

The French Period in Malta:
Can. Giacchino Bertis (1765-1843)

by Dr. A. Bonnici

A Sa Majesté Napoléon le Grand Empereur
des François, Roi d'Italie, Protecteur de la Confédération
du Rhin, Médiateur de la Suisse, etc. etc. etc.

Sire.

Le Chanoine Bertis, né à Malthe, prisonnier de guerre sur parole à Verdun, a l'honneur d'exposer très respectueusement à Votre Majesté qu'à l'époque de la conquête faite par vos Armées de l'Île de Malthe, toute sa famille manifesta son attachement au gouvernement François, et lui rendit d'important services par les différents emplois occupés par ses frères, l'un en qualité de président de la Municipalité de l'Est, et l'autre comme chef de brigade de la garde nationale dans la même division de la Cité de Malthe.

À l'époque de la Capitulation de cette Île tous ses parents, frères, sœurs, beaux-frères, et neveux abandonnant maison, fortune et patrie, ont suivi la garnison en France, sur d'y trouver asyle et protection, et d'y partager les bienfaits dont jouissent les sujets de Votre Majesté Impériale et Royale.

L'exposant, après avoir beaucoup souffert pendant les deux années de blocus, sans être sorti de la Vallette, resté seul, privé des secours de sa famille, exposé aux persécutions par motif d'opinion de ses parents, fut obligé d'avoir recours à la protection du nouveau

Vous;

4

Gouvernement par le quel il fut chargé d'exercer les fonctions
d'Aumonier dans le Régiment Royal Malthe qu'on forma alors,
et de le suivre en Sicile, de là à Capri, ou il fut fait prisonnier
de guerre par les Armes de Votre Majesté.

L'Espérant, ayant toujours tenu une conduite régulière pendant
le blocus de Malthe, ainsi que depuis le temps de sa Captivité
en France, Ecclesiastique et non combattant, âgé de 58. ans,
tourmenté continuellement par des douleurs rhumatismales,
se prosterna au pied du Trône de Votre Majesté, en ose la
supplier de lui accorder la Grâce de sa liberté pour pouvoir
se rendre à Malthe sa patrie en y finir ses jours; Prace
que l'Espérant espere obtenir simplement par un Acte
de Clémence de Votre Majesté Imperiale et Royale.

Verdun sur Meuse
15. Mars. 1815.

Berthe Chanoine
prisonnier de guerre sur parole à Verdun.

Le Colonel, Comte de Beauchamp, Commandant le Dépôt Des prisonniers De
guerre anglais échappés à Verdun. Après un Député De votre Société à la commission
honorifique que le Général BERTHELOT a chargé d'organiser De guerre huparade
à continuer dans le Dépôt Des prisonniers et ceux qui y résistent, ce étranger
étranger, d'ailleurs, par sa qualité, son humanité et son rôle infatigable dans la
des fractions Des ministères, a par le comité d'Action De la Société et la Commission
des autorités civiles et militaires De cette ville.

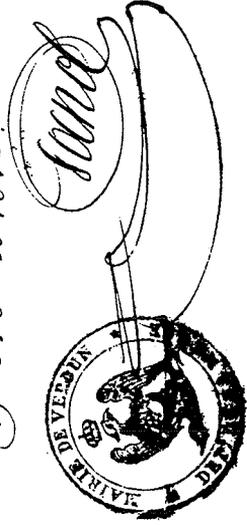
Verdun le 14. mars 1873



Le Maire de la Ville de Verdun qui

a eu en communication la présente Lettre,
entend qu'il ne peut qu'applaudir à l'opportunité
de M. de Saron de Penuchon en faveur
de M. Bertis qui depuis son séjour en cette
ville a toujours exercé des fonctions
ecclésiastiques, de la manière la plus écri-
vaine et que pour sa conduite vertueuse, il peut
compter l'estime des Autorités Civiles
et Militaires, et la Dérivation de
Arabians de Verdun.

Verdun le 11. Mars 1819.



TO HIS MAJESTY NAPOLEON, THE GREAT EMPEROR OF THE FRENCH, KING OF ITALY, PROTECTOR OF THE CONFEDERATION OF THE RHINE, MEDIATOR OF SWITZERLAND, ETC, ETC.

SIRE,

Canon Bertis, born in Malta, prisoner of war on parole at Verdun, has the honour to explain with great respect to your Majesty, that when your armies conquered the island of Malta, all his family showed their loyalty to the French Government; and rendered important services in different ways: one of his brothers as President of the East City, the other was Brigadier of the National Guard in the same division of the City of Malta. At the time of the surrender of this island, all his parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and nephews abandoned homes, fortune and fatherland, and followed the garrison to France, sure to find there help and asylum, and to share the benefits enjoyed by the subjects of your Imperial and Royal Majesty.

The writer underwent much suffering during the two years blockade, then he remained alone in Valletta, deprived of the help of his family, exposed to persecution because of his family's behaviour and views; he was forced to seek the protection of the new Government which ordered him to carry out the duties of Almoner in the Royal Malta Regiment recently formed, to follow it to Sicily, from there to Capri, where he was taken prisoner by your Majesty's forces.

The writer always had a good record of behaviour during the blockade of Malta, as well as during his captivity in France; he is an ecclesiastic and non-combatant, aged 53, in continual pain from rheumatism; he kneels at the foot of your Majesty's Throne and dares to beg for the grace of his liberty, so as to be able to return to Malta his homeland and to finish his days there; grace that he hopes to obtain simply by an act of Mercy from your Imperial Majesty.

Verdun sur Meuse
13th March 1813

Canon Bertis
p.o.w. on parole at VERDUN

Col Baron de Beauchesne, Commander of the camp for English prisoners of war at Verdun, has a duty to acknowledge the honourable conduct of the good Canon Bertis, Maltese POW on parole, after three and a half years at this camp. Besides, this distinguished foreigner, by his piety, his humanity and his untiring enthusiasm for his duties has deserved the gratitude of the clergy and the esteem of the civil and military authorities of this town.

POW DEPOT
VERDUN

Verdun: 14th March 1813

The Mayor of the City of Verdun who has received this request certifies that he fully agrees with the recommendation of Baron de Beauchesne in favour of Mr Bertis who during his stay in the city has always carried out his ecclesiastical duties excellently and due to his excellent behaviour has won the esteem of the civil and military authorities and reverence from the people of Verdun.

Verdun

15 March, 1813

This document consists of a petition written by Can. Giacchino Bertis together with two good conduct certificates, one issued on the 14th March 1813, by Colonel Baron de Beauchese, Commander of the Camp for English prisoners of war at Verdun, and another good conduct certificate issued on the 15th March 1813, by the Mayor of Verdun, to "His Majesty Napoleon", when Can Giacchino Bertis was a prisoner of war on parole in Verdun in 1813.

This letter written on a double sheet of paper, each measuring 21x31.5cm is watermarked. The watermark consists of two very close to each other outer circles, the inner one separated 1cm away by another inner circle which encloses:

1. The French Eagle with both wings open with its head wearing a crown and facing to the right. The watermarked words in block letters read:

"DIEU PROTEGE LA FRANCE", lying between the two circles. This watermark appears on the right hand sheet, which when folded is the first sheet; and

2. The head of Napoleon looking to the right wearing a laurel leaf head band, with the watermark words in block letters reading:

"NAPOLEON LE GRAND EMPEREUR ET ROI" , lying between the two circles. This watermark appears on the left hand sheet, which when folded becomes the second sheet.

The letter is addressed to "His Majesty Napoleon, The Great Emperor of the French, King of Italy, Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, Mediator of Switzerland, etc. etc.", and signed by "BERTIS CHANOINE 12Mars 1813". The letter fills the first and second pages. On the third page is the good conduct certificate issued by Col Baron de Beauchesne, commander of the prison camp signed by him on the 14th March 1813 and bearing the official Prisoner of War Camp hand seal. On the fourth sheet there is a certificate of good conduct issued by the Mayor of Verdun on the 15th March 1813 signed by him, and bearing the official hand stamp of the Mayor.

This is a letter from a prominent Maltese Clergy personality, who lived during one of the most turbulent periods of Maltese and European history. He lived through the reign of Grand Master De Rohan – Hompesch – the French Occupation, the British Administration.

It was a period which saw Napoleon Bonapart conquering and subjugating nearly all Europe, with the exception of England and Russia, causing great suffering to many.

It was the period which saw Napoleon – Nelson – Wellington – achieve great victories at the cost of enormous human carnage. Canon Bertis lived through all this when Europe was in a convulsive state. I propose to examine the events and circumstances he mentions in his letter, which are certainly very interesting.

Portrait of Can Giacchino Bertis
by Giuseppe Calleja, Lithograph
by G. Trapani (25)

Canon Giacchino Bertis was born in Senglea on the 5th July 1765. He had started his studies in Malta, but later he proceeded to Italy to study Humanities and Philosophy, at the seminary of Montefiascone, graduating at the Sapienza in Rome as “Juris utriusque doctor”¹, returning to Malta soon after to devote his time as a cleric – “Kjerku” in the Parish Church of Senglea of Our Lady of Victory – Maria Bambina. During that period it was the practice that not all clerics were Priests – some even were married, and they were called “Kjerku”.



60 de Senglea.
 Dia u. civit. Nubij 1783.
 Ego N. Salvator Bonnici Parochus loci. Capui infra-
 Ignazius zom heri nazum, ex Francisco Barri, et Maria Anna
 Franciscus gibus, cui fuit impm nomen Ignazius, Franciscus
 loachim, loachim, Domizianus Raimundus Lacedonius, Paulus
 Domizianus Maria. Parrini fuere Dnius Raimundus second filius
 Raimundus qd'm legit, et Dna Magdalana. uxor M^{ri} Morari lo
 Lacedonius Paulus hinc Sauron de Vallo
 Betrij
 Die xxij civit

When he returned to Malta, it was the time when Canon Salv Bonnici, (A direct relative of the author), with the help of Bishop Mons Vincenzo Labini, and the approval of Grand Master de Rohan, had worked hard since 1783 to promote the Parish Church of Senglea – to a COLLEGIATE one. This was achieved on the 21st May 1786, when Pope Pius VI signed the official document “BULL”, authorising the elevation of the Parish Church of Senglea dedicated to Our Lady of Victory –

Portrait of Archpriest Salvatore Bonnici (attributed to Favray, private collection) showing him with the Papal Documents elevating the Church of Senglea to a Collegiate



Maria Bambina – to a Collegiate Church, thus becoming the third Collegiate Church in Malta (B'Kara was the first Collegiate Church established by Pope Urban VIII on 5th December 1630 during the Bishopric of Mgr Cagliares. The second St Paul's Church, Valletta, created Collegiate Church on 16th September 1733 by Pope Clement XII, under Bishop Alpheran de Bussan).²

This precious historical document on parchment paper with the Pontifical seal is preserved in the Church's archives. So Canon Dun Salv Bonnici became the First Archpriest of the new Collegiate Church, and the Collegiate Chapter was established, meeting for the first time on the 20th September 1786.³

However the post of Treasurer was missing in the new Chapter as there was no "Benefice", but Dun Anton Muscat, Parish Priest of Cospicua, and his sister Gejtana came to the rescue. They proposed to the Chapter that they would support a "Benefice" in order that a new Dignitary of Treasurer could be created. On the 21st September, the Collegiate Chapter discussed this possibility and accepted their offer.

On the 14th October 1786 Cleric Gioacchino Bertis was nominated to the post, becoming the first Treasurer of the Collegiate Chapter, occupying the sixth place in its Order of Merit. However, he could not exercise any jurisdiction on the Church property or its assets. On that same day (14th October 1786) he became a Canon appointed by the Vicar General Mons Albino Portughes.⁴

In January 1789, together with Dun Frangisk Adriano, he was nominated to study the best method and place to erect a new clock and new bells in the belfry.⁵

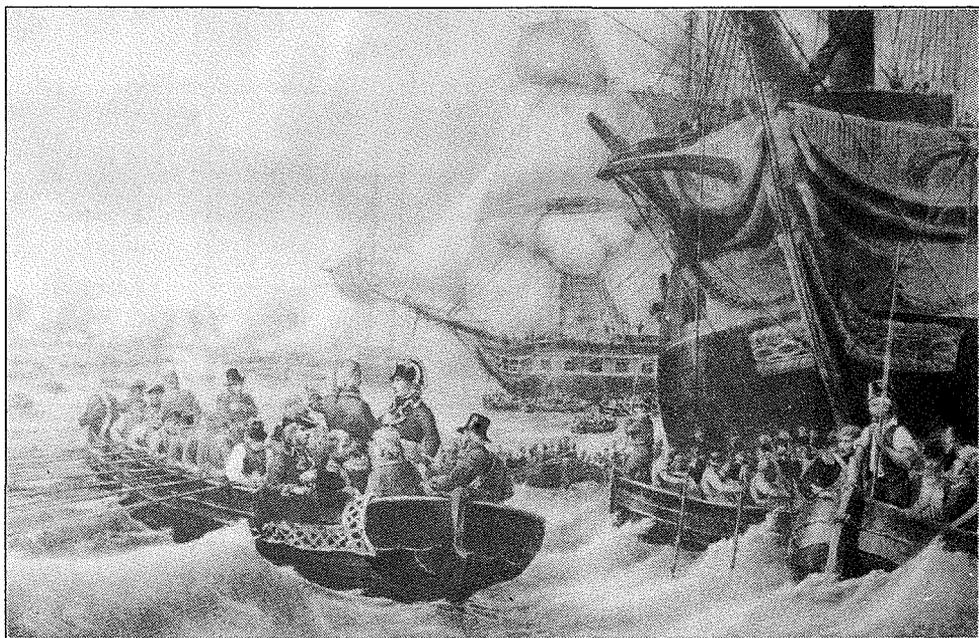
In 1805 Canon Giacchino Bertis appears as N^o 21 on the list of “Sodalità tal-Kleru”, and next to his name we find “Treasurer in the Collegiate Church of Senglea – Doctor of Theology – Confessor – Preacher”, as by this time he had established himself well as one of the greatest orators of his time and in great demand as a Confessor.⁶

Bertis says in his letter:

“when your armies conquered the island of Malta, all my family showed their loyalty to the French Government and rendered important services in different ways, one of my brothers as President of the East City, the other was Brigadier of the National Guard in the same division of the City of Malta”.

Napoleon on his way to Egypt arrived off Malta on the Orient on the 9th June 1798. After two days of negotiations, Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch (Austrian – 1797-1798) capitulated, and Napoleon entered Grand Harbour on June the 12th at 4.30pm, Malta passing under French rule.

Napoleon on the 13th June, began issuing a number of decrees. Clause 7 of the First Decree stipulated that the Islands of Malta and Gozo were to be divided into



districts (municipalities), each having at least 3,000 inhabitants. The city of Malta to be divided in two districts. In fact Valletta and Floriana were called the Municipality of the West, and Senglea, Vittoriosa and Cospicua the Municipality of the East.

On the 22nd June 1798, the Members constituting these two Municipalities were nominated. Gaetano Bertis, a lawyer and the brother of Can Giacchino Bertis was nominated one of the members for the Municipality of the East. The other members being Joseph Maurin nominated as President of the Municipality, Marc'Antoine Muscat, Jean Dalli and Dr Gaetano Pisani.⁷

Maurin because of other work resigned on the 27th June 1798 and Lawyer Gaetano Bertis became the new President of the Municipality of the East.⁸

Napoleon Bonaparte left Malta on the 19th July, leaving General Charles - Henri Comte de Belgrade de Vaubois (1748-1939) (picture below left) as commander in chief. Napoleon



sailed for Egypt, his fleet under the command of Admiral Bruëy, and anchored in Aboukir Bay. He was closely followed by Admiral Horatio Nelson, the British Admiral in the Mediterranean.

In the morning of the 1st August at ten o'clock Nelson saw the port of Alexandria crammed with French transports, but this was not Nelson's objective. He wanted to engage the mighty fleet under Admiral Bruëy. So he continued sailing eastwards towards the peninsula of Aboukir. Soon after two o'clock he saw, standing across the skyline in the little town and fort of Aboukir, the masts and yards of the French fleet at anchor.

At three o'clock Nelson signalled: "prepare for battle and for anchoring by the stern".

At five o'clock he signalled: "I mean to attack the enemy's van and centre".

And at half past five he signalled: "Form line of battle as convenient".

A few hours before sunset this great naval battle – the Battle of the Nile – began, the *Orient*, flagship of the French Fleet, blew up at 10 at night, and the battle continued throughout the night.

By sunrise Nelson who was wounded in the face during the night, had destroyed the mighty French Mediterranean Fleet, and won a great victory. Of the thirteen French ships of the line that had laid at anchor the day before, ten had been captured, one had blown up and two escaped. Aboukir Bay was a scene of silent, smoking desolation, the whole bay being covered with dead bodies, mangled, wounded and scorched. Understanding the consequence of this battle, Nelson wrote: "Victory is not a name strong enough for such a scene".⁹

The British were again in command of the Mediterranean. Bonapart's threat to India stopped, and the invasion of Europe from the East no longer possible.

Meanwhile on the 10th August 1798 the Pole of Liberty was put up near the statue of Victory in the square at Vittoriosa, and speeches commemorating the occasion were made by General Vaubois, d'Angely and President Gaetano Bertis.¹⁰

Probably, by now because news of the French naval defeat at Aboukir had arrived in Malta, coupled by the vexatious demands made by the French – which created great discontent among the population, and because Can Bertis was not at all happy with the demands made by the French on Church property and assets, exerted moral pressure on his brother Gaetano Bertis, and so Gaetano, although a Francophile, started having second thoughts about the benefits from the French Occupation.

It seems that he started leading a double role. He tried to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. On one hand he appeared to be pro French, so much so that he was listed as one of the traitors on the manifest stuck to the door of a shop owned by Mr Salvatore Bartolo, in a small street leading into St Theresa Street, Vittoriosa.¹¹

On the other hand he tried to befriend the anti-French Party, so much so that he was reported by Mr Salvu Bezzina to the French Commission as having been on a list of plotters shown to him by Chemist Frangisk Pisani, who intended to ask British help and that Vaubois D'Angely and the French collaborators would be killed.¹²

Marianna Picasso also testified during the official investigation that Chemist Pisani had mentioned that President Gaetano Bertis was one of the plotters against the French, and that she suspected also his brother Canon G. Bertis, Archpriest Dun Salvatore Bonnici and his nephew Teodor as being among the plotters. She also testified that she had heard the President Gaetano Bertis complain that because of his civic responsibilities as President of the East he had created many enemies and was fed up. He was therefore contemplating resigning.¹³

News of the French defeat at Aboukir was by now confirmed, and as General Vaubois was running short of money to pay the French garrison, an accelerated demand was made on Church property and assets. Achille Ferris in 1877 published his "Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta", and he gives a full inventory of all the precious gold and silver objects which were in the churches' possession prior to the French occupation.¹⁴ Thus the spirit of discontent became universal, and when on the 2nd September some French deputies went to Mdina for the purpose of selling the tapestry of the Carmelite Church, the rebellion against the French started. Mason, the French Commander, was killed and the French locked themselves in Mdina, Valletta and the Cottonera. Mdina was captured within the first twenty four hours, but the siege of Valletta and the Cottonera lasted up to 5th October 1800.

Notwithstanding the siege, the French Commission in Valletta wanted to implement one of the most unpopular demands made by Napoleon before he left Malta, which was that sixty Maltese youths selected from the richest families in Malta should be sent at their families' expense to further their education in France in French Collegies.¹⁵

So on the 14th September 1798 the French Commission insisted with the Government Commission to implement this, and so President Bertis was requested to report at the Government's Commission's Office the next morning at 8.30am, so that he would help with the selection which, of course, now because of the siege, was restricted to a selection of youths from the richest families of the Cottonera and Valletta, and with French leanings. Among those selected was Anton Bertis, another brother of the President.¹⁶

Anton Bertis, however, because of the prolonged siege, never made it as a student to France but according to what Canon Bertis wrote to Napoleon was promoted to "Brigadier of the National Guard".

On the 13th October 1798 the President Gaetano Bertis together with two other Maltese – Manwel Buhagiar and Giuseppi Giglio – were awarded a contract signed by the French Commissioner for war, Jeanne Pierre Dot, to supply the

French army with bread.¹⁷

On the 11th November 1798, President Bertis sent in his resignation from the Presidency of the East, which was gladly accepted by Vaubois, stating to the Government Commission "that he was glad to accept Berti's resignation and hoped that the Commission would agree with him, as Gaetano Bertis did not deserve Public esteem, as his patriotism existed only in words and not in deeds! He is to be feared one thousand times more than the aristocracy".¹⁸

So it was obvious that by now even Vaubois realised that Gaetano Bertis was a double agent. On the 16th March 1799 Diego Muscat won a law suit against Gaetano Bertis, accusing Bertis of having forced him to give him a silver ladel, which Gaetano Bertis had said was needed for the French Commander of the district, which was not true. Gaetano Bertis did not even appear in Court to defend himself.¹⁹

On the 9th May 1799 a forced public loan was launched by the French, and in the Government Commission's report of the 5th June 1799, there is a whole list of persons, street by street, with the amount given by each individual. Among them is Gaetano Bertis ex Municipalist 300 scudi.²⁰

From the above it is clear that what Canon Bertis said to Napoleon about his families role during the French occupation is correct, though great doubts are cast about his family's loyalty and honesty.

Canon Bertis continues saying "that at the time of the surrender of this island, his parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and nephews abandoned homes, fortune and fatherland and followed the French garrison to France", etc.

Great doubt is cast on this statement. However there is no doubt that the Bertis family were looked down upon because of their behaviour during the French occupation, but it is doubtful if they really had left the Island. On the other hand would Canon Bertis lie so blatantly to Napoleon, when his statement could have easily been verified? Moreover as far as I could ascertain there are no families today bearing the surname Bertis in Malta.

Canon Bertis continues saying "he was forced to seek the protection of the new Government which ordered him to carry out the duties of ALMONER in the Royal Malta Regiment recently formed, to follow it to Sicily, from there to Capri, where he was taken prisoner by your Majesty's forces".

Why was Canon Bertis in Capri?

On the 5th of September 1800, the terms of capitulation were signed, Gen. Vaubois and Admiral Villeneuve on one side, and Gen. Pigot and Capt. Martin on the other, and Malta began to be administered by a British Commissioner, Sir Alexander John Ball, who had organised the Maltese resistance during the siege against the French.

In a general order dated Malta, March 30, 1805 it was intimated that his Majesty had been pleased to direct that Major General W.A. Villettes, then commanding the troops in Malta, should raise a regiment of Maltese infantry for general service, and to permit that the same should be styled the Royal Malta Regiment. Prolonged negotiations took place about pay and condition of service, which were finally completed early in 1807. The regiment was at once placed on the strength of the British Army, and consisted of ten companies. The rates of pay and allowances were the same for all ranks as those of a British infantry regiment of the line.

On November 10th the Corps about 950 strong, under command of Major Meade, left Malta to join the British Army in Sicily.²¹ Canon Giacchino Bertis joined this regiment as a non combatant, occupying the post of ALMONER, which meant looking after the temporal and spiritual needs of the troops.

In September of 1808 the regiment was ordered from Melazzo, in Sicily, to Capri, with the object of defending that Island against the French who by now were in full possession of Naples. The troops embarked for Capri under the command of Lt Col Bryce, R.E., with the detachment of 100men of the 58th Regiment under Captain O'Brien. On their way they assaulted and captured the town of Diamante, in Calabria, in company with a blockading force under Captains Pierce and Prescott R.N. The Malta Regiment lost two men in this affair. After the destruction of Diamante the expedition proceeded to Capri.

On October 4th, 1808, within a fortnight of their arrival, a large flotilla was described coming out of the Bay of Naples, consisting of a frigate, a corvette, a large polacca and 26 guns and mortar boats, escorting a number of coasting vessels (fellucas) conveying a force of 6000 troops. The Maltese defended their position bravely, but when Major Hamill and some of his officers were killed in a downhill charge the regiment was left without its leaders, and not being acquainted with the country, were unable to reach Capri, and when General Lamarque, the French Commander, demanded their surrender on honourable terms, they saw no alternative but to submit and ten Officers and 250 men marched out of Monte Solaro with their arms and their drums beating, until they reached Ana Capri, where the men had to lay down their arms, the officers retaining their swords. The Malta Regiment lost Major Hamill, Ensign Brickell and 75 non-commissioned officers and men killed. General Lamarque

complimented Sir John Dalrymple (who had returned from England in time to be present at the capitulation of Capri) on the bravery displayed by his regiment, a message to that effect being conveyed to the men and officers imprisoned in Naples and in Castel Nuovo. There was great controversy about this defeat, but Sir John Dalrymple in a letter sent on the 26th October 1808 from Messina to Sir Alexander Ball in Malta among other things states:

“I have become acquainted with the state of the facts, from two sorts of persons very different ones indeed, but surely the best evidence in such a case. I mean the enemy who opposed them and the Officers who led them into action. From each of these sources I have received the most unequivocal testimony of the bravery and good conduct of the Maltese soldiers during the attack of Ana Capri”.²²

Canon Giacchino Bertis who was present during this battle was one of the prisoners taken to Castel-Nuovo, and later transferred to Verdun.

The remainder of the regiment returned to Malta in 1809, when new colours were presented to the corps, and its officers received promotion, which was proof that the regiment had been considered by the authorities to have behaved bravely.

This was the period when there was prosperity on the Island, and so it was impossible to obtain recruits. So in February 1811 orders were received from England for the regiment to be disbanded.²³

Canon Giacchino Bertis addresses his petition “To HIS MAJESTY NAPOLEON, THE GREAT EMPEROR OF THE FRENCH, KING OF ITALY, PROTECTOR OF THE CONFEDERATION OF THE RHINE, MEDIATOR OF SWITZERLAND, ETC. ETC, ETC,” Why?

In 1813 when this letter was written Napoleon had registered by now the following successes:

in 1804 Napoleon was approved by a public plebiscite Emperor;

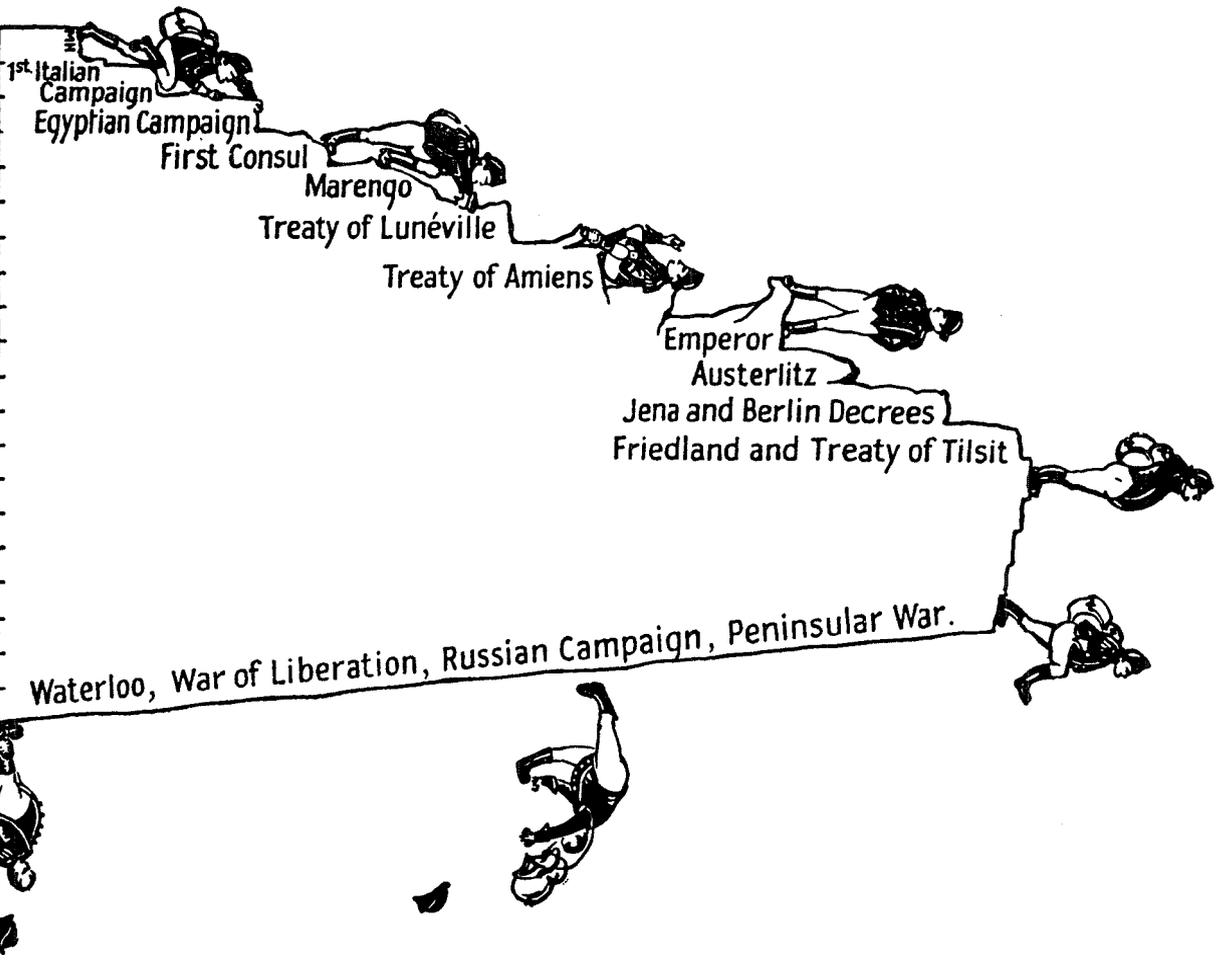
In 1805 Napoleon had outmanouvred the Austrian Army at Ulm, and at Austerlitz crushed the Austrian and Prussian armies. He took Venice and the Tyrol from Austria. Abolished the Holy Roman Empire, which had endured at least in name for a thousand years, and set up a union of west German states known as the Confederation of the Rhine, whose Princes were sworn to carry out his orders in matters of foreign policy.

In 1806 at the Battle of Jenna, the Prussian army received a crushing defeat.

In 1807 Napoleon encountered the Russians at Friedland and beat them so severely that the Czar Alexander decided to make peace. The treaty of Tilsit (1807) signed by the two Emperors on the raft on the River Niemen, represented the height of Napoleon's power.

NAPOLÉONIC MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING.

1795 6 7 8 9 1800 1 2 3 4 1805 6 7 8 9 1810 11 12 13 14 1815



In 1807 he crowned himself King of Italy in the old Austrian dominions in the North, made his brother Joseph King of Naples in the South, made another brother Louis King of Holland, and a third Jerome King of Westphalia (formed from the western lands of Prussia). In other words, he was master of the continent.

In 1807 he conquered Portugal and Spain, bullying the Spanish Royal family to abdicate in favour of his brother Joseph.

In 1809 the Pope was kidnapped and the Papal states incorporated with France.

In 1808 during the Peninsular War, fortune began to desert the French at the battle of Vimiero, but Napoleon was able to restore matters for the moment by coming from central Europe to take charge himself. At Torres Vedras the future Duke of Wellington, began having successes... The first cracks were appearing in Napoleon's edifice. Austria tempted by Wellington's successes in Spain attempted to try again too, but found Napoleon still too strong at the Battle of Wagram, lost even more territory and had to promise to adhere to the Continental System. Moreover, she was forced to supply Napoleon with an alliance and a new wife, the Princess Marie Louise, for Josephine had proved incapable of providing the Emperor with an heir and was therefore conveniently divorced.

In 1812 the Czar broke away from the continental system. The result was the most tremendous military disaster in history. With an overwhelming army of 610,000 men, forced from almost every country in Europe, Napoleon crossed the river Niemen to invade Russia. Outside Moscow Napoleon won the battle of Borrodino but at terrible expense in human life. 50,000 men died, and Moscow which Napoleon thought would provide him much needed supplies and shelter for the winter was put to flames by the retreating Russian forces and became a raging inferno. There was nothing Napoleon could do except turn back, in the middle of the Russian winter, with the Russians organising themselves into a rear action harassing him all the time. Finally of the 610,000 who started on the great campaign, only 20,000 returned in a terrible state. This was the start of Napoleon's series of defeats culminating at Waterloo in 1815 where he was defeated by the Duke of Wellington.

Canon Giacchino Bertis was a POW at VERDUN. Where is Verdun?

Canon Bertis was transferred from Castel-Nuovo as a prisoner of war to Verdun in 1809. When Canon Bertis wrote his petition to Napoleon he had been a prisoner since 14th October 1808 and after three and a half years in March 1812 was put on parole. Verdun was a garrison and prison town of North Eastern France when Canon Bertis was there. It lies between Paris and Metz. Because of its geographical position between Germany and France, it was always an important town since the times of the Romans. The Bishopric held by St Vanne dates from the third

century (498-525). Napoleon organised a big prisoner of war camp there, for soldiers captured during his various campaigns, until they were exchanged or repatriated. At the time of Canon Bertis there were a considerable number of English soldiers captured from the Peninsular and Italian Campaigns.

Achille Ferris, the noted Maltese historian, said: "*Rimasse prigionero per anni sette, continuando nell'adempimento de' suoi sacri uffici, esi merito la lode delle autorità ecclesiastiche, civili e militari, e la venerazione di tutti quelli che lo accostavano.*"²⁴ This opinion, of course, is expressed quite clearly in the certificate issued by the Mayor of Verdun, and Col Baron de Beauchesne Commander of the English Prisoners of War at Verdun.

Napoleon granted Canon Bertis' request and he returned to Malta where he devoted himself to writing various ecclesiastical books. He died at the age of 78 years on the 16th November, 1843.

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- 1, 6 Achille Ferris, *L'Arte*, Malta, February 7, 1866, anno IV, N° 78, p.7/8
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