

# How a Maltese worker sparked a riot and a massacre

Part 9

'Blue-water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800'

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Of course, if Malta were ever to be in a state of siege, the cooperation of the local population was absolutely essential. It was to guarantee such co-operation that a new, slightly expanded Constitution was introduced into Malta in 1887, designed to involve elected members more closely in formulating the details of financial legislation.

To this extent it built on the "Cardwell principle", introduced by Lord Cardwell back in the 1860s. Yet this Constitution never worked from the start. What elected members wanted was to be able to decide, or at least participate in deciding, money matters, and this was not at all the official intention.

A cycle became established through the 1890s whereby deadlock gripped the Council of Government; elected members resigned when they felt their views were held in contempt; new elections were held – usually after prolonged delays – in which the anti-riformisti or partito nazionale and partito popolare as these factions became labelled, were returned, often without contest and government was subsequently carried on under the Governor's prerogative.

In this manner, "the ghost of the official majority" never really went away, while a sense of paralysis came to surround the constitutional machinery.

One effect was to lead many Maltese to see no point in voting at all, so that although anti-government candidates invariably won elections, they did so on the basis of very depleted polls. Deciphering what the Maltese really wanted for themselves was to remain an enigma, for the Maltese themselves as well as the British, right up to the 1960s.

These issues came gradually to a head under Joseph Chamberlain's prolonged Colonial Secretaryship after 1895. In March 1899, in what one historian describes as "a spark applied to the powder magazine", the Govern-

ment Gazette in Valletta announced that in 15 years' time English would replace Italian in Malta's law courts.

This created a storm not only in Malta, but also in the Italian Parliament, which hitherto had steered discreetly clear of Maltese questions: an attempt was being made, it was alleged, to eradicate Italian in the only British colony where it was widely used.

Chamberlain's subsequent visit to the Mediterranean did not soothe matters. He arrived on HMS Caesar on 18 November 1900, with British warships illuminated in the Grand Harbour. Chamberlain's horse-carriage – the first motor cars were yet to appear in the island – took him along streets lined with crowds seeking to catch a glimpse of the imperial statesman and finally through the Porta Reale into Valletta itself.

Amid his busy schedule, including the inspection of the new harbour works and torpedo defences, and attending a Te Deum in St John's Cathedral, the Colonial Secretary allocated a brief space to a meeting with the elected members of the Council.

Chamberlain proceeded to tell Fortunato Mizzi and his colleagues that he could unfortunately hold out no expectation that their aspirations could ever be met and that the language ordinance would stay. Mizzi replied by saying that what had been said was very painful and that the Maltese felt themselves to be slaves.

The Colonial Secretary, fixing a glance on Mizzi's highly polished and portly figure, then said that he did not look much like a slave to him. So it was that the English and their Maltese opponents habitually sniped at each other.

Subsequently matters turned more in Mizzi's favour when the Maltese language ordinance attracted criticism at Westminster and was discreetly withdrawn in the King's Speech on 28 January 1902.

But Chamberlain's climb-down over language did not solve the constitutional matter. The Colonial Secretary was bent on suspending outright the system introduced in 1887, though he

felt such an action might have the optimal effect "by coming on them (the Mizzi faction) unawares".

Afterwards an intention was formed to make a sudden announcement of the closure of the Constitution. This could not be done before the new King, Edward VII, made his planned visit to Malta in April 1903 – the first of those Mediterranean tours, usually aboard the royal yacht *Victoria and Albert* that were to be a feature of the new reign.

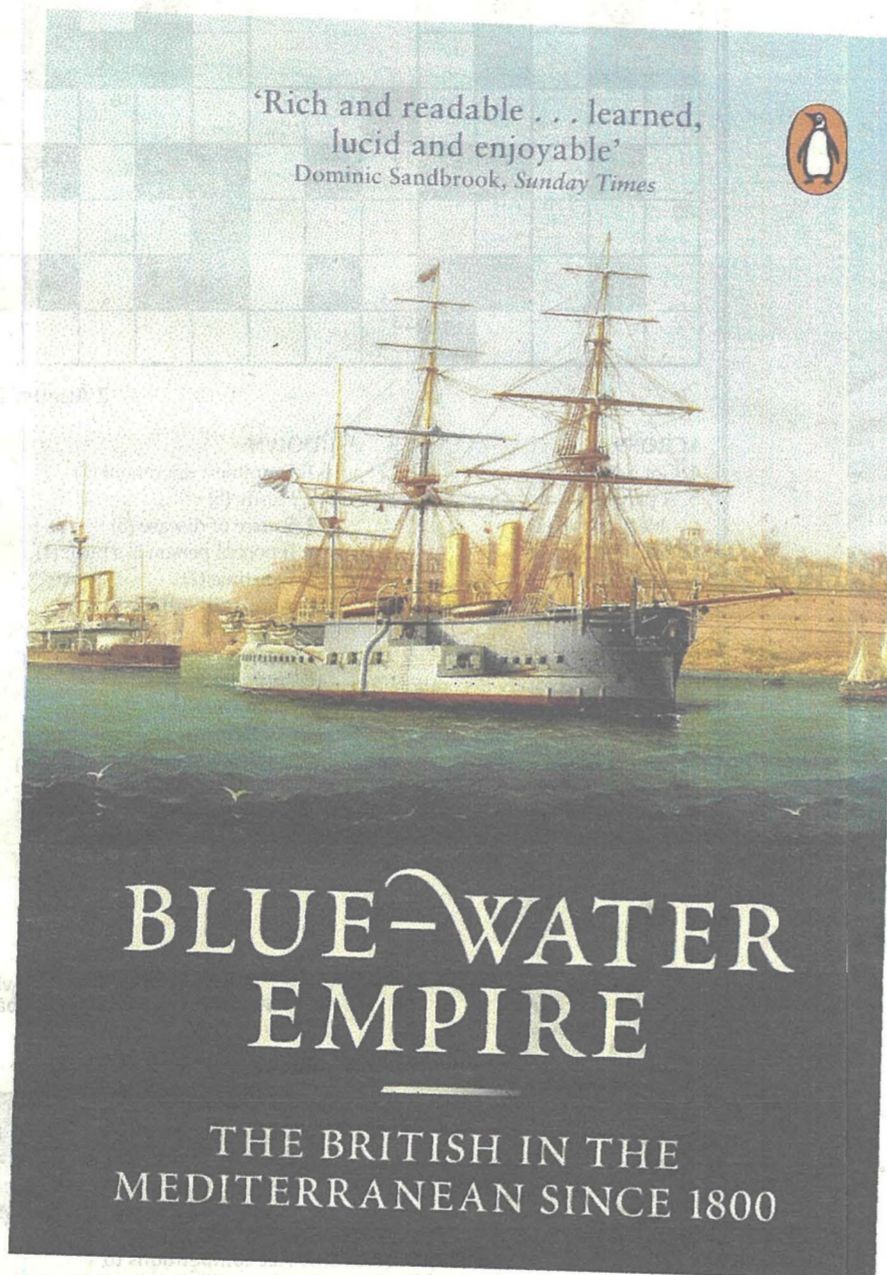
Large crowds turned out in welcome and the King opened a new breakwater across the Grand Harbour. The following June the Colonial Secretary announced the abolition of the Constitution on the grounds of inoperability. Malta was left essentially in the status it had last occupied in 1849. In what became an oft-quoted dispatch to Governor Grenfell, Chamberlain stated that henceforth as a matter of principle "the island was held primarily as a great fortress".

This Anglo and imperialised vision of Malta was by no means divorced from realities. When a French writer, Rene Pichon, published a survey of the British Mediterranean in 1904, he observed that if the British left Malta the following day they would leave nothing behind except for some forts, a racecourse and a few tennis courts.

But this was very far from being true even then. Pichon's biting sarcasm towards British aloofness was characteristic of a Gallic critique throughout much of the Mediterranean. In fact, one-third of wage-earners in Malta were directly employed by the British and many more indirectly, and any British departure would have affected these people deeply.

By the early 1900s an English imprint was to be found at many levels of Maltese society, and royal visitations and nomenclature provided a means of expressing that attachment. The growth of what became a unique Maltese institution, the band club, and of colourful *festas partiti* in towns and villages, testifies to this.

The "La Stella" club changed its name in 1893 to the Prince of Wales, and later on to The King's Own and it became common for such clubs to adopt royal British titles, still extant in the 21st century. Although these often reflected a tendency to oppose



established authority, the particular establishment targeted was generally not British and colonial, but those local elites who wore their bourgeois Italianism on their sleeve.

It was already possible for a rising young politician, Gerald (later Baron) Strickland – the son of a Maltese noblewoman and a Royal Navy captain – to make his way expressing the belief that the Maltese should become as thoroughly English as possible. Strickland's increasing vitriol along these lines, stoking up controversy, led the Colonial Office to lure him away for some years to the West Indies and Australia as a colonial Governor, though he was to have a long and stormy career ahead of him in Maltese politics.

Since French assessments of the British in the Mediterranean usually had at least a glimmer of truth, Rene Pichon nonetheless

caught something by pinpointing the mobility of sentiment among the Maltese during the war in South Africa. He observed that the relief of the siege of Ladysmith (February 1900) could be greeted with genuinely popular and even "imperial" enthusiasm, but that whenever more British soldiers and sailors crammed into the island tensions – the result of what even the British Admiralty called "an overdose" – would rise to the surface.

Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1912 drew radical conclusions. He was already at odds with naval traditionalists and his emphasis on the need to concentrate on fighting a war against Germany on land would make him more so.

His view threatened to reduce the navy's role to that of a mere escort of troopships. In this per-

spective, the Mediterranean Fleet became an actual encumbrance.

On 15 June 1912 Churchill argued at Cabinet that "the Malta squadron can do great good at home and no good where it is. It would be both wrong and futile to leave the present battle squadron at Malta to keep up appearances. It would be a bluff that would deceive nobody. The influence and authority of the Mediterranean Fleet is going to cease, not because of the withdrawal of the Malta battleships, but because of the (imminent) completion of the Italian and Austrian Dreadnoughts".

In the light of Churchill's later obsession with the Mediterranean as the optimal place for British warfare, all this is highly ironic.

But his views in 1912 did not lack for fierce critics in sections of the navy, the Foreign Office, Parliament and the Conservative press. Churchill would have been happy to leave Malta to hold out with three months' supply against some sudden descent by an enemy, or to rely on a torpedo flotilla to protect Alexandria, but others dissented passionately.

Defenceless Cyprus, on this basis, would be left to any foreign force which happened to pass by. If to Churchill the Mediterranean offered only the appearance of power, to others appearances were what power was all about.

It was pointed out that the very presence of the Royal Navy was at the root of British diplomatic and moral authority in the Mediterranean. Once abandoned, Italy would be thrown completely into the arms of Germany and Austria.

All these issues came to the fore when a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence was, unusually, convened overseas to discuss them.

This took place in Valletta in July 1912. Prime Minister Asquith and Churchill travelled there on the Admiralty yacht *Enchantress* and Kitchener was invited from Cairo.

"Looking quite splendid, Mrs Asquith, also a guest on the *Enchantress*, commented on Kitchener's appearance, treble life size but dressed as a civilian in a Homburg hat".

A compromise resulted in which any wholesale naval evacuation of the Mediterranean was rejected, and several cruiser squadrons were ordered to re-

main in these waters during hostilities. The general principle of concentrating battleships in the North Sea was nevertheless agreed (leading to the effective marooning of the main British battle fleet for the best part of 1914-18).

The maintenance of the Malta dockyard was confirmed, to the relief of the Maltese themselves, since so many of their livelihoods were at stake.

The fortifications of Alexandria were also to be improved – the first hint of an expansion of the British military presence in Egypt, though its future scale could not have been predicted.

On the way home, Asquith and Churchill stopped at Gibraltar and provided similar assurances to those for Malta. "We cannot recede from our position as a great Mediterranean naval power," was how Churchill somewhat reluctantly summed up the outcome of these debates.

War broke out between Austria-Hungary and Serbia on 28 July 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Rear-Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, head of the German battleship squadron including the battle-cruiser *Goeben* and the light cruiser *Breslau*, promptly moved his ships out into the Mediterranean to avoid being trapped in the narrow waters of the Adriatic.

At dawn on 4 August, with German troops flooding into Belgium, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* bombarded the Algerian ports of Philippeville and Bone – the first shots fired in the Mediterranean during the war.

The British and French naval leaderships huddled in the Admiralty in London and agreed that the British fleet in the Mediterranean should be reduced to a combination of light armoured cruisers and destroyers under the overall authority of a French Commander-in-Chief.

Churchill recalled in *The World Crisis* (1923) how at that tense moment Fisher, now back once again as First Sea Lord, accompanied by the Chief of Admiralty Staff, came into his office with the French admirals in tow, having completed their operational decisions.

Churchill recalled: "They were fine figures in uniform and very grave. One felt in actual contact with these French officers, how truly the crisis was life and

death for France. They spoke of basing the French fleet on Malta – that same Malta for which we had fought Napoleon for so many years, which was indeed the very pretext of the renewal of war in 1803. *Malte ou la guerre*. Little did the Napoleon of St Helena dream that in her most desperate need France would have at her disposal the great Mediterranean base which his strategic instinct had deemed vital. I said to the Admirals, "Use Malta as your own as if it were Toulon".

The reference to Malta in this classic Churchillian conceit framed in historical terms was suggestive in relation to the strategic pantheon of British Mediterranean possessions.

Churchill could never have invited the French to use Gibraltar as their own in such a manner, not only because of its indispensability, but because the symbolism of the Rock in the English public mind prevented it being shared with anyone.

Nor would Churchill have thought of inviting the French admirals to use Cyprus as their own since it could have offered them nothing of note.

In fact the French navy was to find the welcome it received in Valletta much more qualified than Churchill suggested, and it became even more so as the war went on. But this lay in the future.

On 12 August the French fleet duly entered the Grand Harbour. It did so early in the morning, welcomed by many spectators on the surrounding bastions, civic bands playing and a throng of Allied flags held aloft.

But these French warships did not arrive, as many had in the Crimean conflict, merely on British sufferance. They did so as constituent parts of overall French command in the Mediterranean.

A vivid recollection of what this meant, at least in theory, used to be borne out in what used to be the National Art Gallery of Malta, formerly the British naval headquarters in South Street, Valletta. The gleaming white marble staircase remains, and at its top there were two engraved boards providing a complete list of Commanders-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet.

This recalls the resounding names of Hood, Vincent, Keith, Nelson and Collingwood, but at one point the sequence is intriguingly interrupted: "August 1914 July 1917 post suspended".