

The Occupation

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Published by Headline

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First published in 2004
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in 2005
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7553 2066 2

Typeset in Goudy by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Prologue

Alderney, January 1945

THEY DO NOT walk but stumble, shuffle. Their heads are bent into the solid wind, their bodies folded inwards with hunger and nausea. The lucky ones wear rough wooden clogs, the rest are barefoot, their soles long since hardened on the coarsely gritted footpaths and roads. Slung across their shoulders is a variety of tools – pickaxes and spades mainly – although some are too weak and carry nothing. The lamest are being supported by their comrades, dragged the two miles from the camp to ‘the hill’, a place where they know the weak will die either today, or perhaps tomorrow. Experience has told them that they will never see the day after that.

These are the ones who are badly infected with *la maladie*, *la malattia*, *la nauséa*, for there are many different names for ‘the sickness’. Despite the prisoners’ different tongues, the effects are the same: vomiting, diarrhoea, bleeding from the nose and the anus, utter listlessness. It is impossible to keep

clean if one has the sickness, and the prisoners can always tell who is about to leave them: they are the ones whose striped uniforms are the most bloodied, the most shit-stained. They do not even make the effort – their will has gone – but their comrades insist on dragging them to work. This is not just out of kindness, but also because their masters maintain that where there is breath there is productivity. If anybody remains in the camp, the guards will execute the same number of healthy prisoners as there are malingerers.

There are at least five hundred on the march today, of which at least five are not going to make it to the hill. They know that, their fellow prisoners know that, their guards know that, but all are stuck in a madness that insists work brings freedom, even if one is nearly a corpse.

The first death occurs within two hundred yards of the camp. His name is Francisco, a Spanish Communist captured during the Civil War. For the past two weeks, he has been working deep inside the hill, the place where *la nauséa* is worst. Francisco had started vomiting within a few hours, and by the end of that first day, he had lost so much blood that he nearly died. It is only through the ministrations of Oleg, a Russian, that Francisco has survived for this long, and it is Oleg who is now desperately trying to help him up.

‘Come on, Franny, get up!’ Oleg whispers in Russian. Oleg may be strong, but not even he can carry both his shovel and Francisco’s pick, as well as Francisco himself.

The Spaniard does not answer. All that comes out of his

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mouth is a delicate trail of blood. Oleg knows that his friend Franny is about to die, but he cannot just let him. He can see Franny's stomach convulsing, trying to retch, but there is nothing to leave his body, apart from blood and parts of his disintegrating organs. Franny's body is fighting itself, racked by a corporeal civil war waged by deformed and poisoned cells.

'Franny!' Oleg exhorts him once more, but this is a mistake. Running up towards them comes Rebs, SS Unterscharführer Georg Rebs, a deserter from the French Army who has thrown in his tawdry lot with his country's conquerors. Whether his brutality and fanaticism are those of the convert is hard for the prisoners to establish, but this is not the time to debate Rebs's motives.

'What is this man doing?' Rebs shouts in French.

Oleg looks back at him defiantly. There is no point in replying, not because there is a lack of common language but because there is a complete absence of pathos.

Rebs points his rifle at Francisco.

'Get up!'

Francisco does not get up. His body will not allow it.

Rebs pulls the bolt back on his rifle and slides a round into the chamber. The safety catch is disengaged. Oleg wants to do something, wants to help, but what can he do? Try to overpower Rebs? That will achieve nothing. Franny is a dead man – they are *all* dead men – so what is the point?

Oleg shuts his eyes as he sees Rebs squeezing the trigger. He will not watch yet another death. He will not watch his friend

collapse flat on to the ground as the bullet punches the last traces of life out of his body. He has seen it too many times, and he will not watch it again.

The shot echoes briefly down the short valley that leads to the sea. Normally when guns are fired birds leave their roosts, but there are no birds here. It is said that the birds left when the Germans arrived, and it is a small piece of folklore that the prisoners find fitting to believe. All that stirs is the shuffling column, which briefly notes that it is now one short, its collective brain noting that there will be just a little more 'soup' per head tonight.

Oleg walks on, not looking at Franny's body.

'Where are you going, Russian scum?'

He turns to face Rebs. He knows enough French to understand. In fact, he knows the words for 'Russian scum' in six languages. Although Oleg is a calm man his overworked heart starts to pound.

'Why did you allow this man to collapse?'

Oleg has a good idea what he is being asked, as Rebs is pointing his rifle down at Franny. He shrugs his shoulders.

'Answer me!'

Oleg starts talking in Russian, knowing that whatever he says, in whatever language, is never going to excuse his 'crime'.

'What the hell are you saying?' shouts Rebs. 'What filthy language is that anyway?'

Oleg knows that phrase as well. He just stands there, looking down at the ground, down at this cursed earth. Oleg does not

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know much about the earth he is standing on, because he has very little idea where he is. For the past three years he has been shunted all over Europe, and now, as part of SS Construction Brigade I, he is presently residing in what his captors call *das Arschloch der Welt* – the arsehole of the world.

Rebs is still shouting at him, but Oleg does not care. He knows what is going to happen. It will happen to all of them, and now it is his turn. There is nothing he can do. He thinks of his dead wife, his dead son, his dead brother, and now he starts to think of his dead self, lying next to his dead friend in the cold dirt.

The *bolezna*, he thinks, at least he will not get the *bolezna* – the sickness.

July 1990

Although their presence has put the wind up his regulars, the publican of the Divers Inn on Braye Harbour is delighted. At six o'clock every evening, at least twenty to thirty of them drop in, their heavy workmen's boots leaving heavily defined imprints on the sand-sprinkled floor. They drink nearly as well as any Alderney man, he tells them, a deliberate encouragement to swell the contents of his old-fashioned cash register.

They come from all over Europe, these workmen, but mostly from England and Ireland: there are at least a couple of Frenchmen, the same number of Spaniards, a Greek who

calls himself Harry, and even a chap who swears he's a Pole. The islanders are not accustomed to these foreigners: like islanders everywhere they are suspicious of strangers, even the English.

For the past fortnight, the men have been excavating the site for the foundations of a new hotel – Mannez Heights – which is to be a luxury affair, an attempt by the island to attract some badly needed big spenders. Perched on top of Mannez Hill on the far north-east of the three-mile-long island, the hoarding outside the worksite tells passers-by that the hotel will boast three restaurants, a swimming-pool with a wave machine, a gym and, most crucially, a casino. It is that, the hotel's owners hope, which will really draw them in.

The workmen are particularly ebullient tonight, not only because it is Friday but also because it is a fine evening. Even though Braye Harbour faces north, and the workmen will stay inside until midnight, the occasional glimpse through the pub's windows of anchored sailboats bobbing in the vestiges of warm sunlight makes them feel as though they are on holiday.

'Six pints, please, Dave.'

'Just for you, are they?'

'And after you've done, another six over 'ere.'

'You buying a round, Pete? Miracles will never cease!'

'So, then, Debs, which lucky man have you got your eye on tonight?'

The air is thick with such banter as well as cigarette smoke –

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roll-ups being expertly fashioned every few seconds by thick, muddy fingers.

One of those ordering a large round is Mark, a South Londoner, who finds himself away from home for at least six months a year. He misses his family, but the money from jobs such as this is too good to turn down. As Dave pours the pints, Mark turns to his mate Ian, a man he's worked with for the best part of two decades.

'Tough that today, weren't it?'

Ian wipes his brow theatrically. 'I never known concrete like it. Them Jerries must have doubled the weight of the whole bleedin' island.'

'God knows what we're going through.'

'Probably some sort of fortress or something. The place is littered with them.'

Mark licks the gum on his cigarette paper and nods. 'I don't get it,' he says. 'The Germans must have spent their whole time here building, building, building. Why didn't they just enjoy it? It's not a bad spot, this.'

Ian laughs slightly.

'I expect they did. The Germans, I mean. They had slaves, didn't they, did all their work for them?'

'We could do with a few of them ourselves!' Mark exclaims.

Ian laughs again. 'They say they're all buried in the break-water,' he says.

'Who?'

'The *slaves*,' says Ian. 'I was talking to some bloke the other

day, and he tells me that the Germans worked the poor buggers to death and dumped their bodies in the concrete in the breakwater. Hundreds of bodies, he says, maybe more.'

'Bit like the M25, then.'

'Come again?'

'That's meant to be full of bodies,' says Mark. 'Gangland killings and that.'

'No wonder it's falling to bits.'

The men both laugh.

'Here you go, gents,' says Dave. 'That'll be seven pounds fifty.'

'I'll get this,' says Mark, and picks off a ten-pound note from a large bundle he has stuffed in the back of his jeans.

'Ta,' says Ian. 'And then I suspect it'll be Roger's turn.'

'Speaking of which, where is he?'

'Roger?'

'Yeah.'

'He's here somewhere,' says Ian. 'He told me he was feeling a bit out of sorts, though.'

'Caught the sun?' asks Mark, taking a generous mouthful from his pint.

Ian shakes his head. 'No,' he says. 'He was right down that little shaft all day, the one with all that bleeding hardcore plugging it up.'

'Probably just knackered, then.'

'Yeah,' says Ian.

For the next minute or so, Ian and Mark stand in silence.

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They, too, are a little tired – it has been a long week – but the pint is going down well, and it's good for them to think they've got an entire day's sunbathing ahead of them.

The remaining pints from the round are taken by their work-mates, one of whom is Colin.

'Ere, Col,' says Mark. 'You seen Roger?'

Colin sups his pint and gesticulates with his left thumb over his shoulder. 'Went to the gents. Said he 'ad a nosebleed,' he says, and then, glancing at his watch, 'although he's been there a while. Must be 'bout twenny minutes.'

'A nosebleed?' asks Ian.

'Sright. They can go on for ever them things. I 'ad one which lasted—'

'I think we should see if he's all right,' says Mark, putting down his pint, 'Twenty minutes is way too long.'

Ian nods and places his nearly empty pint on the wet counter. Together, the men make their way through the crowded bar, through the door marked 'Gentlemen' in battered Gothic script, and into the lavatory.

'Jesus Christ!'

'Rodge!'

There, sprawled on the floor, his mouth, chin, neck and chest covered with blood and vomit, is Roger. His head rests against the pedestal of a basin coated with yet more blood, and around him lie countless tissues dyed different shades of red.

Ian remains frozen while Mark bends down. 'Rodge!' says Mark. 'Can you hear me?'

Roger's chest is moving up and down rapidly, his breathing erratic. His eyes are glassy, and he is pale, terribly pale.

Mark turns to Ian. 'For fuck's sake, get some help! Go and get some fucking help!'

Chapter One

Berlin, February 1945

THE LIGHTS IN the bunker flickered in accompaniment to the muffled noise of the bombs. The occupants were too busy to notice, secure in the knowledge that above them lay eleven and a half feet of ferro-concrete and, above that, another four feet of sand. The bunker, it was claimed, was impenetrable to anything the Allies could drop on it. In fact, the greatest danger to the occupants came from within, for everybody seated around the large table in that cramped conference room late that night was equally wary of his neighbour. Ever since the previous July, when von Stauffenberg had nearly wiped them all out, nobody was above suspicion.

The remnants of the Third Reich's leadership were gathered for a 'situation conference' – a common enough event – but there was a curious atmosphere in the room, detected by many. Especially sensitive to the mood was Captain Gerhard Boldt, the aide to Colonel General Heinz Guderian, the army chief of staff.

He had felt a greater tension than usual up in the Reich Chancellery, when he and the general had been searched especially thoroughly for concealed weapons. He had felt it when they entered the bunker, and had even seen it in the faces of secretaries such as Fräulein Junge as they waited in the anteroom.

Although he dared not meet its gaze, it was the face of the Führer that told Boldt all he needed to know about the state of the Reich, its defeats and setbacks physically impressed on his body. His spine twisted, his jowls heavy, his eyes red and heavy-lidded, his pallor troglodytically grey, Hitler was like his own ghost. His hands were so unsteady that it was sometimes hard for him to sign documents, and after a row they shook even more violently. Boldt had heard that Hitler's physician, Dr Morell, had kept telling his patient that he should take Luminal to calm himself down, but the Führer had replied that he had no need of such medication. Instead, to reduce his blood pressure, Hitler had apparently ordered Morell to drain a few hundred cubic centimetres of blood on a regular basis.

Vampire, Boldt thinks, the man is vampire. Not only does he suck our blood, but he also sucks out his own. He actually *wants* to destroy us, destroy himself, wants us all to die rather than accept defeat. For years, Boldt had accepted the 'last drop' homilies, but had never, until that night, regarded them as anything more than metaphorical.

'... and furthermore, I have been told that the latest reports from Dresden suggest that the death toll could be as high as one hundred thousand ...'

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The room gasped. Until that point, nobody had been listening that closely to Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick. He had been droning on in his soft, low, bureaucratic voice about tales of supposed production statistics, about how many trains were reaching their destinations, about food shortages and other equally stultifying topics.

Hitler coughed before speaking. 'One . . . one hundred thousand?' His voice was gruff and strained, so unlike the commanding bark heard at all those rallies held all those lifetimes ago.

'Apparently so, my Führer,' Frick replied, 'although I am informed that the numbers could be higher.'

Hitler smashed the table with a ferocity that made the room jump. 'This is a crime!'

'Quite so,' said Frick, his voice unemotional.

'They are slaughtering our women and children for their own sadistic purposes! It is monstrous!'

There was a loud murmur of agreement – an expression that Boldt couldn't help feel to be hypocritical. The Allied bombing of Dresden might well have been a crime, Boldt pondered, but we have committed quite a few ourselves. Was he really the only one thinking this? He looked at some of the men around him – Field Marshal Jodl, Admiral Dönitz, Guderian: what were they thinking? Did they really believe that the Allies are criminals in the same way as we are? Everybody knows what is happening to the Jews, but nobody talks about it. Surely the 'evacuations to the East' are worse than Dresden?

But their faces mimicked that of their beloved Führer, expressing indignation at this criminal act. Boldt noticed that the only man who looked impassive was Albert Speer, the Minister for Armaments. Handsome, elegant and patrician-looking, Speer's face stuck out among the rougher ones that surrounded him. It was to Speer that Hitler's next remark was addressed.

'Speer!' the Führer growled. 'What is happening to my vengeance weapons? Are they just sitting in the factories? What are you doing with them?'

Speer shrugged a little, as though someone had walked over his grave. 'It would seem that we can do very little, my Führer.'

'Little?'

'Things have been . . . difficult of late,' Speer replied, his tone bordering on the nonchalantly insolent. Boldt was impressed – there were very few who could talk to the Führer in that way.

Hitler's eyes widened so much that everybody around the table could see how bloodshot and yellow they were. 'It has been *difficult* for all of us,' Hitler shouted. '*Difficult* for our brave soldiers on both fronts, *difficult* for every citizen of the Reich, young or old. It has been *difficult* for everybody, Minister, and yet why are you the exception?'

Another shrug. Boldt found himself wincing at Speer's manner.

'I am in no way demanding for myself any exceptional or particular treatment,' Speer replied precisely, his top lip visibly

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moistening, 'although my Führer must appreciate that special-armaments production is almost impossible with such saturation bombing. If we were in a position to stop it, then of course things would be far less . . .'

Boldt realised that Speer was about to say 'difficult', but its repetition would clearly have been unwise.

' . . . I mean, we would achieve greater levels of efficiency.'

Hitler glared. He knew Speer was right – this was all Göring's damn fault. That drug-addled whale had managed the Luftwaffe so ineptly that it was now no more effective than a pre-war flying circus. It was just as well that the man was not present: he would have been swept away by the strongest torrent of savage abuse. 'So what is happening, Speer? Why exactly are your rockets not wreaking the havoc I had been led to expect?'

Speer swallowed. It was certainly not his fault that the V2 rocket had not been as effective as it was hoped, but he knew that if the Führer asked such questions, then one was obliged to reply as if it was one's responsibility. 'Once again, my Führer, there have been delays. Last month the factory in the Netherlands that produces the rockets' liquid oxygen was destroyed by the RAF. There has also been a question of launch sites. The Allied advance has been so rapid in some quarters that as soon as a launch pad is established it has to be moved again. We are . . . we are doing our best, my Führer.'

Hitler waved his right hand effeminately in the air, brushing away Speer's comments as if they were some mildly troublesome flies.