

# AN OBJECTIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE SIEGE OF MALTA OF 1565

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The number of books, pamphlets and newspaper features which have been written about the Siege of Malta of 1565, certainly run into hundreds if not thousands. The self-sacrifice, heroism and unity of purpose displayed by the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem assisted by the Maltese — men, women and children who manned the bastion walls to repel the Ottoman invaders — have become legendary as the centuries roll by. Indeed, Malta has recently commemorated the 4th centenary of this event.

It is due to the passing of so many years, influenced by growing national pride which made the Maltese blow-up this event out of its true historical proportion. This siege was in fact a comparatively minor event in the great game of power politics played on the European chessboard in the 16th century. It was just one link in an imposing chain of historical events some of which have been brought to light by modern research workers.

In the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks were in occupation of the Balkans, Asian Minor, the Middle East and North Africa including Egypt. The Islamic tide lapped at the gates of Vienna (years before it had set foot on Otranto in Italy) and the Christian defeat at the Battle of Mohacs in Hungary in 1526 proved that the feudal system of government and war strategy then prevailing, were powerless to stop the Ottoman advance.

When Soliman the Magnificent succeeded to the Ottoman throne in 1520, he started to consolidate his possessions and planned to cross swords with the Christian powers. Even by modern standards Soliman combined military capacity with statesmanship of a high order. In a century of great monarchs, he was one of the greatest in his own right "He was a cultivated man who enjoyed music, poetry, the beauties of nature, and philosophic discussions. Yet the military apparatus of the Empire forced him to pursue a warlike policy. The feudal 'sipahi' and the Janissaries, as well as the leading land-owning families and the great officers of the government, lived off the great flow of booty from the Empire's distant borders to its centre" (1).

With rare exception, Soliman honoured his engagements and was well-known for his clemency in a world and period when cruelty was commonplace and an accepted way of life. When he conquered Rhodes during which he lost several thousand men, Soliman faithfully observed the terms of the surrender and allowed the Knights of the Order and their men with all their personal effects, to sail to Crete in their own galleys.

When the Knights came to Malta in 1530, Soliman deemed the island to be too far away by 16th century standards and too unimportant to bother him. He concentrated on European diplomacy to extract the maximum advantage for himself out of the fight for supremacy between Spain and France.

(1) S.N. FISHER, *Turkey*, in Collier's Encyclopedia, U.S.A., 1964, Vol. 22, p. 543.

As Sir Charles Petrie has so aptly put it, Soliman "began to pursue in the East much the same policy as Henry VIII (of England) was attempting in the West but he (Soliman) was more successful for he had far greater material resources at his disposal.

"The progress of events soon provided him with an opportunity for intervention, for the defeat of the French at Pavia in 1525 was a great day not only for the Habsburgs but also for the Turks. In his despair Francis, to the scandal of Christendom, invoked the aid of Suleyman to take the pressure off his country by an attack upon the Empire (Spain) from the East" (2).

Thus an unholy alliance between the Cross and the Crescent was born in Paris and Constantinople (a formal treaty was signed in 1536) and this alliance survived before, during and after the Siege of Malta (3). It was a marriage of convenience but the fact remains that it was in being and Soliman did not hesitate to make use of it and to extract the maximum benefit out of it. (It may be strange but true that contacts were in being between Paris and Constantinople ever since 1483, that is, 52 years before the siege) (4).

The agreement between Turkey and France "was destined to supply one of the most continuous threads in the fabric of European diplomacy for more than 300 years and it rendered Philip (of Spain) fearful of a war on two fronts throughout his reign" (5).

In due course Soliman moved north and occupied the Balkans up to the gates of Vienna which he besieged in 1529 but failed to capture. The Habsburgs in Vienna were not so happy. There was intermittent warfare with Soliman; they would have preferred Philip to take some of the pressure but the latter favoured the then prevailing situation so as to have a freer hand in the Netherlands.

The fact that the Crescent had one point directed at Austria and the other at Spain with Soliman in the centre carrying out a pincer movement, appeared at the time to be the key to Ottoman power politics of 16th Century Europe. In 1535 and again in 1553, treaties were signed between France and Turkey. Indeed, it was agreed between the two countries in 1553 that towns in Italy captured by the Turks were to be first sacked, the people enslaved and the towns handed over to the French. In this manner, France was assured of Turkish assistance in the former's effort to keep the balance of power against the Spanish Empire (6).

All this goes to prove that the ever-growing belief encouraged by Maltese writers, teachers and others motivated by an uncurbed national pride as the years roll by, that Europe was a united Christian continent ready to fight for the Cross with Malta in the forefront taking the full brunt of the battle to save Europe

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(2) C. PETRIE, *Philip II of Spain*, England, 1963, p. 121.

(3) E. BRADFORD, *The Great Siege*, London, 1961, p. 43. See also S.N. FISHER, *o.c.*, Vol. 22, p. 544.

(4) PETRIE, *o.c.*, *l.c.*

(5) *Ib.*

(6) *Ib.*, p. 123-124.

from Ottoman domination, is far, very far, from being historically correct to say the least (7).

Soliman was strong enough on land and on the sea to by-pass Malta and attack the underbelly of Europe as in fact he did on many occasions — the southern part of Italy, Sicily and other islands in the Mediterranean had suffered from Turkish invasions on many occasions. In alliance with France he attacked Northern Italy in 1536. He defeated a combined Venetian and Habsburg fleet off the coast of Greece in 1538. In addition he had every harbour and all the resources of North Africa at his disposal to use whenever he deemed fit.

However, in those days of difficult and sometimes near impossible means of communications, Soliman toyed with the idea of having a base equi-distant between Turkey and Spain. He was well informed by spies about Philip's difficult commitments in Germany and the precarious political situation in the Netherlands fomented against Spain by Protestant England. As part of his expansionist policy, Soliman realized the necessity of securing his sea communications if he were to be successful in the Western Mediterranean.

For many years, the Crescent and the Cross were at grips for the possession of the far western part of North Africa. The battle swayed backward and forward, fortune smiling first on one contestant and then on the other as it did four centuries after. In 1565 Spain was victorious in a sea battle (8), and this fact could have decided Soliman to secure an advance base. He controlled his sea communications in the Middle and the Eastern Mediterranean, and in alliance with the North African corsairs and the French fleets stationed at Toulon and Marseilles, he hoped to dominate the Western Mediterranean and attack both the Spanish mainland and the Balearics before moving further north from the west. From among the potential bases, he opted for Malta.

Why did Soliman take this decision? Until Turkish archives and other sources are studied and historical research carried out on modern scientific lines on this subject, I am not in a position to state with assurance. Until then I submit that the same system used by opposing generals during war may, to some extent, be profitably adopted.

For example, before the Battle of Alamein in October, 1942, and again before the Battle of Caen in June, 1944, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery had already studied Field Marshal Rommel's character and war record, and on the basis of this knowledge plus other information he had from Intelligence, Montgomery could, more or less, appreciate how Rommel would react in a stated situation (9).

Soliman's war record proves that he was mostly on the offensive (10). His whole strategy and tactics were principally based on battles of attrition. He did not hesitate to call diplomacy to his aid to attain his aim and he planned accor-

(7) W.H. PRESCOTT, *History of the Reign of Philip II, King of Spain*, translated into Maltese by G. VASSALLO, Malta, 1903, p. 185. See also S. LASPINA, *Outlines of Maltese History*, Malta, 1943, p. 113.

(8) PETRIE, *o.c.*, p. 127.

(9) L. PHILLIPS, *Alamein*, London 1962, p. 382. See also C. WILMOT, *The Struggle for Europe*, London, 1954, p. 341.

(10) J. PIRENNE, *The Tides of History*, London, 1963, Vol. 2, pp. 389-92, 557.

dingly. Neither did he fail to probe for weak spots in his enemy's armour. Therefore, it is highly probably that the principal factors which may have influenced him in favour of Malta were:

Firstly, the island is ideally situated in the centre of the Mediterranean. It could be converted into an advance base not only for himself but also for the eastern part of North Africa. It would also be easier for him to despatch units of his fleet to help France from Malta than from Constantinople, while the island would serve as a point of assembly for or to repair and replenish the Turkish and French fleets should the need arise.

Secondly, the island has good harbours. It is not large like Sicily and therefore easier to defend. It is not too small like the Lipari Islands nor too barren and rocky like Pantellaria. It is not too close to the European mainland nor too far away from North Africa.

Thirdly, the Order was making itself felt mostly at sea by capturing or destroying Ottoman shipping and occasionally attacking North African harbours.

Fourthly, Soliman was well-informed by spies about the defensive, demographic and agricultural state of Malta. The fortifications were formidable but not impregnable. The population was small, between 12,000 to 20,000 men, women and children.

Soliman was getting on in years. His health was not so good and after weighing all the information he had in hand, he decided that he need not direct operations himself to capture the island — had he decided otherwise the History of Malta would have been vastly different from what it is today. He appointed his able lieutenant Mustapha Pasha at the head of a large force. Being fully aware of the fighting qualities of the members of the Order, Soliman ensured a ratio in his favour.

While the Order mustered a force of about 600 members who were the hard core, plus a total of about 8,000 to 9,000 men half of which were Maltese, Soliman launched against them from 12,000 to 20,000 men. The hard core of this Ottoman force was about 6,000 Janissaries, the greatest fighting machine created by Ottoman rulers. No Maltese historian or teacher ever disclosed the fact that the Janissaries were the sons of white Christian parents, born and bred within the confines of the Ottoman Empire.

From the age of seven these boys were taken from their parents, placed in training schools, and transformed physically and psychologically into an elite of the Ottoman army — hard as steel, trained in arms to the highest pitch, fearless, proud of their privileges, and fanatical in their convictions and loyalty to their sultan.

What was the principal factor which robbed Soliman of certain victory? In courage, in fanaticism and in first-class fighting qualities, the opposing forces were evenly matched. Even in strength, they were more or less equal for if the Turks had numbers in their favour, the Knights and Maltese had bastions as their shield.

There were several factors, but it is the conviction of the present writer that the principal factor which contributed to the Turkish defeat was a divided command. Mustapha Pasha was in command of the army. He was an efficient and experienced general. As co-commander, Soliman appointed Admiral Piali, who

was an able commander as well. Piali was also the son of Christian parents and after carving for himself a formidable reputation at sea, he married Soliman's grand-daughter and was high in the sultan's favour.

After landing in Malta, Mustapha planned to isolate the defenders by capturing Gozo, then Imdina and finally attacking Vittoriosa and Senglea from landward. Piali intervened. He insisted that Fort St. Elmo must be eliminated first so that he would have a safe anchorage in Marsamxett harbour for his fleet. There was no commander-in-chief to solve this dilemma. The result was that knowing how high was Piali in the sultan's favour, Mustapha dared not refuse with the result which I need not repeat here.

It is not my intention to recapitulate the history of the siege itself. There is one event however which I cannot in justice, fail to mention. This refers to Don Garcia de Toledo, the Spanish Viceroy, who was no coward or nincompoop although painted as such by Maltese authors for delaying to send troops to relief Malta. He could not do so firstly, because he was expecting a Turkish invasion of Sicily. Secondly, he had no troops to spare as his whole force was inadequate to carry out an invasion of Malta by sea. Thirdly, because he could not send any troops in such circumstances unless on the specific orders of his Emperor (11).

Amongst other factors, denigration of the Spanish Viceroy is a typical example as to how contemporary authors including those of the Order and others later in the century loaded their narrative of the siege to glamourise the Order's achievement out of perspective. Not one of them refers to the warm letter of congratulations from Philip II of Spain to Garcia de Toledo for assembling the relieve force which was the principal factor for the lifting of the siege.

When the Turkish force retired from Malta in September, 1565, the Ottoman Empire had not suffered a crippling defeat. True enough, by failing to capture the island, Soliman had failed to dominate the Western Mediterranean, but it is also true that Malta had not saved Europe from Ottoman incursions but only won a short respite. Soliman had lost a battle but had not lost the war. He and his successors had an unlimited store of manpower to build more ships and to man them and so remained a serious menace to Christendom.

It was after the Turks had captured Cyprus in 1571 and ravaged the Venetian coast that Spain and Venice entered into an alliance to combat the Ottoman menace to the mainland of Europe and in the Mediterranean as by this time the Turks had built a fleet of over 200 fighting vessels. The Christian allies gave the command of their combined fleet which was made up mainly of Spanish and Venetian warships, to Don Juan of Austria, the illegitimate son of Charles V of Spain and half brother of Philip II.

At the Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, a larger Turkish fleet, comprising 275 galleys, than the Christian (202) was annihilated and Ottoman naval power was broken to such an extent that it never recovered (12). In this

(11) PETRIE, *o.c.*, p. 128.

(12) "Under Don John of Austria, a combined Spanish, Papal, Venetian and Genoese fleet of 202 vessels attacked a Turkish force estimated at 275 galleys off the Curzolari Islands and inflicted upon it a defeat from which Turkish naval power never recovered" — *Concise Encyclopedia*, Hammerton, London, p. 861. See also FISHER, p. 544, and PIRENNE, p. 540.

battle it is worthwhile recording that nine galleys in Don Juan's fleet flew the Order's flag — three galleys belonged to the Order of St. John, one galley belonged to Gill d'Andrada, a Knight of the Order, and five galleys belonged to wealthy Maltese who armed and manned them at their expense.

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In writing this brief paper, my intention is purely to place this event in Malta's history in its proper historical perspective as objectively as I can fully conscious of the outcry I will cause against me in so doing and of the many efforts to contradict me.

My aim is certainly not to denigrate Malta's achievement as one may think but simply to prove that historical facts cannot be twisted at will. The rising and future generations of Maltese children should not be brought up on warped historical concepts to inflate national pride by failing to admit our limitations. Throughout its history, Malta was never in a position, financial or economic, to wage a war and win it solely by its own effort without the assistance of a strong foreign power.

In the 16th century, Malta was an important outpost in the defence line of Europe. It was by-passed by Soliman before the siege and after the siege just as General MacArthur by-passed a large number of islands in the Pacific in his plan to defeat Japan during the Second World War. Europe's seaboard was still exposed to attack by the Turks after the Siege of Malta. The Christian nations were divided and at war with each other. A common Christian front was non-existent. Malta's great effort gained time for some of the European nations to come to their senses, form an alliance and deliver their decisive blow at Lepanto.