

JAN RÜGER

HELIGOLAND

BRITAIN,
GERMANY
AND THE
STRUGGLE
FOR THE
NORTH SEA



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For Paul and Anna

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
Prologue: Between Worlds	I
1. Edge of Europe	7
2. Nation and Empire	32
3. A Matter of Sentiment	55
4. Making Germans	87
5. Island Fortress	109
6. To Heligoland and Back	133
7. Disarming Germany	153
8. Hitler's Island	174
9. Out of Ruins	204
Epilogue: No More Heligolands	230
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	237
<i>Notes</i>	241
<i>Sources</i>	314
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	353
<i>Picture Credits</i>	356
<i>Index</i>	357

List of Illustrations

Figure 0.1	The North Sea. Detail from <i>A Map of the Island of Heligoland</i> by G. Testoline, 1810.	xii
Figure 1.1	<i>A View of Heligoland from Sandy Island</i> . Hand-coloured aquatint by Robert and Daniel Havell, 1811.	17
Figure 1.2	Bird's-eye view of Heligoland during the Napoleonic Wars. Detail from <i>A Map of the Island of Heligoland</i> by G. Testoline, 1810.	26
Figure 2.1	'Das Lied der Deutschen'. Manuscript by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, Heligoland, 26 August 1841.	38
Figure 2.2	<i>Ansicht der Insel Heligoland</i> . Oil painting by Georg Christian Perlberg, 1839.	44
Figure 2.3	<i>Düne bei Heligoland</i> . Oil painting by Christian Morgenstern, 1854.	46
Figure 3.1	Heligoland postcard issued in British and German currencies, 1876.	69
Figure 3.2	<i>Dolce far niente auf der Düne</i> . Drawing by Emil Limmer, 1887.	79
Figure 4.1	Wilhelm II takes possession of Heligoland, 10 August 1890.	90
Figure 4.2	View of Heligoland from Sandy Island, 1890.	98
Figure 4.3	<i>Heligoland</i> . Oil painting by Walter Leistikow, 1889.	101
Figure 4.4	<i>Sonnenaufgang bei Heligoland</i> . Drawing by Friedrich Preller (the Younger), 1904.	101
Figure 4.5	Original score of <i>Heligoland</i> by Anton Bruckner, 1893.	103
Figure 5.1	'John Bull: I must just ask my officers to see if my German cousin is well.' Caricature in <i>Ulk</i> , 1911.	116
Figure 5.2	'Heligoland in Heavy Sea'. Photograph by Franz Schensky, 1912.	127

Figure 6.1	Sheet music for voice and piano by Theodore Morse and John O'Brien, 1917.	141
Figure 6.2	<i>Helgoland</i> . Drawing by Reinhold Max Eichler, 1915.	146
Figure 6.3	Detail from aerial photograph of Heligoland taken by the German Naval Air Service, 7 June 1918.	151
Figure 7.1	'The Demolition of the Sea Fortress Heligoland'. British press photograph, 1 June 1920.	159
Figure 7.2	'In memory, 16 to 22 Sept. 1929'. Postcard from Aby Warburg's last visit to Heligoland.	170
Figure 7.3	The Sass brothers on Heligoland, c.1928.	172
Figure 8.1	'Against England'. German propaganda photograph, 1941.	193
Figure 8.2	<i>Die Wacht</i> . Oil painting by Michael Kiefer, 1940.	194
Figure 8.3	Heligoland after the Allied aerial attack of 18 April 1945.	201
Figure 8.4	Alfred Roegglen, commander of the naval fortress, capitulates, 11 May 1945.	202
Figure 9.1	Operation 'Big Bang', 18 April 1947.	206
Figure 9.2	'Heligoland for the Germans, Heligoland for Peace!' Poster, <i>Deutsche Bewegung Helgoland</i> , 1951.	220
Figure 9.3	West Germany takes possession of Heligoland, 1 March 1952.	223
Figure 10.1	<i>Hoffmann von Fallersleben auf Helgoland</i> . Oil painting by Anselm Kiefer, 1980.	231
Map 1	Northern Germany, 1807.	8
Endpapers	Admiralty chart of Heligoland, September 1914.	

Die Insel ist wie ein zu kleiner Stern.
Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Die Insel (Nordsee)'



Figure 0.1 The North Sea with Heligoland in the south east. Detail from *A Map of the Island of Heligoland* by G. Testoline, 1810.

Prologue

Between Worlds

Out in the North Sea, five hours north-west of Hamburg and 300 miles off the east coast of England, sits Heligoland. In good weather its imposing cliffs can be seen from more than a dozen miles, rising abruptly to eighty feet above the crashing waves. It is a steep, triangular bastion of an island. Half a mile to the east lies a flat sand dune, Sandy Island, which looks like a geological accident that could be washed away by the North Sea at any moment. In between these twin islets ebbs and flows a relatively calm stretch of water, sheltered from the north-westerly wind by the cliffs. Sailors have relied on this natural harbour ever since humans began to cross the sea between Continental Europe and the British Isles.

For generations Britain and Germany have collided in this archipelago half the size of Gibraltar. The two nations' pasts are etched into the rust-coloured, blotched sandstone cliffs. Wherever you turn, Heligoland's scarred landscape reveals the imprint of war: the craters and broken rock formations, the iron and concrete remnants of Germany's naval stronghold, built and demolished with equal determination, the overgrown ruins of the dream of sea power, bombed again and again. In 1947 British forces set off here the largest non-nuclear explosion on record, blowing up what was left of Hitler's island fortress. In its ruins a long history of Anglo-German conflict was meant to come to a conclusive end. Pressed in Parliament on why it was not prepared to give Heligoland 'back', the Attlee government declared that the island represented everything that was wrong with the Germans: 'If any tradition was worth breaking, and if any sentiment was worth changing, then the German sentiment about Heligoland was such a one'.¹ Above all, the outpost stood for a long tradition of militarism which London was determined to see buried forever.

But long before it became Germany's North Sea bulwark and was fought over in two world wars, Heligoland had been Britain's smallest colony, an inconvenient and notoriously discontented border island. Its location at the fringes of Europe, where the British empire ended and the German-speaking world began, intrigued geographers and colonial officials. In 1888, Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, the head of the Dominion department at the Colonial Office, described Heligoland as

the point at which Great Britain and Germany come most nearly into contact with each other, and... the only part of the world in which the British government rules an exclusively Teuton though not English-speaking population.²

'Contact' was an understatement. A web of laws and customs made it impossible to draw a clear boundary on the island between the British empire and the different Germanies that existed in the long nineteenth century. For the Germans flocking to the colony ever since it opened its spa resort in 1826, Heligoland was just outside the Fatherland, but very much part of it.

From early on this was an island of the mind as much as an island of rock and stone.³ Poets and painters, from Heinrich Heine in the 1830s to Anselm Kiefer in the 1980s, styled the outpost as a monument of German identity. However different these constructs of nationhood were, they focused on two aspects in common: Germany's boundaries and its relationship with the sea, the latter almost inevitably involving the British. German sentiment about Heligoland was thus always in part a sentiment about Britain, its naval power, its attitude towards Europe, and its role in the world. For generations the island symbolized a German desire to be equal with and to be recognized as equal by the British. Having acquired it from Britain in 1890, the German government turned Heligoland into a fortress that expressed this ambition, a showpiece of the grand strategy that was meant to force Britain into acknowledging Germany as a world power. But the Kaiser's battle fleet, built up over two decades, did little to compel the British to give way.

Heligoland, demilitarized after the First World War, became a symbol of this failure. For the Nazis it was a metaphor of the Fatherland's shameful humiliation by the Allies, 'a silent warning', as Joseph Goebbels had it, demanding revenge.⁴ After he took power, Hitler had the fortress rebuilt and vastly expanded as an icon of Germany's will to be bold with Britain. Comprehensively destroyed by the RAF, the island's ruins turned into an emblem of German victimhood and nationalism after the Second World War. When the UK released it into German hands in 1952, Chancellor Adenauer proclaimed that his country had 'finally been given back a piece of soil to which we Germans

are attached with so much love'. The island would now show to the world that the Germans had overcome the past: 'Peaceful Heligoland, set in the seas between Germany and Britain, will be in future a symbol of the will to peace and friendship of both nations.'⁵

For the British Heligoland provided a lens through which to interpret Germany. The island was a 'parable' for the Anglo-German relationship, wrote Austin Harrison, the editor of *The Observer*, in 1907.⁶ The meanings of this metaphor changed dramatically in the course of the two centuries, as the relationship of the two countries was transformed. When the Salisbury government ceded the colony to the Kaiser, it was proclaimed as a token of friendship, heralding a new era of Anglo-German collaboration. Only from the turn of the century did Heligoland change in the British imagination. The forlorn colonial enclave, that 'gem of the North Sea', became a dark rock symbolizing the German menace.⁷ H. G. Wells, Erskine Childers, and a host of lesser writers used the outpost as a symbol of the German threat—and Britain's failure to stand up to it.⁸ Giving the island to the Kaiser had been a momentous mistake, argued Winston Churchill and Admiral John Fisher. Their mantra, 'no more Heligolands', meant: no more concessions, no more appeasement.⁹

Situated at the fault line between imperial and national histories, this rock in the North Sea provides an apt location from where to rethink the Anglo-German past. Most histories of this relationship focus on the two world wars. There is no scholarly account that spans both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.¹⁰ This absence of a long-term perspective has created a misleading picture: the nineteenth century appears as a mere prehistory of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. We have grown accustomed to a narrative that uses the period between the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) and the First World War as the foil against which to narrate the 'rise of antagonism'—a dramatic shift from unity to enmity, from 'friend to foe'. Yet for most of the nineteenth century Britain and Germany were neither joined in comprehensive alliance, nor locked in conflict. This was a decidedly ambivalent relationship long before Bismarck founded Imperial Germany and Wilhelm II decided to build a battle fleet against Britain. What took place in the decades before the First World War was not an inevitable shift towards enmity, but an increase in both cooperation and conflict. Under radically altered circumstances, this state of interdependence re-emerged after the Second World War. In order to appreciate this, the traumatic periods of violent conflict need to be inserted into the longer history of Anglo-German coexistence—in this book from the Napoleonic Wars to the Cold War.

Such a longer time-frame prompts us to see the past as more than a national construct. The first chapter of this book opens a window onto a time when 'Germans' and 'Britons' were still uncertain denominations. Those who cooperated across the North Sea to defeat Napoleon rarely identified themselves according to the national categories that were cemented only towards the end of the nineteenth century. For many of them local and regional sentiment was far more decisive. The inhabitants of Britain's North Sea colony were a case in point. Wedged in between the British empire and the German nation state, the Heligolandians were keen to cultivate a separate, independent identity. In August 1890 they were told that they had turned from subjects of the British empire into citizens of Imperial Germany. Yet they still had to be 'made German', as the German Foreign Office agent sent to the island put it.¹¹ Their story is as relevant to this book as the view from Berlin and London. It mirrors the many episodes in the Anglo-German past in which refugees and migrants have played key roles for both countries. If anything has characterized this relationship consistently through the past two centuries, it is that people never stopped moving between the German- and English-speaking parts of Europe. They more than complicate the national framework within which so many British and German histories operate.

Following the arc of the Anglo-German relationship as it spans the past two centuries allows us to appreciate the many ways in which Europe and the British empire were bound up with one another. We are used to thinking of the two as opposite poles: historians and politicians alike have fostered a narrative in which the empire allowed Britain to disengage from Europe, as if the two were clear-cut opposites, with Britain in a position to choose one over the other. This is very much a twentieth-century idea, reflecting, more than anything, Britain's changed global position after the Second World War. The imperial project was never isolated from Europe, nor did it allow Britons to isolate themselves from Europe. The UK's trade was never exclusively with either Europe or the rest of the world, it was with both. The same was true in strategic terms: colonial expansion hinged on calm in Europe, while overseas conflict typically went hand in hand with European instability.

Just as empire and Europe were not two separate spheres between which Britain could choose, national and imperial impulses were not neatly separated in modern Germany, either. The unification and dynamic expansion of the Bismarckian nation state in the second half of the nineteenth century

took place in a global context in which the British empire played a key role.¹² At the very time when borders became invested with new national symbolism, the wealth of nations depended more and more on the movement of goods and people across boundaries.¹³ The case of Heligoland is typical of this paradox. It offers a history of both the transnational relationships that bound nineteenth-century Germany and the British empire together and the reverse process in which the world of Anglo-German collaboration was challenged by the 'nationalizing process' that accelerated towards the end of the nineteenth century. After 1890, when Imperial Germany acquired Heligoland in return for colonial concessions in Africa, nation and empire were to be symbolically disentangled—in the very period when Britain and Germany were becoming more interdependent than ever before.

In making an islet in the North Sea the main character of a history of Britain and Germany, this book builds on a tradition of scholars who have studied small settings in order to reflect about large historical issues.¹⁴ There is no doubting the miniature scale of the locale at the heart of this book, Britain's smallest colony, rarely inhabited by more than 3,000 people.¹⁵ Heligoland was 'the quaintest little spot imaginable', wrote a British diplomat in the 1870s.¹⁶ It had 'the ingredients of one of those miraculous-looking islets pictured in fairy-tale books', commented a British traveller in the 1930s.¹⁷ German visitors agreed: the cliffs, the beach, the small town, complete with church spire and lighthouse, made for the perfect image of a *Heimat* by the sea.

Exploring this local world and the attraction it held for contemporaries allows us to get away from the Olympian vision that characterizes so many historical narratives.¹⁸ All too often the main actors in histories of international relations are exclusively statesmen and politicians. But the 'rise and fall of great powers' took place not only in the ministries of Whitehall and Wilhelmstraße, it was also manifest in the everyday lives of people and their places. Heligoland allows us to uncover this local history of Anglo-German conflict. 'Local', though, should not be taken to mean in isolation from the bigger picture.¹⁹ For microhistories to work, they have to engage simultaneously with small settings and large contexts. This book does so by criss-crossing between local, regional, national, and imperial archives, reaching from small record offices in the north of Germany and the south of England to the large national archives (mostly in Britain and Germany, but also in Denmark, Australia, Canada, and the USA). The book does not neglect the

perspective from the political cockpits in London and Berlin, but it refracts this view through the everyday life of the Heligolanders and those involved with them, amongst them spies, smugglers, soldiers, and traders. Their voices interrupt the flow of dispatches and memoranda swelling the files of the Colonial and Foreign Office archives. We gain a richer sense of the past if we listen to them, directly caught up as they were in the Anglo-German struggle for the North Sea.

History, as the great French historian Fernand Braudel once wrote, likes to 'make use of islands'.²⁰ He meant this in a geographical sense: islands had, he thought, functioned throughout history as stepping stones for trade and migration. But the same is true in metaphorical terms. From the moment Heligoland entered the European stage during the Napoleonic Wars, to the time when it slowly exited that stage towards the end of the twentieth century, it was never only a geographical reality in which people lived and died, but also a product of the imagination. The book engages continuously with both these worlds. It explains the role this outpost played at the edge of the Continent, where empire and Europe met. And it explores the myriad ways in which people in the past have thought about the island, in order to make sense of Britain, Germany, and the sea in between them. A vast archive of artefacts allows us to do so: paintings, poetry, literature, music, maps, charts, travelogues, photographs, films. *Heligoland* binds these diverse sources together 'under the name of a place'.²¹ It reveals in roughly chronological order the personal stories and official dealings, the decisions and events, the culture and the politics that made this cliff-bound island a microcosm of the Anglo-German relationship.

I

Edge of Europe

George III, Britain's long-reigning and now ailing monarch, had never heard of Heligoland. On 9 December 1806 his government, the 'Ministry of all the Talents' led by William Grenville, came together to discuss the war against Napoleon. Since Nelson's victory at Trafalgar the French navy, or what was left of it, posed little threat to Britain.¹ There remained the Danish fleet, so far kept out of the war by the government in Copenhagen. But with the French army advancing through northern Germany Denmark's position of neutrality looked increasingly precarious. In October 1806 Napoleon had decisively defeated the Prussian army at Jena and Auerstedt. Soon enough, he would be in a position to threaten the Danish with occupation. If they gave in and became French allies, their fleet could be turned against Britain. In this situation, Grenville's cabinet concluded, 'it may eventually become necessary to take possession of Heligoland in order to secure a safe position for your Majesty's ships'.² The navy should blockade the North Sea outpost now: it was paramount that the Danish should not turn it into a fortress. George III agreed. On 10 December he ordered his fleet 'to prevent any reinforcements from being thrown into that Island'.³

Edward Thornton, Britain's man in northern Germany, had recommended this course of action for some time. Thornton was the minister-plenipotentiary to the Circle of Lower Saxony—a patchwork of territories that had belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, but were now being violently reorganized by Napoleon. With the French advance into northern Germany, Thornton's daily duties had become almost entirely taken up with intelligence gathering. Relying on a sprawling network of informants, he was busy supplying London with reports about Napoleon's moves. In November 1806, with the French about to occupy Hamburg, Thornton had to leave his headquarters for the neighbouring Duchy of Holstein, which, governed by the Danish, was still neutral. From here he continued to send

intelligence reports to London. Heligoland played a key role in this activity. His couriers and spies used it as a convenient stepping stone: within the reach of the Royal Navy but just outside of Napoleon's sphere of influence. One of them, John Sontag, a military intelligence officer, reconnoitred the island in July 1807. He urged London to take the outpost 'should a rupture with Denmark appear inevitable'.⁴

On 11 August 1807, expecting the French to occupy Holstein any day, Thornton thought 'it my duty to hasten to England'.⁵ All British vessels had left the duchy's ports a week earlier, but he had arranged for a boat to take him into the Bight where the commander of the British warships on blockading duties was expecting him. On 14 August he went aboard HMS *Quebec*, together with three of his staff. From there Thornton eventually transferred to another warship for the passage to London. As he sailed out towards Britain he passed Heligoland, that 'elevated, barren, rocky spot'.⁶ When he arrived in London Thornton was summoned by George Canning, since March 1807 foreign secretary.⁷ Canning was one of the key figures in the



Map 1 Northern Germany, 1807.

new government headed by the Duke of Portland, which had taken over from Grenville's 'Ministry of all the Talents'. Advocating a hard line against Denmark, Canning had been instrumental in the government's decision to send the Royal Navy to the Baltic to secure control of the Danish fleet. But the show of force had not persuaded Denmark to enter an alliance with Britain. The Danish, under immense pressure from Napoleon, had rejected the British ultimatum. Since mid-August the two countries were at war, with British naval and military forces advancing against Copenhagen.⁸

Taking Heligoland in this situation seemed 'of special importance', Thornton agreed with Canning. It was paramount that Britain should deny the Danish and French the strategic stronghold:

By its position and great elevation, compared with the low, shoaly and dangerous coast of the North Sea, it is absolutely necessary for every vessel bound to or from the Hever, Eider, Elbe, Weser and Jahde rivers to make the Island of Helgoland.

If it was owned by the British, a 'squadron of the King's ships could regulate from hence the blockade of the principal rivers of the North Sea'. At the same time the island could function as an outpost from where to undermine the Continental system through which Napoleon had cut off all trade between Britain and the rest of Europe. As Thornton explained, Heligoland was close enough to the mainland for 'merchandise to be conveyed in small vessels to the Continent'. Yet it was sufficiently removed from the coast for the Royal Navy to be able to control its access. For intelligence gathering too the island was 'a point of essential importance to his Majesty's Government'.

Capturing the island would not, Thornton believed, be difficult. The rock was garrisoned by a small number of Danish soldiers. There was a larger militia made up of Heligolanders, but they were unreliable. Thornton predicted that they would 'yield to the first summon of any maritime force', as that force 'would put an immediate stop to the preoccupations of the inhabitants, and cut off all the means of their subsistence'.⁹ Canning was persuaded and the Admiralty prepared orders on the same day: in parallel to the British assault on Copenhagen (which was to begin on 4 September), Heligoland was to be taken by 'the earliest and best means'.¹⁰

The officer charged with the task was Vice-Admiral Thomas McNamara Russell, commander-in-chief of the North Sea squadron. A detachment of his ships was already blockading Heligoland when the Admiralty's orders reached him by dispatch boat near the Dutch coast. Russell set sail immediately

and arrived at Heligoland on 4 September, anchoring his flagship HMS *Majestic* with its seventy-four guns in full view of the town. So far the Danish commandant had refused to capitulate, despite being cut off from all support. As Russell wrote later,

I was making my arrangement to storm him with the marines and seamen of the squadron if he did not instantly surrender, for at this time the value of the island to us is immense. At six pm, however, he sent out a flag of truce, desiring that an officer might be sent in the morning to treat on articles of capitulation.¹¹

Russell agreed and sent a deputation on shore with a letter for the governor, imploring him not to 'sacrifice the blood and property of your inhabitants by a vain and impotent resistance; but that you will by an immediate surrender avert the horrors of being stormed'. As it turned out, Major Karl Johann von Zeska, the island's commandant, was not in a position to mount much of a defence. He could rely on his company of Danish soldiers, but he was unable to motivate sufficient numbers of the Heligolanders to fight. As Thornton had predicted, the latter were keener to save their families and livelihoods than to die for the Danish crown. Von Zeska gave in and negotiated the handover. This was less heroic than the government in Copenhagen had expected, but it meant that he was able to gain a number of important concessions.¹² Russell granted his request for safe passage to the Continent on his word that he and his troops would not take up arms against the British again. Von Zeska tried in vain to gain a written assurance that the island would return to Denmark after the war. This was out of the question for Russell, but he agreed to far-reaching concessions with regard to the islanders' position. The Heligolanders would not have to do service in the British navy or army against their will. They would enjoy freedom of religion and their property rights would be safeguarded. Importantly, Russell agreed to guarantee the privileges which they had enjoyed under the Danish crown.¹³ Conveniently for the Heligolanders, the articles of capitulation left these privileges undefined—the document was to become the islanders' most treasured constitutional record, invoked whenever they tried to gain concessions from their rulers.

At 4.30 p.m. on 5 September the Danish flag was lowered and the Union Jack hoisted. The British had taken the island without a shot being fired. Russell sent the Danish prisoners with a flag of truce to Holstein. The Heligolanders, he declared, 'shall become subjects of Great Britain with all the universally known advantages peculiar to that character'. Russell installed one of his officers, Corbet d'Auvergne, as acting governor and told him to

'see that the inhabitants are treated with the greatest kindness; to conciliate their affections; and secure their attachment to our government; as I hope it [the island] will never be given up'.¹⁴ Before he set sail again, Russell sent a report to the Admiralty:

Heligoland continues to be governed like our colonies by a governour [*sic*], a council, and an assembly. It contains three thousand three hundred souls, with a majority of females by three hundred. It is possessed of a secure haven, formed between it and Sandy Island, for vessels of twelve feet draught of water, and a safe roadstead for twenty sail of the line the year round.

In order to demonstrate how useful the natural shelter would be for the navy he added: 'It blows tremendously hard at this moment at W.S.W., which is nearly the least sheltered, yet we ride easy with a scope of two cables'.¹⁵

What begins here, in September 1807, is the story of an outpost at the edge of Europe in which Britain and its empire were bound up with the Continent. Heligoland belonged to a string of islands which Britain occupied during the wars with France: Corsica, Elba, Malta, Sicily, and the Ionian Islands (though Corfu remained French until 1814). Together with Gibraltar, acquired in the early eighteenth century and vigorously defended during the Napoleonic Wars, they were catalogued as Britain's 'European possessions'.¹⁶ For some observers these acquisitions signalled a new departure in Britain's relationship with the Continent. Gould Francis Leckie, an enterprising writer who spent much time in Sicily, was one of the most influential amongst them.¹⁷ In his *Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain*, published in 1808, he portrayed these outposts as part of an 'insular empire' that would allow Britain to refrain from too much engagement with the Continent, while ensuring its maritime supremacy. This mirrored a broader conception of the empire as a realm that stood in opposition to Continental Europe, an idea which proved attractive for many commentators in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Continent, unstable and plagued with revolution and tyranny, was something Britain would do well to stay away from. The empire would allow it to do just that. As long as the Royal Navy dominated the world's maritime thoroughfares Britain would not need to meddle in Continental politics. It could concentrate on expanding its empire and worldwide trade.¹⁸

But Leckie's idea of an 'insular empire', and the broader 'blue water' strategy which it reflected, were based on a false dichotomy. Empire and Europe were not clear-cut opposites, nor was Britain in a position to choose one

over the other. Its shifting and ill-defined imperial project was bound up with Continental Europe economically and strategically. Britain's trade was rarely exclusively with either Europe on the one hand or the colonies and the rest of the world on the other. Rather, the movement of goods, finances, and people was typically triangular, involving Continental as much as overseas locations. Nor did the empire allow Britain to disengage from Europe strategically in any sustained fashion. On the contrary, overseas expansion hinged on European stability, just as European instability typically resulted in overseas conflict. Most London governments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were all too aware of this: playing a strong role in Europe and expanding the empire were intrinsically linked rather than opposed interests. This interdependence was encapsulated by Britain's European colonies, scattered as they were around the shores of the Continent. Their occupation was aimed at supporting the fight against Napoleon—they were testament to the expressed British will to tilt back the balance of power in Europe. Rather than symbols of withdrawal, George III's 'European possessions' became hinges between empire and Continent, much like their royal family seat of Hanover itself.¹⁹

In the case of Heligoland this became obvious soon after the takeover of September 1807. While most of the press applauded the occupation, some critics argued that it did not go far enough. Charles Pasley, who visited the island in November 1807, wrote a particularly acerbic critique in his influential *Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire*.²⁰ Pasley, an engineer officer and later a well-regarded general, could not understand why the 'conquest of that worthless lump of red clay, called Heligoland, is received with the greatest applause and joy in England'.²¹ Britain, he thundered, was far too hesitant—it had not nearly enough military ambition. Heligoland was a symbol of 'this unmanly timidity': rather than occupy all of Denmark, the government had gone for a small rock in the North Sea.²² But Pasley's argument, clad in much rhetorical flourish, overestimated Britain's capability to counter Napoleon on land. While its navy was able to see off the French threat, its army did not have the strength to challenge Napoleon on its own. In 1807 an all-out invasion of the Continent was likely to lead to disaster. Britain had to wait until enough governments had turned against Napoleon and a coalition had emerged that was prepared to act. To this end it was crucial that Britain supported those ready to rise against Napoleon through 'guineas and gunpowder': arms supplies, subsidies, covert operations, and targeted expeditions.²³

Heligoland was key for this policy. It was to be the gateway for Britain's engagements in northern Europe and the linchpin for its efforts to break Napoleon's blockade.²⁴ As soon as the island was secured, London sent military and diplomatic staff out to set up the infrastructure for infiltrating the Continent. The first of these agents arrived on 2 October 1807 and reported back that the communication with the mainland was 'entirely cut off'.²⁵ It took almost a month before the British had worked out how to go around the French and Danish gunboats patrolling the entrances to the Rivers Elbe and Weser and the harbours in Holstein. By 29 October the acting governor was confident 'that with the greatest secrecy being observed we may obtain any intelligence that Mr Canning wishes to have from the Continent'. The Heligoland boatmen seemed particularly good at evading enemy craft and landing mail or cargo covertly. What was more, they seemed to be loyal:

I am happy to say that the inhabitants of this island are sober, good people, and seem well disposed to their present government, and may be made by proper means very useful in obtaining any intelligence.²⁶

In January 1808 Canning appointed Edward Nicholas, a career diplomat, to 'take charge of all correspondence with the Continent'.²⁷ This was an innocuous description, considering the range of tasks Nicholas was charged with: running a network of informants and agents on the Continent, directing covert operations, conducting counter-intelligence measures, orchestrating pro-British propaganda amongst the French and their allied troops, organizing the transport of troops to and from the Continent, smuggling armaments and channelling secret payments to allies and insurgents.

Nicholas had worked in a similar if less wide-ranging capacity under Edward Thornton until the French had occupied Hamburg in November 1806.²⁸ He was now to be solely responsible for supervising Britain's intelligence gathering and covert missions in the German-speaking lands. As long as Heligoland provided the closest and most reliable outpost through which to communicate with the Continent, he was also in charge of the government's European correspondence. As Canning explained, 'all letters of every description whatever which pass between this country and the Continent are to be delivered in the first instance to the care of Mr Nicholas'.²⁹ It was through Nicholas that the cabinet and the king were informed about the course of the Napoleonic Wars in these years; and it was through him that most covert initiatives against the French were to be taken. Canning sent 'despatches from Mr Nicholas' to George III at least once a

week, often more frequently and, if they were urgent, late at night. 'I lost no time in reading to his Majesty the intelligence from Heligoland', was a typical response from Windsor.³⁰

From February 1808 until June 1812 'der Konsul', as the locals called Nicholas, resided in Heligoland. Officially he was employed by the Foreign Office on a 'special mission' during this time, with the rank of a minister-plenipotentiary, equivalent to an ambassador.³¹ Reporting directly to Canning, he was given far-reaching powers. All arriving and departing ships had to have a passport signed by him. No one who was not from Heligoland could reside in the island without his permission. All mail to and from the island had to go through him.³² This last aspect was pivotal, since the government's communication with the Continent depended on it. As Nicholas told the governor, 'I am the only person authorized to judge of the propriety or impropriety of what letters are to be delivered'.³³ Few of his contacts on the Continent knew him by his real name. Those who did were under strict instructions not to use it in any correspondence that could be intercepted. Nicholas warned Charles Hamilton, who took over as governor in February 1808, 'that it must be at your peril if you open, cause to open or detain any letter addressed to His Majesty's Ministers or myself under their or my seal or false names'.³⁴

For four and a half years Nicholas was the *éminence grise* of the island, making the governor look like a subordinate officer. Hamilton complained bitterly to the Colonial Office that his authority was being undermined, but the Foreign Office routinely overrode the Colonial Office's objections in this regard. Nicholas, in turn, left Canning and his successors in no doubt about the lowly qualities of the governor, whom he described as naive and slow. The governor, he scoffed, did not even speak German.³⁵ In many ways Hamilton and Nicholas could not have been more different. Hamilton was averse to too much work and took up to two months' leave every year. Nicholas relished his mission and seemed continuously at work. Only once in the fifty-three months during which he resided in Heligoland did he ask for leave, on health grounds. The Foreign Office flatly denied the request—he was irreplaceable given the 'present critical situation of affairs in the North of Germany'.³⁶ Hamilton and Nicholas differed markedly also in the attitude they took to the islanders. Hamilton, with more than a hint of colonial paternalism, thought of them as 'poor people entrusted to my care' and repeatedly defended them as loyal subjects.³⁷ Nicholas, in contrast, disliked the Heligolanders with a passion. They were notorious, he wrote to Canning,

for the 'little confidence they merit'.³⁸ Officials on both sides of the North Sea were to judge them in similar terms throughout the nineteenth century and beyond: as a selfish and narrow-minded island people who failed entirely to appreciate the need to align themselves with their masters.

Nicholas had not only been given far-reaching powers, but also considerable financial clout. He needed a continuous flow of funds to pay couriers and informants, bribe the enemy's officials, and reward the Royal Navy's officers. 'The nature of the service I was charged with', he explained in February 1813, 'required constant naval protection to the boats I employed, certain civilities were due and expected by the officers in return for a disagreeable and at times dangerous service'.³⁹ On a quite different scale were the funds required by the allies and insurgents whom Britain supported against Napoleon. Occasionally bullion and guineas could be shipped from England for these purposes, but that was risky and took a long time. Nicholas needed to be able to pay highly fluctuating sums at short notice to a range of beneficiaries on the Continent. For this he enlisted the help of the Hamburg merchant bankers Parish & Co. The house had been set up by John Parish, the son of a ship's captain from Leith in Scotland, who had emigrated with his family in the mid-eighteenth century. Parish had made vast profits in international trade and finance, making him one of Hamburg's richest men. His luxurious lifestyle was proverbial—'*pärrisch leben*' became a Hamburg idiom for sparing no expense.⁴⁰ From 1795 Parish was involved in masterminding the transport and financing of British troops fighting the French on the Continent and in the colonies. When he retired and moved to England in 1806, his sons took over the business. Nicholas knew them from his time in Hamburg and had established a particularly good relationship with John Parish junior and his brother Charles, who was prominent amongst the merchants circumventing the French blockade. Early in 1808 the Parish brothers arranged an account under a false name on which Nicholas and anyone he authorized could draw.

Agents coming from Heligoland were thus able to get funds in Hamburg, similarly the couriers and informants whom Nicholas used on the Continent. John Parish junior also facilitated larger payments on credit for troops and insurgents fighting Napoleon. He was arrested twice on suspicion of aiding the British, but swiftly released and never charged. It helped that his brothers Richard and David were busy organizing international transactions for the French in Paris and the Americas—just like the Rothschilds, with whom they competed, the Parish brothers were careful not to alienate any

of the great European powers.⁴¹ The well-oiled system, for which Parish & Co charged a handsome commission, continued throughout Nicholas's time in Heligoland. When he returned to London in 1812, Nicholas still had debts of 49,444 Mark Banco with Parish 'on account of secret service'.⁴² (Mark Banco was the Hamburg unit of account. The sum, roughly £4,800 at the time, amounted to about five times Nicholas's annual salary.⁴³) The Foreign Office footed the bill without hesitation, just as it rarely queried the 'extraordinary expenses' which Nicholas incurred.⁴⁴

The collaboration between Parish and Nicholas illustrates the distinct Anglo-German character of much of the covert action that was conducted through Heligoland. 'Anglo-German', that is, in a loose, cultural rather than strictly bi-national sense: the agents, informants, couriers, bankers, merchants, and officers with whom Nicholas worked came from a range of backgrounds, many of which did not fit into the national categories that became entrenched later in the century. Most of them spoke both English and German. Many of them had strong links to England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales on the one hand and to Hanover, Holstein, the Hanse cities, Prussia, or other German states on the other. The 'extraordinary Anglo-German symbiosis', created by the French threat and epitomized by Heligoland, should not be mistaken for a pact between two nations.⁴⁵ It was both more and less than that: a dense network of (almost exclusively) men for whom local and regional identities mattered as much as supra-national constructs such as the House of Hanover. Some had strong, others only vague feelings for whatever they identified as 'Germany' or 'Britain'. What held them together was opposition to Napoleon, for political, personal, or commercial reasons. In many cases, that of John Parish included, all three applied.

The King's German Legion, which used Heligoland as a recruitment base and arms depot, was a case in point.⁴⁶ The Legion, an integrated part of the British army, had been set up to recruit volunteers from the German-speaking lands who had fled the French. Friedrich von der Decken, one of the many officers in the Legion who served both on the Continent and in Britain, was responsible for the covert operation.⁴⁷ The largest proportion of his recruits came from Hanover, but it would be wrong to see the Legion as a mere Anglo-Hanoverian vehicle. Those who joined it via Heligoland came from a wide range of backgrounds, mostly northern German, but also Prussian, Bavarian, and Austrian.⁴⁸ Major Kentzinger, the commander of the Legion's base on the island, had agents who brought volunteers from as far as



Figure 1.1 *A View of Heligoland from Sandy Island*. Hand-coloured aquatint by Robert and Daniel Havell, 1811.

the Tyrol.⁴⁹ As long as they spoke German he also took on deserters, draft-dodgers, and prisoners of war who had escaped the French.⁵⁰

So successful was the King's German Legion at attracting men from German states that Continental governments, keen not to offend the French, warned their citizens not to be lured to Heligoland by the British.⁵¹ Practically all recruits for the Legion, once interviewed and checked by an army surgeon, were sent to the Legion's headquarters in England. From there they were dispatched to support British campaigns all over Europe. Units of the Legion fought in Spain, Sicily, and at Waterloo, where they famously defended the stronghold of La Haye Sainte until Prussian troops arrived.⁵² Epitomizing the peculiar Anglo-German collaboration prompted by the Napoleonic threat, they were loyal both to the English king and to the various Germanies that they identified with.

The recruits of the King's German Legion who made their way from the Continent to Heligoland crossed paths with the agents and couriers who took the opposite route. By spring 1808 Nicholas and his confidants had established a network that was reliable enough for large-scale covert missions. The first of these was masterminded by Canning and Arthur Wellesley (the later Duke of Wellington) in May 1808 when the Madrid uprising caused serious difficulties for Napoleon in Spain. As news of the insurrection spread through Europe, Canning tried to fan the flames. Could Spanish

troops stationed in northern Europe be encouraged to defect from Napoleon and join the resistance in the Peninsula? The Marquis of La Romana, commanding a division in Denmark, was known to harbour anti-French sentiments. If he could be persuaded, might the Royal Navy be able to evacuate him and his division, reported to be 37,000 men strong, and transport them to Spain? It was worth a try. Wellesley selected a Scottish priest whom he had used as an agent before for the mission. Father James Robertson (a 'short, stout, merry little monk') was an almost perfect choice: he was fluent in German, having spent many years in a Bavarian monastery; as a Catholic he would have more authority with La Romana; he would have a natural alibi as a travelling clergyman; and since he had no direct links to the government he could be disowned if things went wrong.⁵³ Wellesley told Robertson 'that, if the service on which you will be employed should succeed, you will be amply rewarded; and that, if in the execution of it, any accident should happen to you, your mother and your two sisters . . . will be taken care of and provided for by Government'.⁵⁴ Robertson would report to a case officer, Colin Alexander Mackenzie, who had run similar missions before.⁵⁵ Mackenzie was to accompany him to Heligoland and stay there during the mission, liaising with Nicholas and Canning.⁵⁶

Before leaving London Robertson assumed the identity of a Bavarian whom he had known and who had died in Britain without leaving any family behind. Mackenzie entered Robertson under this false name at the Alien Office, stating that he was instructed to convey him out of the country. On 4 July the couple went on board a packet boat at Harwich. 'A favourable breeze brought us in forty-eight hours to Heligoland', recounted the priest later.⁵⁷ Nicholas briefed them about the situation on the Continent and gave Robertson a letter for Parish, written with invisible ink, instructing the Hamburg banker to furnish the priest with the necessary funds. On 8 June Robertson embarked for the Continent. After some mishaps he made it to Bremen on board a contraband trader, avoiding French troops and customs officers. Using false papers, he travelled on to Hamburg, where John Parish provided him with money and intelligence. Via Altona and Lübeck Robertson eventually made it to La Romana's headquarters in Nyborg on the Danish island of Fyn (Fünen), keeping his superiors in Heligoland informed through coded letters. Mackenzie and Nicholas were thus able to send dispatch boats at the right time to London and the Baltic, where a fleet under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Goodwin Keats was waiting. It took Robertson some time to convince La Romana, but after several

meetings the general agreed to the plan hatched by Canning and Wellesley. A final dispatch via Cuxhaven to Heligoland set in motion the evacuation. On 9 August *La Romana* escaped the French using all the ships available at Nyborg. His cavalry units had to leave behind their horses, shooting hundreds of them before embarking. Keats's ships brought *La Romana's* division to England, from where they went on to Spain.⁵⁸ In early October 1808 they landed in Santander and joined Wellington's campaign against Napoleon. It was a stunning success for British intelligence and military planning, much exploited in anti-French propaganda, orchestrated by Nicholas from his island outpost.⁵⁹

Emboldened by the *La Romana* mission, London used Heligoland for a string of covert operations in which Britain and its Continental partners cooperated. In March 1809 the Portland government agreed to support a clandestine network of Prussian officers who seemed ready to rise against Napoleon—while their king, Friedrich Wilhelm III, was hesitating to commit himself against the French (Prussia had suffered a crushing defeat at Jena and Auerstedt three years earlier).⁶⁰ The insurgents' hopes rested on Major Ferdinand von Schill, who had fought an audacious guerrilla campaign against the French in 1806 and 1807.⁶¹ Schill was now to lead an insurrection planned for Westphalia, which he hoped would spark a general revolution against Napoleon. Prussian and British agents made repeat journeys to and from Heligoland to negotiate the details. London agreed to supply arms and money via the island. Canning promised to send a British expedition to the Continent, should the insurrection be supported by the Prussian king.⁶² In April 1809 Nicholas organized for Parish & Co in Hamburg to pay £20,000 up front to the insurgents via Augustus Maimburg, a captain in the King's German Legion who acted as an Anglo-Prussian go-between.⁶³

Anticipating, as Canning told George III, 'a general rising throughout Westphalia and Lower Saxony', Heligoland was turned into a major weapons depot.⁶⁴ But much of this came too late. Schill began the revolt before having secured sufficient support, either in the Prussian or other armies. After some initial success, he had to retreat before Napoleon's troops. On 14 May 1809 Schill sent a courier to Nicholas requesting 20,000 muskets with ammunition as well as swords, pistols, and saddles for 3,000 men.⁶⁵ But none of these could be delivered in time and Schill withdrew to the Baltic coast. The British Admiralty was busy drawing up a plan to evacuate him and his troops when Nicholas was informed that Schill had been killed on 31 May 1809.⁶⁶ Those of his troops who survived were taken prisoner; only a few

hundred escaped. Worse still, the Prussian king disowned Schill, quashing all hopes of a wider Prussian uprising.

Heligoland continued to be the Anglo-German headquarters for covert operations in northern Europe. To Canning's great regret, most of these followed a similar pattern: Britain would get weapons to the island and from there onto the Continent, but the uprisings they were meant to be used in fizzled out before British support could become effective. The abortive rebellion in Hanover in July 1809 was a case in point.⁶⁷ Two deliveries of arms and ammunition were shipped by convoy from Britain in mid-July.⁶⁸ The plan was to smuggle them to Hanover for an uprising which Canning hoped would distract the French from the expeditionary force London was about to send to Walcheren, the Dutch island in the Scheldt estuary. Nicholas organized for the weapons to be landed on the east Frisian coast, but the insurrection was aborted and the guns had to be abandoned. As Nicholas's agent wrote, French officers 'discovered our long train of waggons' and were soon 'in eager pursuit'.⁶⁹ In parallel with this, the British landing at Walcheren failed abysmally.⁷⁰

A few more covert operations run from Heligoland followed, but, with bigger powers such as Prussia not ready to act, insurrections against Napoleon remained sporadic and weak in the German lands. It was a sign of the overall strategic situation that Heligoland was now used more and more for withdrawals. In August 1809 Nicholas managed to orchestrate the evacuation of Friedrich Wilhelm, the Duke of Brunswick Oels. The duke, George III's nephew, had raised a corps of partisans to fight the French and had briefly managed to re-occupy Brunswick. Vastly outnumbered, he fled with his 'Black Brunswickers' (so called because of the black uniforms they wore in mourning for their occupied country) to the North Sea. On 9 August 1809 they were evacuated to Heligoland from the River Weser amongst considerable chaos 'owing to the confusion of the moment, the Westphalians being on his rear [*sic*], and the Danes having occupied the other bank of the river'.⁷¹ Within days a convoy brought the duke and his corps to England, from where they eventually joined Wellington's forces in the Peninsular War. George III was delighted about his nephew's rescue, which was duly celebrated in the press, but there was an unwelcome sense of déjà vu at Whitehall: the British were getting rather too much experience in evacuating troops from northern Europe.⁷²

It was inevitable, given the prominence of such operations, that the French would try to put a stop to Britain's use of Heligoland. As early as

May 1808 Nicholas had reported that 'the enemy's secret agents' were trying to infiltrate the island under false German or English names.⁷³ In order to protect his network he set up special counter-intelligence measures. Travellers and merchants alike complained about the strict controls. Louis Ompteda, wrongly suspected of working for the French in May 1809, was one of them. Having been arrested together with two other travellers he found himself closely watched by an officer 'who seemed to perform the functions of a police agent':

We were not permitted to speak with one another, or to approach the window, lest, perhaps, we might make secret signs to someone outside; we were scarcely allowed to move so great were at that time the precautions taken about Heligoland.⁷⁴

The precautions taken by Nicholas paid off. In late August 1809 he arrested a French spy who had arrived on the island under the name of Herling. The Foreign Office had no doubt that this was 'a very active spy of the French government' known as 'Colville' or 'Lauda'. It asked Nicholas to 'send him to this country or detain him at Heligoland until you can receive instructions as to his future disposal'.⁷⁵ On 23 September Nicholas put Colville on a warship bound for England. The French agent 'still persisted in his story'. Nicholas had refrained from interrogating him further, trusting 'that he would come under much better hands' in London.⁷⁶

In the wake of the Colville case the French made a sustained effort at cutting the routes connecting Heligoland with the Continent. While they were in no position to challenge the Royal Navy's squadron stationed off the island, they became increasingly effective at controlling the entrances to the Rivers Elbe and Weser. Again and again British detachments had to embark on missions to keep a check on Danish and French gunboats. To Nicholas's great regret, he did not manage to hold on to Neuwerk, a small tidal island close to the Cuxhaven coast which served as a stepping stone for his couriers. About thirty nautical miles from Heligoland, Neuwerk is exposed at low tide, so that visitors can walk to it from the mainland. Nicholas paid a generous fee to the lighthouse keeper who orchestrated the secret exchange of post on the islet. He would make a 'private signal' to the Heligoland boatmen, indicating that they could land and hide their secret mail.⁷⁷ Once they had left he would make a signal to agents on the mainland, who would then walk over the mudflats to Neuwerk and pick up the correspondence. This maritime dead drop worked smoothly until Neuwerk was used for the evacuation of deserters, which brought it to the attention of the French.

Initially Royal Marines were able to drive the French off the island again, but the navy's ships could not operate in the shallow waters and the French had the advantage of land access. Lord George Stuart, in command of the frigate HMS *Horatio*, was 'sorry to say' that his squadron could do rather little.⁷⁸ By November 1810 Neuwerk had to be given up.

Yet none of this put an end to the secret communication between Britain and the Continent. Nicholas was able to establish alternative routes to the Holstein coast and on to the Hanseatic cities, aided by staff at the Hamburg Post Office who were in his pay.⁷⁹ When his own agents or informants were arrested he managed surprisingly often to get them released, mostly through 'the timely application of a bribe'.⁸⁰ When this failed, the incriminating material could normally be 'purchased out of the hands of the French seizing officers'.⁸¹ This was particularly important in cases where it concerned John Parish, Nicholas's banker on the Continent. When the cover of a Hamburg agent who knew Parish was blown he moved him 'out of reach of the French authorities'.⁸² Nicholas was similarly obsessive about protecting any communication that could implicate the British government.⁸³ Only once during his mission did official dispatches from London come into the hands of the French.⁸⁴

Nicholas's success in protecting Britain's secret communication with the Continent reflected the advantage he enjoyed over the French in running his Anglo-German network. His headquarters at Heligoland was out of Napoleon's reach—there was a brief scare late in 1810 that the French would try to take Heligoland, but the Royal Navy's command of the North Sea was never tested. At the same time, Nicholas's station was close enough to the Continent for his couriers to sail to the mainland and back within a day. Most of all, he could rely on a dense clandestine network in the coastal areas occupied by the French. This included not only outright agents, but also friends, associates, and informants, most of whom he knew from his days in Hamburg. His contacts ranged from officials and high-ranking officers to pub owners and fishermen. Nicholas rarely struggled to recruit locals willing to assist him, despite the dangers involved. This is partly explained by the generous payments he offered. Yet the goodwill he encountered reflected not only opportunism, but also a combination of patriotism and Anglophilia: many in the Hanseatic, Hanoverian, and Frisian territories were convinced that the British effort against Napoleon was aligned with their own interests. 'The whole of the coast from the Ems to the Elbe', Friedrich von der Decken wrote in December 1811, 'is inhabited by people

who are not only anxious to have intercourse with England, but are sincerely attached to the English cause'.⁸⁵

Nowhere did this symbiosis between British and Continental interests show more than in the vast smuggling activity that centred on Heligoland. Circumventing the Continental System, Napoleon's blockade of British commerce was pivotal for Britain's finances as well as its strategic prospects in Europe.⁸⁶ Smuggling had been accordingly high on Canning's agenda when he first suggested that the island should be taken, but many British merchants were initially hesitant. Nathan Mayer Rothschild, the Frankfurt-born founder of the famous London house, first contemplated smuggling via the island in October 1807. His father-in-law, Levy Barent Cohen, warned him:

Regarding shipping to Heligoland, it is attained with too much difficulty to attempt anything. Some clever person is necessary to have on the other side, say the Continent, to give you information in what manner to manage this kind of business.⁸⁷

What was needed was 'a friend there to arrange matters' so that 'you can introduce the goods to the Continent'.⁸⁸ While government initiative was essential in securing Heligoland, the problem described by Cohen was solved by the Hanseatic merchants who pioneered routes through which to land goods on the Continent. The Parish brothers were amongst them, acting as agents for British houses while also trading on their own account.

By the spring of 1808 an extraordinary network of Anglo-German merchants had begun to use Heligoland for large-scale smuggling. In May 1808 Canning asked Nicholas to set up a system allowing merchants from Britain and the Continent to reside on the island. This was because the 'applications which are daily made for passports to Heligoland . . . have become so numerous'.⁸⁹ By the summer of 1808 around 200 merchants, mostly from London, Hamburg, Edinburgh, Bremen, Liverpool, Frankfurt, and Manchester, had settled on Heligoland. Two years later Hamilton estimated that, together with their clerks and servants, the merchants made up about 1,000 foreign residents.⁹⁰ It was they who advised the government how to break Napoleon's blockade and they were the ones who shouldered the enormous risk involved.

At the core of their activity lay the island's Chamber of Commerce.⁹¹ Nationality played no role in the Chamber—any merchant residing on the island qualified for membership. This included representatives of companies that had their headquarters in Britain or on the Continent.⁹² Larger houses

such as Rothschild, Oppenheim, and Parish were thus able to establish branches on the island, using agents and cover names.⁹³ The vast majority of merchants had British or Hanseatic-German backgrounds.⁹⁴ They voted for a president (a Hamburg trader) to lead the Chamber and a secretary (a London merchant) to assist him. What they had in common was commercial interest and a cosmopolitan outlook—many amongst them had family in and business ties to both Britain and the Continent. Consequently, the Chamber had decidedly little of a national agenda. As one critic wrote to Canning, ‘the merchants that compose the same want patriotism’.⁹⁵

Precisely this, not representing national interests, made the Chamber successful: it could speak for merchants from all backgrounds, including the handful of Scandinavian and exiled French ones that existed amongst the Anglo-German houses dominating the trade. From the beginning the Chamber succeeded in negotiating favourable conditions both on the island and in London. This included a passport system by which ships were cleared, allowing Nicholas’s men to inspect cargoes and crews, while ensuring a swift landing of goods.⁹⁶ When the government changed this mechanism to a licence system, which was less flexible, the Chamber intervened to have it amended.⁹⁷ Importantly, it succeeded early on in lobbying London to provide naval protection. The Admiralty duly dispatched warships to guard the transports sailing in convoy across the North Sea.⁹⁸ And it reinforced the squadron at Heligoland tasked with patrolling the coasts of Holstein and eastern Frisia as well as the Elbe and Weser estuaries. Without this protection few of the boatmen making the hazardous journey to and from the mainland would have succeeded for long. Here is how a passenger described a typical trip:

At midnight I was on the shore where the ship which was to take me was at anchor. I found my unknown [*sic*] on board immediately. He was no less a person than a Bremen smuggler, and owner of the cargo. There were also two young merchants from Hamburg who wished to proceed to Spain from England. The total ship’s company consisted of the skipper, quite a common man, and a lad of sixteen or seventeen . . . After a time, when we were approaching the estuary of the Elbe, we heard the reports of cannon-fire, which on the sea has a peculiarly clear sound. I learned later on that it was an English frigate which had engaged some French gunboats at the mouth of the Elbe. At last, towards 3pm, we anchored off Heligoland.⁹⁹

From early 1808 the covert trade rose dramatically. The Colonial Office was inundated with requests from merchants for land on the island. In April

Governor Hamilton warned his superiors that the 'mercantile establishments are already too numerous, considering the contracted space to be occupied, the number of foreigners necessarily employed as labourers from the continent, and that the supply of water is far from being abundant'.¹⁰⁰ 'The spirit of adventure is so great', he wrote in October, that the harbour was full of ships despite 'this critical and hazardous season'.¹⁰¹ In November the Chamber of Commerce told the underwriters at Lloyd's that the Heligoland trade had reached 'an extent which the most sanguine mind could hardly have imagined it capable of reaching under the present extraordinary situation of the Continent'. Within twelve days 'upwards of one hundred and twenty vessels fully laden' had arrived from Britain, the 'aggregate value of whose cargoes cannot be less than eight hundred thousand pounds'.¹⁰² In March 1810 Hamilton told the Earl of Liverpool that 'every spot unoccupied [on the island] has been appropriated to mercantile purposes'.¹⁰³ He calculated that goods in the value of four to five million pounds were on the island at any given time.¹⁰⁴

Heligoland was now the most important covert trading outpost the British had apart from Malta, the smuggling centre of the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁵ The volume of trade can be reconstructed with some precision, as the Chamber of Commerce raised a levy on all goods landed on the island. The levy was used to fund the facilities run by the Chamber as well as pay for the harbour master and his men who orchestrated the stream of ships coming and going—up to 300 vessels a day in good weather. There were a few merchants who refused to pay or fell into arrears, but the vast majority complied with the system, so that the levies paid reflect the overall value of goods fairly reliably. Accounts exist for 1809 to 1811. They show that for these years a total of £215,837 was raised in levies. Given that the rate remained unchanged at 0.25 per cent, the value of goods registered in this way would have amounted to roughly £86.3 million, a little more than Britain's annual public budget for 1811.¹⁰⁶ These were extraordinary sums, exceeding even the value of goods being smuggled through Malta.¹⁰⁷ As the Chamber of Commerce explained to the Committee at Lloyd's, Heligoland was 'the only medium through which the North of Germany and the countries upon the Rhine can receive their supplies'.¹⁰⁸

Heligoland's role became so notorious that Heinrich von Kleist, the Prussian playwright, devoted a long article to it in December 1810, defying the Prussian censors. According to his account, goods worth £20 million had been piled up on the island. The activity there exceeded 'all trading



Figure 1.2 Bird's-eye view of Heligoland during the Napoleonic Wars. Detail from *A Map of the Island of Heligoland* by G. Testoline, 1810.

places of the Continent' and belonged to 'the most extraordinary and remarkable appearances of our time'.¹⁰⁹ The French were accordingly keen to stop the smuggling. Napoleon's police commissars warned in public announcements that 'any interaction with the English via Heligoland will be treated as treason'.¹¹⁰ They even forbade the use of English in conversation or writing in the ports and cities along the coast. But despite their concerted efforts, the French failed to put an end to the clandestine trade. Their gunboats could never control the entire coast. As long as the Royal Navy did its bit, Governor Hamilton told Lord Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, then the smugglers would 'find no difficulty in landing their cargoes on the adjacent coasts'.¹¹¹ Practically all the smuggling was conducted in small ships, sailed at dusk or dawn by local fishermen who knew the waters better than anyone else. As John Rennie, the civil engineer, explained in a letter to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Robert Dundas:

The vessels which generally carry on the trade between the island of Heligoland and the continent carry from 5 to 50 tons, are very flatt [*sic*] and drawn from 4 to 5 feet of water. They come in great numbers, so much so, that Mr Brown [the harbour master] says he has seen 800 sail (including open boats) at one time.¹¹²

The goods which the Heligoland smugglers ferried to the Continent showed how closely intertwined empire and Europe were in British trade.