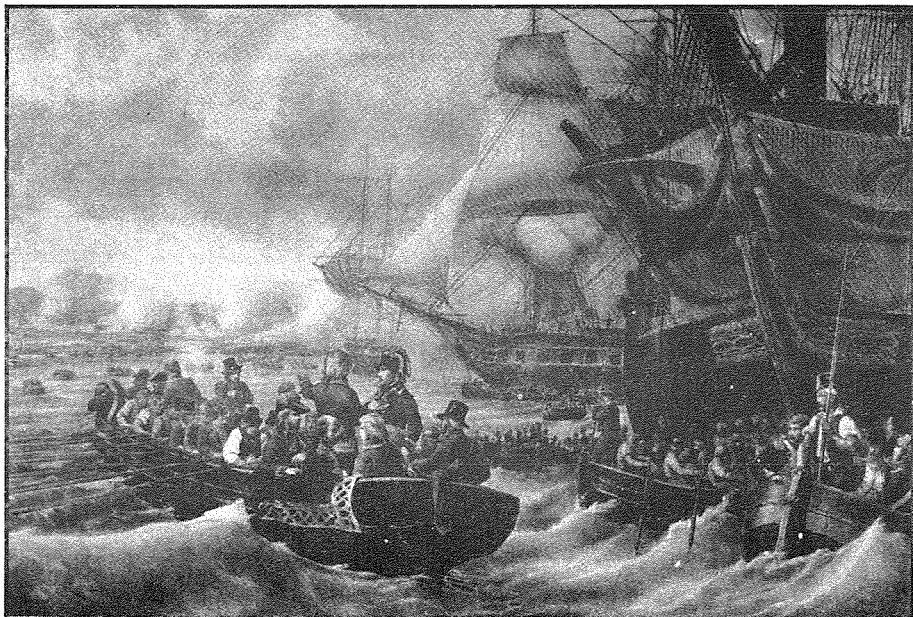


Napoleonic Period

June 1798 - September 1800

By Dr. A. Bonnici



Prise de Malte. Débarquement de Bonaparte.

Our member Tony Eastgate, a well known Postal Historian has very kindly sent me this historical letter written on the 9th March 1799 by Sir William Hamilton, the British Ambassador at Palermo to Capt. Ball on the Alexander off Malta.

Palermo 9th March 1799
My Dear Sir

I am truly sensible of your kind attention in giving me so full a detail of your operations at Malta which do you the greatest honor, and now that Lord Nelson and I have succeeded beyond our Expectation with this Government in sending back the Companies well satisfied all will go on smooth - I can well comprehend the total confidence the Maltese had in the protection of His Sicilian Majesty whilst His Majesty's own affairs were taking so bad a turn - Now as matters are settled and the British Colours are to fly at Malta with those of the King there they will be satisfied, God knows the only true protection they have hitherto experienced has been

ness of Great Britain & without which
the Island of Malta would have been
lost long ago - and I agree with you
entirely that it is of such consequence
to Great Britain that Lord Nelson
and I

as the King's Minister might take
upon our selves to answer for a
small Sum of money rather than
run any hazard of losing Malta.
However you will see this Govern-
ment has advanced a little ^{money} just
to keep things going and they are
perfectly happy that you should
have the direction of every thing
according to Lord Nelson's plan.

The letter continues on a personal note.

Pleasure - Adieu My Dear Sir
may every Success attend you
it is the Wish of your most
Obedient & much obliged humble
Servant.

Edw. Ball
of the Alexander
at Malta

J. M. Hamilton

In order to understand properly this Historical letter, and the Political Intrigue that was going on during these turbulent times in the Mediterranean, one must go back in history and recall certain significant events.

In 1416 Malta was in the hands of King Alfonso, of Castille, the local Government being known as Università or Commune.¹

In 1420 ignoring all the privileges granted by his predecessors, the King sold our Islands to Don Antonio Cardona, Viceroy of Sicily for 30,000 florins. In 1425 Don Cardona resold the Islands to Don Gonsalvo Monroy who unlike his predecessor, was greedy and selfish; this led the Maltese to revolt against him and overthrow His regime. After this event the Maltese Leaders went to Sicily to explain to the King the reason for this revolt. They insisted on the re-incorporation of the Island with the Crown and offered to refund to Monroy the 30,000 florins which he had paid to Cardona.

Finding the claims of the Maltese very just King Alfonso on the 3rd January 1427, gave them a Diploma, commonly known as the Maltese 'Magna Charta', signed by the two Viceroys in which he solemnly confirmed all the privileges of the Commune, granted to the Maltese by his predecessors, and authorised them to resist 'EVEN BY FORCE OF ARMS' any further infringement of their liberties.² This Diploma can be seen at the Public Library, Valletta. Charles V of Spain handed Malta to the Order on the 24th October 1530 with an undertaking that should the Order relinquish Malta, Malta was to go back to Spain.

In 1759 the King of Spain abdicated Naples and Sicily in favour of his son King Ferdinand IV, who became known as the King of the two Sicilies.

The Order in June 1798 capitulated to Napoleon, and on the 2nd Sept. 1798 the Maltese, fully conscious of the Magna Charta, and the above, considered that they had a moral and political right to resist the French by force of arms, and the uprising took place on the 5th September 1798.

That same day Canon Caruana, Manuel Vitale, Count Saverio Manduca, Ferdinando Theuma Castelletti, and Marquis Vincenzo De Piro, met in Mdina and on behalf of the Maltese community signed a letter to the King of Sicily informing him of their rebellion against the French and their success in gaining control of the whole countryside within the first seventeen hours. They requested to buy wheat from Sicily on credit; His protection, and that they now considered him as their King.³ The King of Sicily acknowledged this request on the 15th November 1798, and declared war on France on the 24th November 1798 after making sure of Austrian Assistance. (His wife Maria Carolina was the sister of Emperor Leopold of Austria.)

Russia had also set her eyes on Malta during this period. On the 12th November Major Fredrick d'Otee, the Russian Consul General in Sicily wrote to Canon Caruana, the General in charge of the Maltese troops congratulating him on his courage and informing him that the Russian Czar had taken a personal interest in the revolution of the Maltese against the French, and that the Russian fleet had passed through the Bosphorus to fight the French in the Mediterranean.

In the meantime the Maltese wrote to Nelson, the British Admiral, informing him also about their resistance, and that they had acknowledged the King of Sicily as their King, but requested him to blockade the harbour of Valletta, so that the French could not get help and supplies and, what was more important, the French Naval force in Valletta could not go out of the harbour and harass the assistance promised to the Maltese coming from Sicily.

As Nelson had just defeated Napoleons Fleet at Aboukir Bay on the 1st August 1798 (two months after Napoleon left Malta in the hands of his General Vaubois), he was busy mopping up what remained of the French Fleet, and so when this letter reached him on the 13th September on the Vanguard he immediately instructed Don Dominic Saverjo Marquis of Nizza, the Commander in Chief of the Portuguese Naval Force in the Area, who had been ordered to help Nelson fight the French Mediterranean Naval Force.

Nelson instructed him to go and blockade the Valletta harbour in the following letter:

'being informed by Captain Hood of H.M.S. Zealrus, of your return from Alexandria, I beg to represent to Your Excellency the great benefit it would be to the common cause should you proceed to Malta and to attempt to intercept a French ship-of-the-line and two frigates ('Le Guillaume Tell' of 80 guns, and 'La Diane' and 'La Justice'), frigates that made their escape from Alexandria . . . , cruising there for a short time, it might be the means of driving the French from the Island as well as protecting the 'Colossus' (Captain George Murray) and some victuallers and store-ships sent by the Earl St. Vincent for the use of my squadron under my command and ordered to rendezvous between Sicily and Malta and which I much want to have at Naples⁴

The material help promised by the King of Sicily never materialised as the King who had declared war on France conquered Rome on the 24th November 1798, a few days later the French General Championet not only pushed back the Neapolitan forces but conquered Naples itself, and the King and his court were forced to go to Palermo in Sicily.

So by now it dawned upon the Maltese Leaders that the King could not effectively help them, as he had enough problems of his own.

In the mean time the Maltese had received military assistance by way of gunpowder, rifles etc. from the British Fleet, who had captured them off a French Frigate in Aboukir. However there was an acute shortage of food, especially grain.

Capt. Ball who had been instructed by Nelson to patrol the Malta waters on board the Alexander together with Audacious, Goliath, Emerald, Stromboli, Incendiary, Alfonso and Benjamin, wrote to Nelson on the 14th February 1799. *'The other week the Maltese did not have even for a single day any more wheat, but by a stroke of good luck I was able to intercept near St Pauls Bay an Austrian ship full of wheat, and ordered it into St Pauls Bay to sell the wheat to the Maltese. I have a suspicion that it was proceeding to Valletta. On the 1st of this month I captured a ship going to Valletta laden with 350 barrels of beef, 50 barrels of pork and 53 casks of wine.'*

Ball had already informed Nelson that he had received an urgent letter from Canon Caruana the Maltese leader, requesting wheat.

The Maltese themselves had repeatedly asked Nelson to persuade the King to send them the necessary wheat, as they were on the point of total starvation. In fact on the 2nd February 1799, Nelson approached the King, and wrote the following letters to Sir John Acton.

'Sir,

If 6,000 salms of corn are not sent directly to Malta, the inhabitants are in that state of want, that the worst consequences for the interests of His Sicilian Majesty may justly be apprehended. All these poor people want is that the King should give them six months credit, when they could make their payments in money or cotton. The case is important and demands instant compliance. Your

*Excellency will excuse this plain truth for being told, perhaps, too abruptly and believe me etc The inhabitants have not seven days 'bread'. Nelson.*⁵

By 'The worst consequences for the interest of His Sicilian Majesty', Nelson means that if the Maltese do not have wheat for bread, they would because of starvation have to make peace with the French, and it was not in the interest of the Sicilian King to have Malta in the hands of His enemies the French again. The French would have been too close for comfort for him, as he had already lost Naples to them.

On the 15th of February Canon Caruana wrote to Nelson, giving him a full picture of the desperate situation.

Bearing all the above in mind we can understand and analyse the significance of the published letter written by Sir William Hamilton to Capt. Ball on the *Alexander*, on the 9th March 1799 which sheds conclusive evidence of the political intrigue that was going on.

'My Dear Sir

9th March 1799

I am truly sensitive of your kind attention in giving me so full a detail of your operations at Malta which do you the Greatest Honour.

It is obvious by this, that Ball was keeping his Ambassador in Palermo fully informed about the situation in Malta, and his direct help to the Maltese, and the establishment of friendly relations with the Maltese Leaders.

'and now that Lord Nelson and I have succeeded beyond our expectations with the Government in sending back the Commissaries well satisfied.'

He is referring to the Maltese Delegation consisting of Baron Gejtano Fournier, Judge Wigi Agius, and Mr Wigi Savoia, who on the 19th February 1799, presented the King with a petition signed by 44 Maltese requesting permission from the King to ask formally for British Protection, and requesting material and financial help from the King. The asking of this permission was very important, as we have already seen how on the 5th September 1798, the Maltese had acknowledged the King of Sicily as their King.

Lord Nelson, Sir William Hamilton and Lady Emma Hamilton who had great influence at the Court of Sicily, exerted tremendous influence, to persuade the King and his wife Caroline, who was really the power behind the throne, that the request of the Maltese Delegation was a wise one, and it would be safer for them to have a friendly power in Malta, rather than their enemies the French. Moreover they had persuaded the King to appoint as his Ambassador in Malta, Capt. Ball with the rank of Governor. By now Nelson had fully realised the great advantages that the Malta Harbour had to offer the British Fleet, for British Naval Supremacy in the Mediterranean, and so he wanted Ball as the Governor there, as obviously Ball had only one loyalty – that to Nelson and the British Crown.

No wonder he says 'beyond our expectations'. The Commissaries were indeed 'well satisfied'. In fact when they returned to Malta on the 15th March, the next day they informed Congress about their successful trip to Palermo, as the King had:-

1. Wavered the normal tax charged on wheat exports to Malta, retroactively as from the 2nd September 1798 when the Maltese insurrection against the French started. This meant that the Maltese were able to get back the money they had paid by way of tax.

2. Accepted Maltese Gold and Silver coins as payment for wheat bought from Sicily.

3. The King had donated a considerable amount of gun powder etc.

4. The King had appointed Capt. Ball as his representative in the Maltese

Islands with the title of Governor.⁶

'all will go on smooth, I can well comprehend the little confidence the Maltese had in the protection of His Sicilian Majesty whilst His Majesty's own affairs were taking so bad a turn.'

He had already lost Naples to the French, and by now he had reached a stage when he was entirely dependent himself on British Protection.

'Now as matters are settled and the British Colours are to fly at Malta with those of Naples.

Indicating Sovereignty:-

'I hope they will be satisfied.'

This letter was written on the 9th March, when the Maltese delegation was making preparations to come back to Malta, arriving on the 15th. 'They were well satisfied' because on the 16th they informed Congress of their success in Palermo. When their report was read to Congress they received enormous applause. The Congressmen went up to Ball and heartily congratulated him on his New Post of Governor. Ball accepted their good wishes and announced that he had just received from the King of Sicily 7,000 measures of Sicilian Gold, to be given to those Maltese who had given their help in fighting the French. Nelson had written to Ball on the 8th March a day before this letter was written. *You will receive 7,000 ounces or 21,000 ducats which the King confides in you to dispose to the best advantage'*

'God knows the only true protection they have hitherto experienced has been that of Great Britain, without which the Island of Malta would have been lost long ago.'

He is of course referring to the British Blockade, and the frequent supply of corn which Ball was able to supply together with war material, without which the Maltese would have been unable to prolong the siege, and France would have gained control of Malta again.

'and I agree with you entirely that it is of such consequence to Great Britain that Lord Nelson and I as the King's minister might take upon ourselves to answer for a small sum of money, rather than run any hazard of losing Malta.'

From this it is obvious that Nelson, Ball and Hamilton realised the great potential Malta had to offer, and what an asset it would be to Great Britain.

So much so that Nelson and Hamilton had shouldered responsibility to supply the necessary money 'for a small sum of money' rather than to wait and the Maltese had to give up their resistance, and so lose Malta to the French again or the Russians, whose Czar by now had his eyes on Malta also.

'However you will see this Government has advanced a little money first to keep things going and they are perfectly happy that you should have the discretion of everything according to Lord Nelson's plan.'

This clearly shows that Ball was given absolute authority, but what is more important 'according to Lord Nelson's plan' which means that Nelson did have definite precise ideas about Malta, and that Ball's job was to implement these plans.

The letter goes on about the personal Problems and ambitions of Sir William Hamilton, and ends by wishing him success in his new venture.

'Emma (his wife) desires to be most kindly remembered to you, and we both beg our best respects to your brave companions.'

REFERENCES:-

Sir William Hamilton

1,2. Laspina, Maltese History, p. 51.

3,4,5,6,7. Testa. Maz-zewg nahat tas-swar.