? List some ethical responses.

Further reading

Gilly Carr, Paul Sanders and Louise Willmot (2014), *Protest, Defiance and Resistance in the Channel Islands: German Occupation 1940-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.