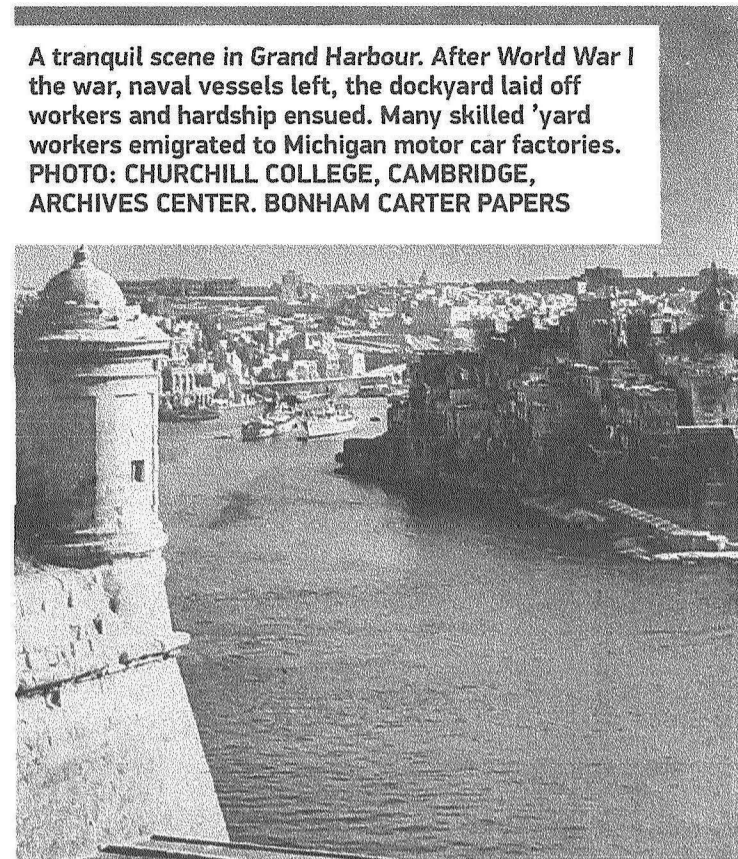


World War I Royal Navy battleships in Grand Harbour. The naval base was active throughout the war and dockyard employment nearly doubled. British, French and Japanese naval vessels used the harbours and crews went ashore for recreation. PHOTO: CHURCHILL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, ARCHIVES CENTER. BONHAM CARTER PAPERS



A tranquil scene in Grand Harbour. After World War I the war, naval vessels left, the dockyard laid off workers and hardship ensued. Many skilled 'yard workers emigrated to Michigan motor car factories. PHOTO: CHURCHILL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, ARCHIVES CENTER. BONHAM CARTER PAPERS

Leo Amery's visit to Malta in

BRIAN BLOUET

Author of *The Story of Malta, 7th edition, 2017, and the forthcoming Malta and Britain, MidSea Books*



In 1919, as diplomats in Paris were working on treaties with defeated Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey, life was stressful in Malta.

At first sight, it appeared that Malta's economy benefitted from World War I. The naval base was active throughout the war and dockyard employment nearly doubled. British, French and Japanese naval vessels utilised the harbours and crews went ashore for recreation. The island economy expanded rapidly.

Then the reality emerges. Economic expansion led to inflation, wages in the civil service and at the dockyard, the biggest employer, did not keep pace. Because Malta was in a war zone, maritime insurance rates increased hugely, inflating grain prices. Malta's importers and flour millers had no control over insurance costs but were blamed for bread price increases, which heavily impacted living costs.

At war's end, naval vessels left, the Royal Navy dockyard laid off workers, wages were stagnant and hardship hardened. There were different ways to cope. Many skilled dockyard workers emigrated to Michigan motor car factories. Detroit still has a Maltese community.

As a result of rising prices and unemployment, there were riots on June 7, 1919. Such riots were common in post-war Europe. In comparative terms one was better off in Valletta than Vienna,

where the food shortages and killings were prolonged.

When the seriousness of the Malta situation was understood, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Milner, dispatched his Undersecretary of State, Leo S. Amery, to the islands to seek remedies.

Leo Amery, MP, had served in the British Cabinet Secretariat in World War I, organising agenda, taking minutes, and writing position papers on strategic issues. He was at the cabinet core of policy making. Lord Milner, who brought Amery into the Cabinet Secretariat, had faith in his undersecretary's ability to see problems and find solutions.

"Amery's most important task was overseeing the drafting of a new constitution for Malta"

Amery and his wife, 'B', left Britain on August 22, 1919, aboard the *Lancashire*, carrying troops to Palestine. As the vessel was not scheduled to stop at Valletta, a launch took them ashore. After passing through customs, Amery and his wife went to Verdala Palace to stay with Governor Plumer.

Each morning, Amery went to the Palace of the Grand Masters, in Valletta, to meet with a range of people. In Volume Two of his 1953 autobiography, *My Political Life* (pp.193-194), Amery concluded: "It soon became clear to me, not only that the financial situation both of the Malta Government and of the people was desperate, but that the Imperial Government



In World War I, Leo Amery did intelligence work and served in the Cabinet Secretariat. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Right: After the war, Amery was Under Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, becoming Colonial Secretary. For a decade he oversaw Malta's affairs. PHOTOS: CHURCHILL ARCHIVES CENTRE THE PAPERS OF LEOPOLD AMERY - AMEL 10/1/1.



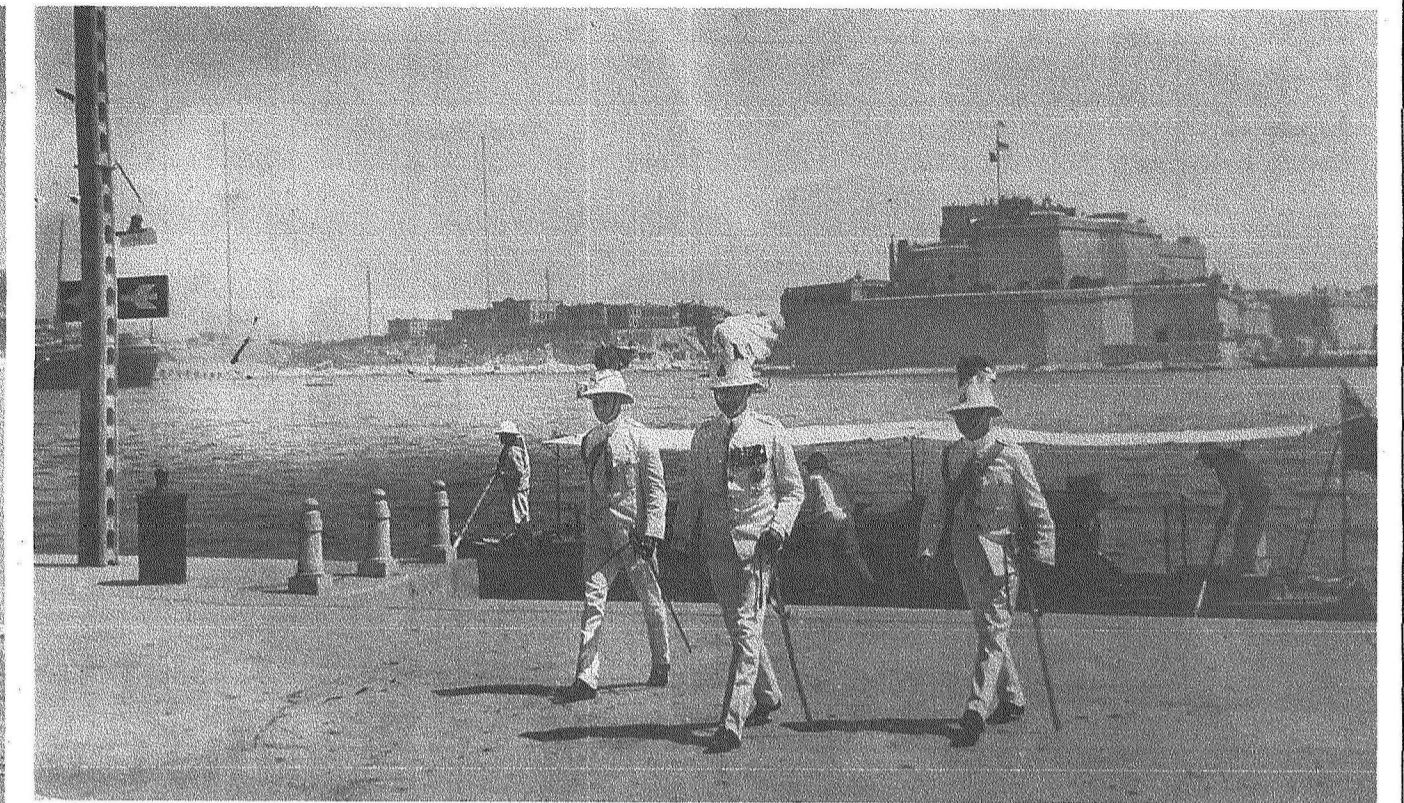
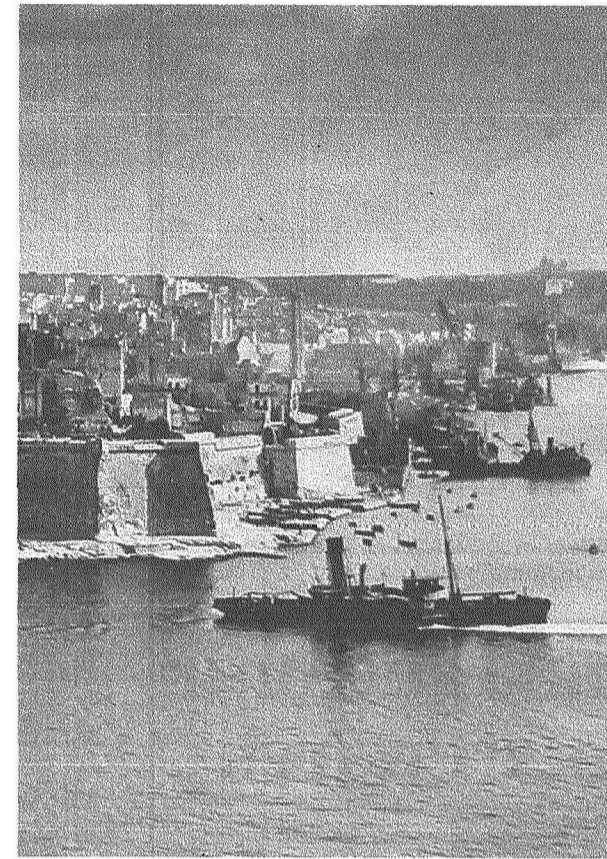
was directly to blame. The Services had annexed for their use lands and buildings belonging to the civil government for which they should have paid some £45,000 a year in rent."

Further, dockyard works in wartime had been "scandalously underpaid", subsisting on overtime and food handouts. Amery saw... "The impossibility of dealing with the financial and economic situation unless the political situation was dealt with at the same time. A fresh start in politics is an essential condition for a fresh start in the economic field."

Governor Plumer agreed. The Colonial Office was urged to provide funds. Lord Milner got the cabinet to grant a quarter of a million pounds to Malta's civil treasury. Then Amery got to work with Filippo Scerberras (later Sir Filippo) on a

new constitution giving full internal self-government. There were to be two spheres, an imperial sphere controlling defence and international affairs, and a Maltese parliament with full control of Malta's internal governance.

There was to be 32-member Legislative Assembly, and a Senate composed largely of people representing special interest groups, including the Church, nobility, chamber of commerce, the trade union council and university graduates. Amery greatly enjoyed his 1919 visit to Malta, including a trip to Gozo, which he recorded in his diary, now deposited with his papers at the Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge. The Gozo outing, "coincided with a great banquet" the Gozitans were giving, "for Sir Michaelangelo Refalo, who had been promoted



British officers in uniform at the Customs House, Lascaris Wharf, Valletta. Parades were part of British pageantry in the 1920s and 1930s. PHOTO: CHURCHILL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, ARCHIVES CENTER. BONHAM CARTER PAPERS

1919

to the post of Chief of Justice, and Arturo Mercieca elevated to Crown Advocate". A launch took Amery from Malta to Mgarr where he was met by Refalo and Judge Cremona. A fine dinner and a moonlit walk around Victoria followed.

The next morning, Amery called upon the Bishop of Gozo before a great lunch to celebrate Refalo's elevation to Chief Justice. Amery was expected to speak. Refalo told Amery that many luncheon guests would not understand English. Amery, a linguist, offered to speak in Italian.

The Gozitans present at lunch were enjoying the equivalent of a Scottish St Andrews event, where the Scots enjoy stories illustrating their superiority over the English.

The Gozitans were proclaiming their prominence in the archipelago. Amery joined the spirit of the occasion, announcing that everyone in Whitehall understood that Malta was a dependency of Gozo!

Amery then embellished his speech when he, "threw in a couple of Maltese proverbs, not my own invention or rather adapted from the Arabic". The speech was approvingly enjoyed by many priests, doctors and lawyers at the luncheon.

After the banquet came a visit to the *fešta* at Xaghra to be welcomed by the parish priest, who offered biscuits and whisky before a visit to the fine, beautifully situated, village church. Then to the great archeological site of Ġgantija.

Amery was greatly enjoying his visit to the islands and, on return to Malta, he visited Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, St John's Co-cathedral, the Mosta dome, the archeological museum and other places.

After Amery left Malta, he kept working to advance the islands' interests. As a member of the Rhodes Trust, he got



An old photo of Mgarr Harbour. Amery greatly enjoyed his 1919 visit to Malta, including a trip to Gozo. After he left Malta, he kept working to advance the islands' interests. PHOTO: CHURCHILL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, ARCHIVES CENTER. BONHAM CARTER PAPERS

Malta included in the Rhodes scholarship scheme. He talked with two commercial shipbuilders about the possibility of starting operations in Malta, but it is likely that the Admiralty would be unenthusiastic about such an idea.

Amery's most important task was overseeing the drafting of a new constitution for Malta and making two governmental

spheres: defence and foreign affairs run by imperial authorities, and internal affairs run by Malta's elected politicians. Any disputes between the spheres were to be referred to London. Between 1921 and 1927, the number of referrals were tiny. The constitution included many of the ideas developed by Scerberras but had to pass through the parliament at Westminster.

Amery did insert one of his own ideas... proportional representation.

Amery succeeded Lord Milner as Colonial Secretary in 1924, recording with pride how few issues were referred to London under the constitution. To the disappointment of Amery, the 1921 constitution was suspended, and then abandoned in the political turmoil of the 1930s.