8
Relations with Britain

In reality, the Channel Islands have not been forgotten; their best interests...are continually kept in mind...The Government...was in full sympathy with the islanders.
Channel Islands Monthly Review, February 1942

Although assurances similar to those above were consistently repeated by British Government representatives throughout the war, such sentiments were simply not seen to be translated into any kind of action which the Islanders could clearly recognise. In fact, the omission caused much puzzlement within the Islands, and the sentiments expressed by Reverend Ord opposite reflect many similar comments made in other contemporary accounts. In addition, apart from the news leaflets which were dropped over the Islands in the very early stages of the Occupation, it seemed to some witnesses that the British Government was totally indifferent to their welfare. Many diarists felt abandoned; and in spite of the fact that the basic loyalty of most to the Motherland remained unaffected, the subsequent lack of broadcasts which made any mention of their plight served only to compound this impression.

What follows is therefore an exploration of evidence now available to establish whether British Government policy was indeed reflective of a caring administration, truly taking account of the Islands’ best interests, or giving precedence to the exigencies of war, ministers and officials on the Mainland preferred instead to carry out policies as and when best suited the general war effort.

Already in June 1940, demilitarisation and haphazard evacuation had made a considerable impact upon the Islands’ psyche, but in Britain the same events were largely glossed over in news reports. In fact, news that the German Air Force had occupied the main Islands was not announced to the British people immediately after it had happened, and instead newsreaders made a series of simple announcements that communications with
the Islands had been temporarily suspended. Back in Guernsey, septuagenarian Arthur Mauger wrote in his diary on Saturday, 30 June: ‘so we... are now under German rule... abandoned by the British Government. After all we’ve done for it in money and men.’ Later in Jersey, R.C.F. Maugham summarised the situation: ‘There was no emotion; scarcely any comment, but much deeply felt, if inarticulate bitterness.’ Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that a good many Islanders would feel let down, and the failure to publicise the King’s message on the eve of the invasion had not helped to dispel this feeling. Subsequent policy was also not designed to instil confidence, and the commando raids carried out over the next few years served only to reinforce the view that Churchill’s overriding concern was ‘to win the war in the shortest possible time... although he must have been well aware that they would put the civilian population in great danger’.

Two years after the first failed raids on Guernsey, which almost cost the life of Ambrose Sherwill as well as causing the death of Lieutenant Symes’ father, there came three more in fairly close succession. The first of these, ‘Operation Dryad’, took the form of an attack on the Casquets on the night of 2/3 September, and several Germans and code books were captured from the lighthouse. The second, ‘Operation Branford’, was a reconnaissance mission of Burhou on 7 September 1942. However, it was the third raid, ‘Operation Basalt’, which was to produce the most widespread repercussions. This time the Commandos landed in Sark, where they were directed to the Dixcart Hotel by Mrs Francis Pittard, who told them that Germans were in residence. The annexe of the Hotel was attacked and prisoners taken, but on the way back to the boat four of them attempted to escape. At first they were tied up, but when they tried to escape again, at least one was shot dead. The incident infuriated the Germans, who seized upon the fact that the prisoners had their hands tied behind their backs. In retaliation, the Fuehrer ordered the chaining of 1376 prisoners taken at Dieppe, to which the British responded by chaining the same number of German prisoners in Canada. The matter escalated, and on 18 October, Hitler ordered that in future captured commandos were not to be treated as prisoners of war, but ‘ruthlessly exterminated, whether in uniform or not’.

In Sark itself the garrison was reinforced, Mrs Pittard was given 11 weeks imprisonment in Guernsey, and ‘eventually there were 4,000 mines on the beaches, strung on wires across the bays and parts of the harbour, and down some cliffs on ropes’. After the attack, German soldiers raided houses, ‘the curfew was reduced... fishing was banned, and houses along parts of the shoreline were deliberately destroyed... Then the Feldpolizei arrived and for weeks the Islanders went in fear of what might happen [next].’

The last three raids on the Islands were launched first against Herm – ‘Operation Huckaback’ in February 1943; Jersey – ‘Hardtack 28’ in December