

The Police and the June 1919 events (Part 2)



British troops in Strade Reale.



The funeral of the first three victims.



Laying of wreaths where Manwel Attard and Ġużeppi Bajada were killed.



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The incidents of the morning of June 8 were trivial compared to what had happened the previous day. However, in the afternoon the situation worsened. At about 4.30pm a crowd gathered in front of the Main Guard in Palace Square and a man haranguing the crowd told the soldiers to give up their arms. The officer in command, however, managed to calm down the demonstrators, and they moved on.

The crowd then went near the Union Club since it was being rumoured that some members were throwing coins at the crowd. This provoked the crowd to break the windows of the club, and a party of Royal Marines was called as a backup but they were soon withdrawn at the request of a police inspector.

During the Sunday demonstration, it was common talk that the millers would be attacked that day and when the people began gathering in front of Colonel John Francia's house in Strada Reale, opposite the Opera House, he immediately sought police and military protection. At about 6pm some rioters attacked Francia's residence, and although a 100-strong detachment from the Royal Malta Artillery was present, Francia's house was wrecked. The Maltese soldiers took little or no action to stop them.

Another detachment was sent to protect Francia's property but the wrecking and looting continued. Eventually, Major Dunbar Vella stated that he had received orders to protect Francia's house and to arrest the people who might come out of the house.

At 7.30pm, 140 marines and seamen were sent to Francia's house with instructions to clear Strada Reale. Captain Trewby, RN, instructed his men not to fire without orders. When the seamen arrived near Francia's residence, Carmelo Abela of Valletta was calling his son to get out of the house. Abela was ordered to move on by one of the seamen but he did not budge. It was said that when two marines tried to arrest him, Abela resisted them and he was stabbed in the belly with a bayonet. He was taken to the Central Hospital, where he died on June 16.

In a few minutes, Colonel Francia's house and Strada Reale were cleared and there were no further disturbances in Valletta. But the demonstrators were far from satisfied, and at about 8.30pm about 700 people gathered near Hamrun parish church and proceeded to attack the house of another miller, Luigi Farrugia.

About 15 policemen from Valletta were sent to guard Farrugia's residence and mill, but they failed to arrive, and the rioters were dispersed by Royal Air Force personnel armed with machine-guns who were on their way to protect the Lieutenant-Governor's house in Hamrun.



British troops in Strade Reale.

The rioters, mostly from Qormi, later returned near Farrugia's residence and ransacked the place. Wholesale looting was also carried out but when it was rumoured that marines were about to search premises in Hamrun for stolen cereals, most of the looters threw away the loot in the field known as Tal-Fatati, where the Lyceum now stands.

On June 10, the new Governor, Lord Plumer, arrived in Malta. He had not been told of what might await him at sea until he received a wireless message from the acting Governor, advising him to delay landing because of several riots.

Valletta was paralysed by the time Plumer decided to land. He refused any protection as he was driven from the Customs House to the Palace through a crowd, telling the driver to drive at walking pace.

On arrival at Palace Square he left his car and walked through a crowd of 2,000-strong to inquire about the guards that should have greeted him. The crowd parted before him and he came upon two wreaths on the ground where two Maltese had died. The guard had been hidden among the crowd.

The Governor ordered the wreaths to be removed and inspected the guard. Then he entered the Palace courtyard and when he saw a large body of 200 sailors, he immediately ordered all to leave except 20 to remain on duty. He then ordered all the troops to barracks, imposed censorship in the press, and ordered the arrest of the rioters.

On June 13, Lord Plumer issued a proclamation stating he was deeply concerned to find on his arrival that a serious state of disorder had existed for some days. He reminded all citizens that it was their duty to assist him and the authorities to protect life and property and maintain order.

A court-martial met at the Valletta Gymnasium on July 2, and 32 men were charged with tumultuous

assembly, and 14 of them also with wilful damages and other charges. Eight were acquitted and the others received prison sentences varying from nine months to 20 years.

Ganni Miller (Il-Hembet) from Senglea was sentenced to 15 months and Salvo Bartolo (Il-Bosju) from Cospicua to 20 years. Those charged with theft before the criminal court were also given prison sentences. These, however, were later remitted by the Governor.

"Although a 100-strong detachment from the RMA was present, Francia's house was wrecked"

After these convictions, the Governor set up a commission chaired by Judge Alfred Parnis and including two senior military officers, who came from England, and two leading citizens. The commission had to examine the circumstances in which military forces were employed to assist the police to maintain order during the June riots.

On August 18 the commission held its first meeting and a notice was also published inviting the public to provide evidence. The commission held 26 sittings and heard 150 witnesses in all. The commission's report was published on September 18, and among other things it stated that: "Evidently the Police did not appreciate the gravity of the situation and that, with the exception of a few individuals, officers, non-commissioned officers and one constable, the police force proved to be a complete failure, the men being apparently in sympathy with the mob". It was also remarked that it was unfortunate that the Navy was not employed when it was known

that the police were powerless and that there was disaffection among the men.

Moreover, in his report dated August 28, 1919, the newly appointed Commissioner of Police, Lt Colonel Henry Bamford, did not mince words when he referred to the June 1919 events.

In his report which was laid on the table of the Council of Government, Bamford stated: "I submit that Malta is today policed by an inefficient force, which, as recent events have proved, is useless and expensive in times of emergency." Bamford concluded by saying that in those days the wrong type of men were recruited in the Police Force and that these men were illiterate, without training, and thus inefficiency was the inevitable result.

The commission was not satisfied with the reasons given by the acting commissioner for not making use at the outset of the mounted police, and said the reasons given were unacceptable. At that time the mounted police consisted of only seven horses, six of them very old, and the police stables were in Valletta. On account of the war, horses were difficult to obtain and their price had increased considerably.

It was also remarked that: "The fact that nobody was prosecuted for the acts of violence committed by the demonstrators on February last on the occasion of the first meeting of the National Assembly naturally encourages the mob to greater violence on June 7 and 8. Further, the mob was certain that it would not be interfered with the police owing to the unrest in the force and their inclination to go on strike."

The reason for this police inefficiency lay in the fact that since 1904 members of the force had aired their complaint about a wage rise, and in January 1905 they were promised a wage revision. The matter dragged on for many years, and although during World War I a war bonus was



The monument in St George's Square, Valletta.



The monument for the four victims at the Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery.

(Concluded. The first part of this article was published in last Sunday's edition.)