REVIEW

The nightmarish reality of life in Nazi-occupied Alderney

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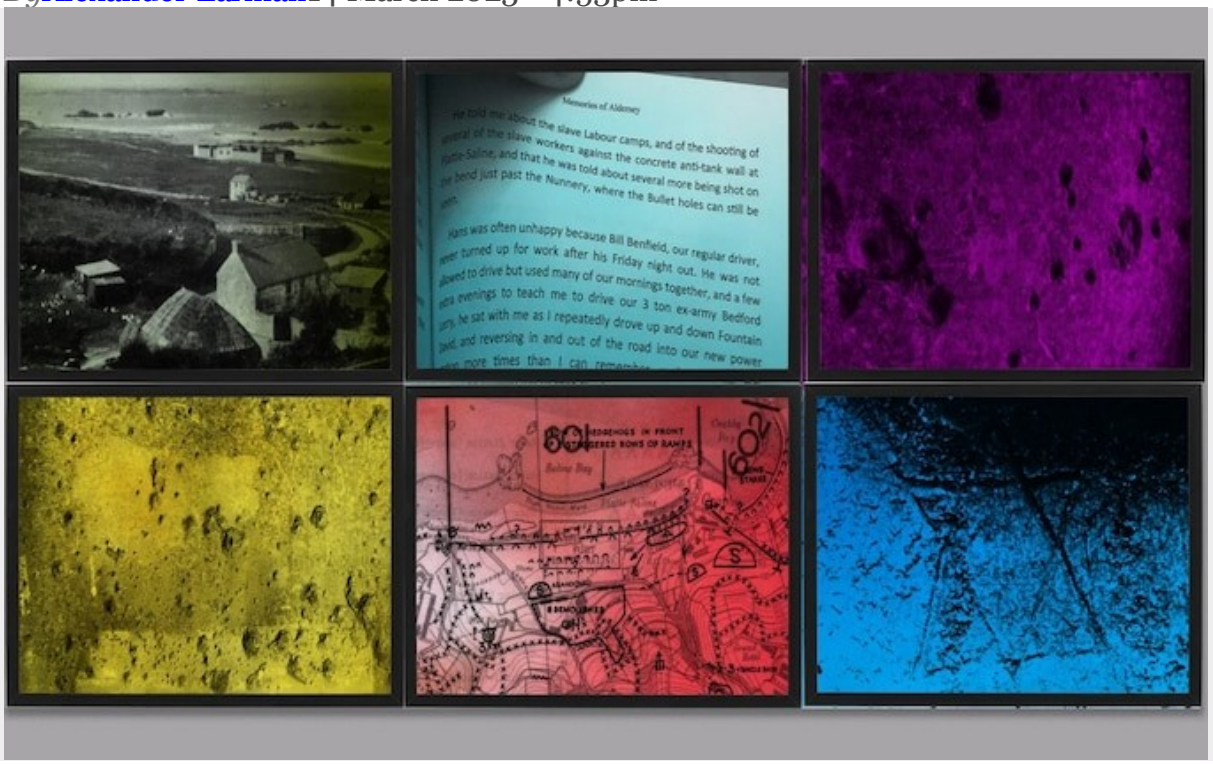
Piers Secunda's shocking and revelatory exhibition documents the little known atrocities that took place on one of the Channel Islands

By Alexander Larman 14 March 2023 • 4:53pm



Images from the exhibition including of the Platte Saline Execution Wall coloured with German gunpowder

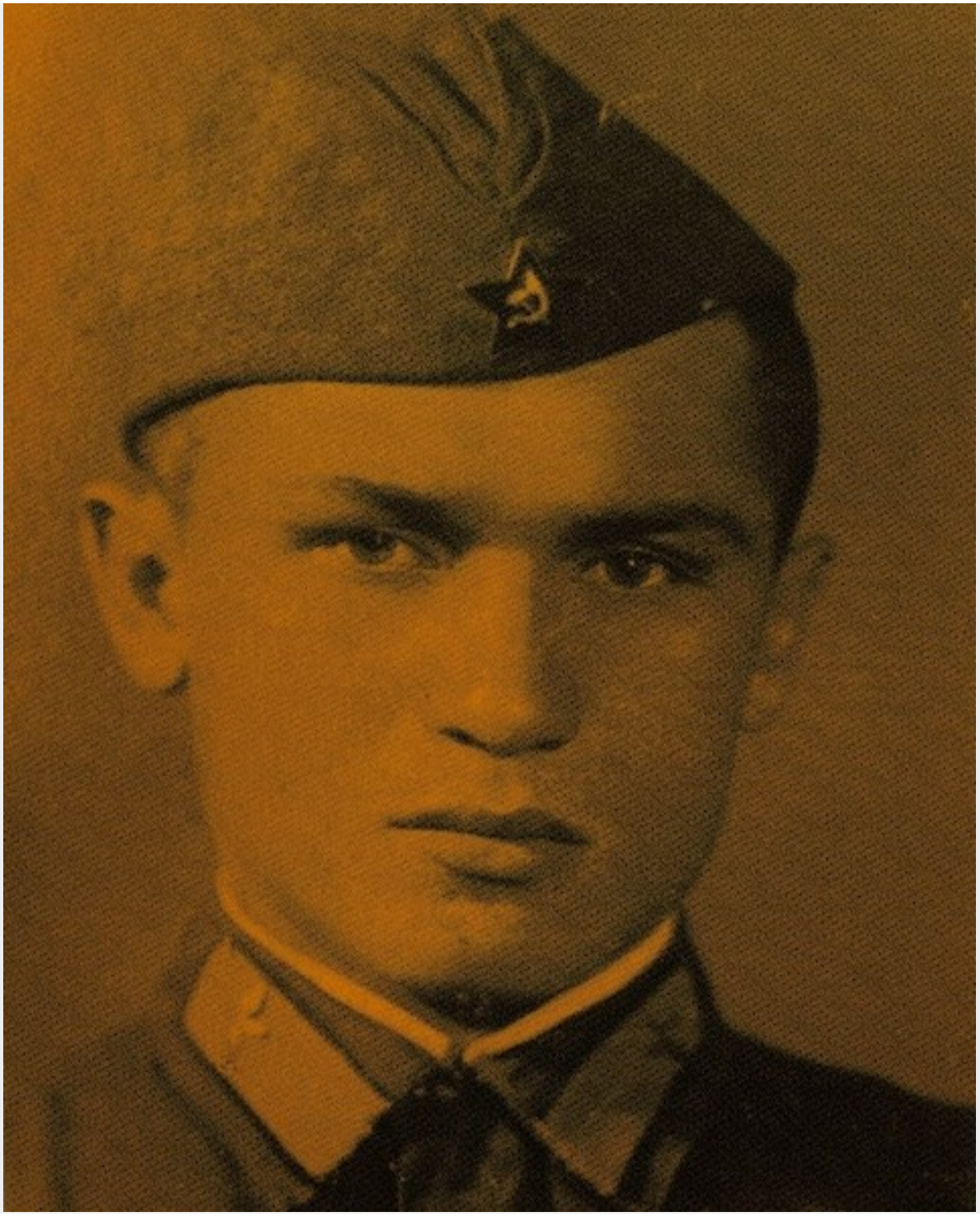
It is too little known today that, during the Second World War, the British Isles housed two German concentration camps. It is also one of the lesser-detailed facts of the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands that Alderney, the northernmost island, was not only home to Russian prisoners-of-war and Jewish forced labourers, but that the inhabitants of the camps were treated appallingly, whether executed by firing squad, tortured to death or slowly starved.

That episode, lasting from 1940 to 1945, has been little discussed in histories of the war – certainly in comparison with the occupations of nearby Jersey and Guernsey, which were comparatively benign – and it's salutary that it forms the basis of Piers Secunda's new exhibition Alderney: The Holocaust on British Soil, at Cromwell Place in west London.

Secunda's work has previously explored the conflict between creativity and war, as in his ongoing series Cultural Destruction, for which he has made moulds of objects and artefacts damaged by Isis. This show, however, compels as historical documentary as much as it offers aesthetic interest.

Secunda has been working on the project since 2019, using a variety of international archives. (He found the Russian archivists especially useful for background information – until just before the invasion of Ukraine.) Alderney's careful focus on detail could put many a historian to shame, and the cumulative effect – even in the regrettably small space of Cromwell Place's Arc Gallery – is both revelatory and shocking: proof that, less than 80 years on, wartime atrocities still have the power to unnerve.

Practically the first thing that greets the visitor is a carefully moulded replica of a wall from Fort Platte Saline on Alderney's northern shore, which Secunda discovered had been extensively marked by bullet damage. Forensic analysis led the artist and scientists to conclude that the structure, known as "Shot Wall 1", contains the necessary physical evidence to be designated a firing-squad execution site.



David Petrovich: Aged 23 commemorates a young Russian pilot who was tortured to death in the Lager Norderney camp

It's powerful and disquieting, and sets the scene for Secunda's large-scale silkscreen prints, coloured with 'German gunpowder', ink sourced from burned cordite from abandoned ammunition. Faces stare out from tinted pictures. The Nazi commandant Maj Otto Hogelow, an especially enthusiastic sadist, chills; David Petrovich: Aged 23 commemorates a young Russian pilot who was tortured to death in the Lager Norderney camp.

Perhaps the most chilling image of all, however, is from the work 573 Jews in Two Transports. We see two Nazi officers stroll down Alderney's main street, outside the Westminster Bank – a photograph taken on one of the Crown's oldest possessions. It's a sobering reminder that the darkest crimes of the Holocaust nearly happened here, too.

Until 15 April. Info: cromwellplace.com

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