

# Gozo During the Second World War - a Glimpse

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## Introduction

The part played by Gozo during the war was somewhat different from that of Malta. Gozo, though subject to the same rules and regulations of wartime Malta, was not a military objective and it was only in early 1942 that Gozo became an enemy target. Yet Gozitans feared the enemy especially in 1942 since the island was defenceless and had nothing to fight with. Therefore certain exigencies that were introduced in Malta from the outbreak of the hostilities with Italy, became in force in Gozo only after the Luftwaffe intensified the attacks on the island in 1942. Thus in Gozo public shelter digging and construction did not start before March 1941, the Demolition and Clearance was not established until February 1942 and the Home Guard only came into being by mid-1941. The Air Raid Precautions

squad was not set up in Gozo during the war and British soldiers, who started to visit Gozo in March 1941, were only stationed in Gozo primary schools or other private buildings just for short periods, to relax and also for their military exercises and parades to boost the local morale. It was only in mid-1943 that, because of the temporary Gozo Airfield, some defence precautions were taken to guard against any air attacks.

From the outbreak of the war with Italy in June 1940 up to mid-December 1941, Italian and German planes just passed over Gozo and occasionally dropped bombs only to lighten their load and turn back as fast as they could. Thus Gozo as a small and defenceless island never endured the harsh bombing that took place incessantly on Malta. Yet Gozo, owing to the war, was never an 'open country' but it still had its tragedies and its problems.

## Air Attacks on Gozo

From June 1940 to mid-December 1941 the bombs which were dropped on Gozo either exploded in fields or fell into the sea thus causing little damage. The first series of bombs were dropped at Dahlet Qorrot in Nadur on 21 June 1940 at 2.07 am, fifty-year old Joseph Mizzi was slightly injured while he was out rabbit hunting by night. Up to mid-December 1941 very few Gozitans were injured and the blast of the bombs caused only little damage to their homes. Between the night of the 27 and 28 May 1941, an enemy plane observing some light, dropped a series of bombs in Ta' Ghammar, Ghasri. Several houses in the vicinity of the fields were damaged by the blast but there were no casualties.

The first serious attack came on the night between the 23 and 24 December 1941. During that night about twelve bombs fell on the outskirts of Victoria. One house in Windmill Street was destroyed while another suffered heavy damage. 22-year old Carmela Borg died in the debris while her mother



Building damaged by bombs in Mithna Street, Rabat, Gozo - 24.12.1941. Photo: C. Bezzina



Partially demolished buildings in Grunju Street, Nadur, Gozo - 03.01.1942. Photo: C. Bezzina

was injured. Carmela Borg was the first Gozitan victim to die in Gozo. It was a sad Christmas with no church bells ringing and with people celebrating it in the blackout and curfew conditions. Nor was the new year a happy one.

On 3 January 1942 at 4.15 am, another twelve bombs were dropped on Nadur. Old Windmill Street, Grunju Street, Saint John Street and other streets in the vicinity were hit. Several houses in these streets were either demolished or badly damaged. Several persons were seriously injured and the 21-month old Carmel Gatt and the 32-year old John Mejlak lost their lives under the debris. A heavier attack took place on Nadur on 15 January 1942 at 4.45 pm when twelve bombs were dropped along Racecourse Street, Telegraph Street and Church Street. Thirteen-year old Rita Galea, 8-year old Joseph Muscat and 42-year old Francis Cutajar lost their lives in this attack. It was a bad start for the year 1942 in Gozo, and it had barely started. On 23 January at 3.45 pm about nine bombs were dropped in Saint Catherine Street, St Joseph Street, Soil Street and other minor streets in Xewkija. Although

no one died, a few persons were injured and some houses were badly damaged. Yet the worst attack in January 1942 took place on 29 January at about 7.15 am in Hamri Street, Għajnsielem. The house of the family Grech was destroyed and from under the ruins of the house the bodies of 49-year old Carmela Grech, 14-year old John Grech, 7-year old Angela Grech, 16-year old Agnes Grech and 17-year old Amalia Grech were pulled out. Other members of the family were seriously injured and taken to hospital. Laurence Grech, the father, only survived because at that time he was in church. It was a dramatic sad event that shocked Gozo. January 1942 ended with Gozitan morale rather low and with enemy attacks becoming frequent against a defenceless island.

On 10 February 1942 about nine bombs were dropped in Xagħra. Both Bullara Street and January Street were hit and some persons were injured, but 72-year old Carmelo Attard and his 70-year old wife Marianna died in their demolished house in Bullara Street. On 12 April 1942, at 12.30 pm, Xagħra was again the enemy target. Both Marsalforn Street and Racecourse Street were hit by several bombs. 17-

year old Carmel Azzopardi died instantly as he was hit by shrapnel while his 48-year old father died of injuries in hospital 11 days later. The air-raided attacks by the Luftwaffe increased drastically. Gozo too was becoming an enemy target. The Gozitans, afraid of the proposed invasion by the Axis, could do nothing except submit themselves to hard wartime conditions. Victoria was subject to an air attack on 6 May and on 8 May 1942. In the former machine-gun attack, 41-year old Toni Saliba, a bus driver, was killed and several other persons injured in Savina Square. In the latter attack no one died, but about 50 sheep and goats that were grazing in Marsalforn Valley and on Gelmus Hill were killed instantly.

On 28 July 1942 at about 10.30 pm a German plane passing over the west of Gozo, dropped some bombs over Gharb. The village cemetery was hit as well as some houses in the vicinity and a few persons were injured. As a result of serious injuries, 50-year old Michael Angelo Mizzi died in Victoria hospital on 4 August. At mid-night between 5 and 6 August 1942, some incendiary bombs were dropped on the small village of Saint Laurence. Consequently

28-year old Nazzarena Attard died in hospital on 7 August and 25-year old Carmela Farrugia, her 35-year old sister Maria together with their 66-year old mother Josephine lost their lives during that night.

Yet the worst attack that ever took place on Gozo was on Saturday 10 October 1942 on the village of Ta' Sannat. At about 10.15 am, two German bombers flew over Gozo and when chased by British fighters, they released two big bombs on built up areas. Sixteen houses were totally demolished and about 60 houses partly demolished. The Demolition and Clearance, which was set up in Gozo in February 1942, did its best to extract the dead from under the debris. The school and the police station were also badly hit and about 70 persons were injured. Eighteen persons died as a consequence of this attack.

### **Maltese Refugees**

Since Gozo was less of a target than Malta, a total of about 5000 Maltese refugees sought shelter in Gozo. The late Frank Bezzina (1925-1996) author of the book "Il-Qilla tal-Gwerra fuq Ghawdex



Houses damaged by bombs in Saguna Street, Sannat, Gozo - 10.10.1942. Photo: C. Bezzina





Bomb damaged house in Race Course Street, Nadur, Gozo - 15.01.1942. Photo: C. Bezzina

1940-1943” recalls the sense of unity and solidarity between Maltese and Gozitans. Of outstanding interest is his account of the summer of 1941, when during the evening, Maltese refugees in Gozo would go to It-Tokk Square, Victoria to socialise. Maltese and Gozitan youths would play football matches together and organise theatrical shows at Don Bosco Oratory.

Marsalforn took the semblance of the Sliema promenade with Maltese and Gozitans interacting together. Maltese teachers who sought refuge in Gozo began to teach in Gozitan schools, while many Maltese students in Gozo began to attend schools with the Gozitans. Consequently the number of students in schools increased considerably. Some Maltese teachers were also appointed Assistant Protection Officers while some had an important role to play within the Protection Office and as Special Constables. With the effort of Emanuel Bianco, a Maltese refugee who was transferred to Gozo as a hospital compounder, the first MUSEUM for boys was opened in Victoria on 23 April 1941. On Christmas Eve of that year, the first procession of Jesus Christ took place and the young Anton

Zammit Gabarretta, a Maltese boy who was a refugee with his family, preached the first sermon. Mro. Vincenzo Bugeja who was a refugee in Xaghra, also left a patrimony of Music to the same village and Mr Tony Scott and Mr Joseph Orlando Smith gave an outstanding contribution to Gozitan farmers, especially during the Wheat Collection in June and July 1942. Moreover, Gozo prospered economically because wealthy Maltese, who brought every penny with them, spent it in Gozo. With the influx of Maltese in Gozo, some individuals who sympathised with the Italians, also sought refuge or better still escaped to Gozo. Thus a nucleus of pro-Italian Maltese lived in Gozo, especially in Victoria, Marsalforn and Nadur. They socialised with other Gozitans who shared the same views they did.

### **Difficult Times**

In general, life in Gozo was difficult and Gozitans had of course the duty to observe during the war the light restriction orders (blackout), the curfew, the air-raid signals and other war regulations. About 600 Gozitans were conscripted and were taken as soldiers to Malta to different destinations. To look



A house damaged by bombs in Race Course Street, Sannat, Gozo - 12.04.1942. Photo: C. Bezzina

after the defence of the island the Coast Police was set up in Gozo on 10 August 1940, with Reserve Police Constables situated around the island with the duty of observation. Precautions were also taken so that the Special Constables could enforce the curfew and blackout regulations while cars and bus transport were controlled due to lack of petrol. The strait between the islands was also a problem. With mines floating in the sea and with air-raid attacks continuously attacking boats plying between the islands, transport between the islands was often suspended. At the peak of the war Gozitans had to make considerable sacrifices and suffered scarcity especially in June and July 1942 when the rations became irregular and Malta was on the verge of surrendering. In summer 1942 Gozitans had to queue up under the hot sun to get the poor quality food of the Victory Kitchens.

### The Black Market

As a consequence of all this the black-market grew steadily during the war, especially in mid-1942 when the scarcity of goods was severely felt. Most Gozitans who needed essential supplies had to pay dearly for something which before the war they could

acquire a few pennies. Thus the price of eggs, flour, sugar, milk and other goods increased alarmingly. Although the Government warned people against the black-market, its growth continued. Many Gozitans considered the black-market trading as the only way to acquire, even at a high cost, these essential goods. Thus Gozitans and many Maltese refugees in general did not protest about the high prices of commodities and only worried as to where to get such goods. Moreover there was a general reluctance to report infringements even though people felt that they were being robbed. Consequently the police never gained control of the situation.

### Conclusion

During the Second World War, about 150 Gozitans lost their lives in one way or another. Many civilians died under the debris after bomb attacks on their houses while many others died as soldiers while on duty. The majority of Gozitans were lost at sea when the ship on which they were serving was sunk either by U-boats, mines or by air raid attacks. One Gozitan person died in a concentration camp. In addition, as a consequence of the war, many Gozitans were injured for life.

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