

The nurse of the Mediterranean

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During the First World War Malta did not take an active part in the fighting. Britain was joined in an 'entente' a friendship agreement with France since 1904 and later with Russia in 1907. On the other hand Germany was allied to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, hence when the Great War started in July 1914 there were France, Britain and Russia on one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. The British fleet "ruled the waves", hence with France and Britain as allies, to be joined later by Italy, the Mediterranean was more or less an allied lake, with Malta in the centre.

During the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, and one of the big problems that faced the foreign office of Britain in the nineteenth century was the Ottoman Empire known as the sick man of Europe. Russia was looking at it from the part of the chief inhibitor of its demise, while Britain was taking the role of a doctor. Russia is a vast country, stretching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Its biggest problem was that it could not use its ports throughout the whole year. Its arctic port, the Archangel, was blocked by ice; its Baltic ports had a similar problem in winter. Furthermore the Baltic Sea was dominated by the German navy in XXXII. The latter was secondary to that of Britain. Russia's far eastern ports – Vladivostock – was also frozen and far too distant. The Black Sea ports were closed by the Ottoman Empire during hostilities. The Russian ships had to pass through the Dardanelles to reach the Mediterranean and if the Dardanelles were under a hostile power no merchant ship could pass – i.e. the Russian navy was bottled up in the Black Sea.

Keywords

nurse, Mediterranean, first world war, Rupert Brooke

The British were always suspicious of the Russian intentions towards the Ottoman Empire, and the Crimean War of 1854 was fought by Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire against Russia to destroy its main base of Sevastapol and its fleet. By the treaty of San Stefano and the convention of Berlin blocked by Bismarck, the small Balkan states of Bulgaria, Serbia, Rumania and Montenegro appeared and these showed that they were very jealous of their independence and were far more efficient than the decadent Ottoman Empire to thwart Russian ambitions to enter the Mediterranean Sea. Still the Balkans was not so stable and in 1911-1912 the Balkan Wars erupted. In 1914 after the Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and the First World War started. The Ottoman Empire had a friendly relationship with Germany, its military was trained by Prussian officers and when the battle cruisers – Goeben and Breslan – were caught in the Mediterranean in July 1914 and sailed on to Constantinople where they were given as a present to the Sultan, the Ottoman Empire found itself on the German side together, incidentally with Bulgaria which felt short-changed by Serbia.

The First World War started in high spirits by both sides. However, it soon degenerated in trench warfare. The British old professional army, known as the old contemptible was soon decimated and new regiments came from Britain and its empire to replace the heavy losses. The French also lost many soldiers when they moved on Alsace and Lorraine, lost in 1870. The Russians lost thousands and thousands of soldiers in the battle of Tannenberg. Their equipment was found most wanting and it was clear to all military chiefs that Russia could not sustain a war of attrition. The soldiers went into battle without rifles, they had to pick rifles from dead or wounded colleagues as they advanced along the front. The Russian army needed munitions, heavy guns, transport, rifles and all that a modern war entails. The French knew that if the Russian front were to collapse – as it did later in the war, the full fury of the German army would be let loose on them. The only way available to supply them was by sea. The Baltic Sea was dominated by the German fleet, while the Archangel was hardly practical. Hence Winston Churchill, who was lord of the Admiralty at that time, thought of supplying the Russian army from its Black Sea ports. To do this he had to open the Dardanelles to allied shipping, which really meant he had to knock the Ottoman empire out of the war. This he deemed a not so difficult task - after all the Ottoman Empire had been falling apart for more than a century, and it was kept in one piece thanks to the efforts of the British Government, the

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chief interventionist being Disraeli.

Possibilities were very good. With Constantinople in British and French hands, the Russian army could be supplied. The Czar government secure from its internal enemies - the Bolsheviks – could initiate a new Russian offensive in the East, thus relieving the Western Front from pressure.

Churchill thought that the Dardanelles could be forced by the navy alone. In conjunction with the French, the British sent the pre-dreadnaughts. This led to a major disaster, the Turkish waters were infested with mines and the approaches with heavy fortified forts. The allies lost a number of battleships through enemy activity and German submarines were reputed to be in the area. Hence it was thought that the Gallipoli Peninsula should be cleared of the hostile troops by landing troops on it – the Anzacs, Australian and New Zealand troops who were in Egypt at that time. However, the element of surprise had been lost and when the troops finally landed they found the Turkish troops ready for them. No real progress was done and after a few months, in which thousands of Allied troops were either killed or wounded, they were evacuated from the Gallipoli beaches, Winston Churchill resigned and eventually the Czar regime collapsed. Luckily the United States came into war on the side of the allies and the Western front was saved.

Malta was warned to get itself prepared to receive the wounded of the Gallipoli campaign. The Governor at that time was Lord Melhuen who was a very good organiser. Plans were immediately started to turn Malta into a giant hospital. At that time there were four hospitals in Malta, the Central Hospital for civilians, the Blue Sisters' hospital for merchant seamen, Bighi hospital for the navy and Mtarfa Hospital for the army. Their total capacity was about three hundred beds, if all the rooms and available space were utilized there would be five hundred beds – far short of what was necessary. The Holy Infirmary at Valletta was roped into service. Some new schools were turned into hospitals and barracks which had been vacated by the troops turned into hospitals. Originally Allied command in Egypt asked for 3000 beds. However, with mounting injuries it was soon found that that estimate was not nearly enough and more bed space was created. A hospital is totally useless without adequate staff, doctors, nurses, attendants, labourers, technicians, cooks, laundry people, etc., etc.

The soldiers invaded the Gallipoli Peninsula on the 25th April 1915. Many soldiers were wounded or killed. Up to the end of May 1915, 38,000 soldiers were either killed or wounded. These figures will make us understand the extent of the problem facing the authorities over here. The first wounded reached Malta on the 4th May 1915. They were carried on hospital ships, painted white with a big red cross painted on their sides. When the people realized that the wounded of Gallipoli were entering the bastions, the mood was very sombre. The harbour had the aspect of a sick ward in a general hospital, silence all around.

One thousand two hundred soldiers, wounded from the front were brought on that day. Barges went against the hospital ships and the injured soldiers were brought down very gently by the cranes on stretchers and from the barges onto the shore. From

the quay they were taken to the Holy Infirmary at Valletta where they were examined by top British and Maltese doctors, from there they were sent to other centres according to their injuries. A Maltese doctor appointed by the Governor himself for such duties was Dr Robert Randon who was placed in charge of Fort Tigne, now turned into a hospital of about 1,000 beds.

The processes of wounded soldiers on stretchers drawn by mules and horses passed through Kingsway, now Republic street, in Valletta on its way to the Holy Infirmary. It was described as that of Good Friday, silence reigned and people on each side on the pavements welcomed the soldiers with cigarettes, sweets, flowers and chocolate. The wounded soldiers most of them very young showed their appreciation by waving to the people and from that day the close bond between Malta and Australia was born. Indeed a lot of these soldiers died in Malta and they were buried at Braxia Cemetery at Pietà near where the football club now stands.

May I be permitted here to read Rupert Brooke poem The Soldier written in that period of time.

*If I should die, think only this of me
That there in a corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed.
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to name,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the XX, blast by suns of home.*

Perhaps if we were to substitute Australia for England here, we can better understand the atmosphere, the sorrow and anguish that reigned in Malta that summer of 1915.

Up till the end of May, 4000 wounded had arrived and they were being treated in 8 hospitals. By September, 10,000 wounded had arrived. By March 1916, there were 20,000 hospital beds, in all 80,000 soldiers were treated in Malta. A percentage of them found their grave in Malta. Military funerals were the order of the day, sometimes with eight or more dead soldiers buried on the same day. Since these funerals were having a depressing effect on the general population, it was decided to conduct them from outside the limits of Floriana, from Portes des Bombes to Braxia cemetery.

The Gardens of Argotti, the Mall, and the streets of Valletta were all full of wounded soldiers. Some of them had an amputated arm pushing at colleague in a wheelchair with amputated legs. Some had bandaged heads, others were blind. However, they were cheerful and made friends with the Maltese people who opened the doors of their homes and hearts to them. Ladies organised tea parties and concerts for them. They started to sponsor children by giving them cards found in cigarette boxes. In general the soldiers who survived the Gallipoli experience were quite happy for things could have been far worse for them. In all they were treated in 27 military hospitals, one of them being the newly built school of Sliema. Archbishop Caruana was asked to tell the parish priests not to

ring the bells to let the patients rest. The Archbishop obliged and the bells stopped ringing.

Għajn Tuffieħa was turned into a giant camp for convalescent soldiers. In all there were 4,000 beds under tents. Three hundred civilian and military doctors were employed. Some top British surgeons came to Malta, like Balance and Garrod, and 1000 British nurses came from the UK.

Gradually things started to calm down. It was obvious that the Allies were making no headway in Gallipoli and they were pushed back. However, on the 25th December 1915 the British and the French landed in Salonika to help the Serbians. The First World War started from Serbia. In the Balkan wars of 1911 and 1912, Bulgaria was offered Macedonia but its share went to Greece and Serbia. Hence Serbia was attacked by Bulgaria, and the British and French went to help. This time the Maltese makeshift hospitals were filled with malaria and typhoid. It is interesting to note that the first cardiac operation was done in Malta on a soldier who had been shot by a Bulgarian sniper.

As the Gallipoli and Salonika campaigns subsided so did the Maltese hospitals empty, to fill again by the Spanish Influenza victims. Employment during the war and when the war finished there was massive unemployment in Malta. A lot of ships had been sunk, food was scarce and hard to get, there was massive inflation and the safety valve of emigration non-existent since Australia had problems of its own. With political aspirations on the increase, the unemployed workers looked at the political leaders like Sir Filippo Sciberras and the next scene was the Sette Gungio rites of 1919.

When the First World War was nearly over the so-called Spanish Flu appeared. The pandemic killed more people than the war itself, although one can attribute it to the war itself. When there is mass movement of troops and civilians with the

most basic requisites of hygiene ignored and non-existent, one can expect epidemics. In WW1 Spain was neutral and the first reported cases came from Spain since the censorship of the media was free. It appeared in the US where young people were being called for service in Europe by Widrow Witson, thousands died in their training camps. It infected the allied army in Northern France where a depot was located and then spread to the German army. In all there were three waves of this pandemic and it was characterized by fever, breathing problems, haemoptysis and cyanosis. Hence our hospitals started to fill again on the 4th October 1918. The Government issued regulations to prevent the spread of the disease – avoiding overcrowding and general cleanliness. Between the 1st September 1918 and 1st March 1919 there were 651 deaths. March was the high point of the third wave. The Influenza continued onto 1920. In February and March 656 cases were reported with a mortality of over 30%. The total mortality of the 1918 – 1919 pandemic in Malta was 3 per 1000 of the population.

On the 10th December 1917 His Excellency the Governor declared at the beginning of the session of the Council of Government. “I also desire to record my grateful recognition of the sympathetic hospitality which the people of Malta and Gozo have extended to the sick and wounded that have been brought during the war, of the support that they have given to the British Red Cross and the Order of St John of Jerusalem and the other charitable institutions that have been formed.” This was not the first time that Malta took the role of a Nurse in Wartime and it is said that Malta had added a bright chapter to human history and the severance to its hospitals ever be named; for their sacrifice has once more been enthroned, and unselfishness, garbed in nurses’ cape or surgeons’ uniform, proclaimed the triumph of love.