

A FOCUS ON THE FRENCH IN GOZO

[An Original Narrative with a Historical Underpinning]

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NARRATIVE

A little after noon on the 7th June 1798, Admiral Brueys and his French Fleet sighted the island of Gozo. Napoleon Bonaparte had planned the invasion of Malta himself, and intended on occupying the islands enroute to his Egyptian Campaign. The island of Gozo bore some 12,000 inhabitants at the time, and a full 18% of the population was engaged in the island's defence. Such a small island as was Gozo therefore engaged 2,300 men in the defence of its shores.

General Reynier ordered his troops to disembark under the high cliffs east of Ramla Bay. As the veteran grenadiers rowed ashore in their longboats, they came under heavy musket fire from the heights above. Two hundred men of the local militia had rallied from the nearby villages of Caccia (today's Xaghra) and Nadur to challenge Bonaparte's invasion. The French took multiple casualties and Sergeant Major Bertrand died on the spot. As the French gained ground and met the Gozitans on the cliffs, the militia retreated back to their villages. Three French detachments spread hastily with the aim of taking over the island by that same evening. One detachment marched up to Caccia (today's Xaghra), a second marched up to Nadur, and a third down to Marsalforn. Popular legend has it that a French soldier in the Caccia detachment made advances towards a young lady tending to nearby fields. In a frenzy of rage, her husband is reputed to have killed the French soldier on site, dug a grave, and buried him.

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The Nadur detachment marched down to the small citadel of Chambray, where the garrison of the fort surrendered following some light skirmishing which left four Gozitans dead. The Caccia detachment marched onto the Gran Castello, where the Governor of Gozo, De Mesgrigny, appointed by the Order of Saint John, had already fled into hiding together with his retainers, leaving the Gozitans to deal with a dire situation absent leadership.

In what would have been a last stand in the face of overwhelming odds, some two hundred men of the militia assembled in the castle square where they prepared to sally forth and meet the French troops as they came up Racecourse street. Reverend Saverio Cassar, a notary and priest, had the foresight to anticipate this charge and ran out by himself to face the French alone under a flag of truce. In a courageous display of initiative and diplomacy, he asked for the French to spare the any further bloodshed, and saved the local militia any further casualties in what would have been a direct confrontation with veteran soldiers. The French took over the castle, and it was thus that Bonaparte came to overcome Gozo in the space of a day.

The general sentiment of the islanders was one of suspicion and mistrust in the face of a foreign people taking over the island, but not all the locals were that eager to get to grips with the enemy. Some sectors of Gozitan society actually rejoiced in the coming of the French. That same night, one wine merchant in Rabat is known to have opened a barrel and distributed wine freely to all those who would join him in his celebrations, and it is said that wine flowed out onto Racecourse street.

The promises of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality soon gave way to the insatiable hunger of the French for gold, resources and foodstuffs in anticipation of their leave for the African continent. One such episode is the well-known case of the Sultana Family in Xaghra. French soldiers rammed the front down and barged into the Sultana Household, stealing two cows and a horse in order to feed themselves and their fellow troops. Leases on the land were also cut short by the new administration, rendering many farmers redundant and out of work.

This, in addition to the desecration of the Holy places so revered by the local populace, would soon spark off a revolt that would spread like wildfire across the islands. Following the massacre of the French Garrison in Mdina, pockets of resistance would sprout up across the islands. Revered Saverio Cassar would lead the fore of the fight against the French here in Gozo.

4 EXT. ST FRANCIS SQUARE. EVENING

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NARRATIVE

'Revered Saverio Cassar rallied all of his commanders at the village stronghold of Caccia, where Xaghra today stands'.

SAVERIO

Bonaparte has surrounded Gozo with four ships. His soldiers are living off our land and our people. They desecrate our churches, take our property and all the while have the arrogance to proclaim they brought freedom to our island. General Vabouis spoke truly at that charade they called the 'Feast of Liberty' in Malta. He said that we should never fear any invader and that when the time comes, we should stand ready to fight. We have been ready to fight long before Vabouis ever set foot on this sacred soil, and we will still stand as ready long after he's left.

He looks to his right.

Soldiers of the militia...

He looks to his left.

My fellow commandants...

He looks to his front.

The time is now. Let's rise and throw these invaders back into the sea! Let's see the tricolor burn atop the rooftops! Let us go forth and fight our way back to freedom!

NARRATIVE

In an amazing display of community and patriotism, the people of Gozo rallied their resources towards the common cause, each in their own way. The lower classes contributed to the maintenance of the military with raw materials and foodstuffs, while the higher classes and minor nobility kept Cassar's coffers afloat in order that he may pay the soldiers' wages and keep his army in the field.

5 EXT. GELMUS HILL. DAY

5

From his vantage point on Gelmus Hill, Cassar surveyed the siege of the Citadel. When Xewkija's Commandant Francis Zammit raided the south coast and won back the coastal fortifications from the French, the guns in Fort Chambray were taken to Rabat and dragged up Gelmus Hill, where they could bring their fire to bear straight down into the Castle. Cassar's word on the island was taken as ipso facto, and he held absolute jurisdiction over the island's administration and military. The trust he enjoyed across the island was legendary.

6 EXT. CITADEL. DAY. PART II

6

NARRATIVE

Rear-Admiral Horatio Nelson cast anchor in Maltese waters on the 24th of October. Cassar met Nelson aboard the Vanguard where they discussed and agreed to the terms to be offered to the last of the French Garrison in the Castle of Gozo.

(MORE)

NARRATIVE (CONT'D)

The articles of capitulation stood as follows:

1. The French troops shall march out of the Castle of Gozo with the honours of war, and shall lay down their arms as they get out of the gate.
2. The Castle of Gozo, with all the military implements and stores, shall be delivered up to the British Officers appointed to take charge of them.
3. The French officers and troops shall be protected in their persons and effects, and the officers allowed to retain their sidearms, they shall be embarked immediately on board his Brittanic Majesty's ships, and sent to France in transports, at the expense of the French government. They are not to serve against His Brittanic Majesty, or his allies, during the war, until regularly exchanged.

Nelson had also entered into agreement with Cassar that should the French surrender to the British, the inhabitants of Gozo shall be considered to be under the protection of the British Crown, and they will not offer the smallest insult or molestation to towards the British Forces.

These terms were signed and agreed to by all parties on the 28th of October 1798. Captain Creswell of the marines marched up to the Castle of Gozo with the British colors that same day. The Union Jack would fly atop the castle's bastions that evening. It was in fact the first time that the British flag was hoisted on Maltese soil.

Cassar wasted no time in celebration. He resumed office as Governor of the Island and went about re-organizing the island's defences.

By February 1799, the Southern and Western parts of Gozo were defended strongly enough to prevent any landing. The Northern and Eastern parts of the Island contained more towers and batteries than the other parts. Cassar had also chose some 250 gunners and soldiers to be employed in the island's defence. Fifty-three men garrisoned the castle of Gozo.

Twenty-nine men were assigned to the protection of the Citadel of Chambray. Thirty-three soldiers were stationed at Marsalforn Tower. Some other eleven forts and vantage points around the island were manned and stood ready to repel any further attacks by the French. Groups of six men were also appointed in each village in order to maintain watch at night.

This was a time of turmoil for the islands. Malta would not be rid of the French for yet two more years, during which Gozo would stand autonomous. Cassar would eventually fly the Sicilian flag once more above the bastions of Gozo, and much heated debate would course across the islands as to which foreign power should exert dominion over the Malta and Gozo once the French would be ousted for good. Some favoured the King of Naples, others favoured the recently-arrived British Forces, and a considerable sector were adamant that the Order Of St John should return as soon as it can be made possible. A petition towards returning the Hospitalliers to the islands was even organized at one point, and it is recorded that some four thousand Gozitans put their word to paper in support of this cause. Such attempts were intercepted by the British before they ever came to fruition.

In 1801, the old custom of sending governors to Gozo was revived. Notary Emanuel Vitale, one of the leading figures in the rebellion of a ten thousand strong militia against the French in Malta, was appointed governor of Gozo on the 20th August. Cassar passed out of the political scene and would eventually pass away a few years later, on the 16th of December 1805, at the age of fifty-nine years, in Rabat Gozo, at his residence in a narrow street which bears his name to this day.