

Curb your enthusiasm (for the Great Siege)

Now that we've celebrated Victory Day, is it perhaps time to take stock of what really went on during the Great Siege? TEODOR RELJIC speaks to local historians about whether the 'greatness' of one of the most marketable events in Maltese history is truly justified



Teodor Reljic

THE Great Siege of Malta is one of, if not the most, marketable episode from Maltese history. The 1565 clash between the Hospitaller Knights and the Ottoman fleet has all the right ingredients of national pride and historical romance to resonate over the ages; the David and Goliath narrative, and perhaps unfortunately a Christians vs Muslims 'culture war' too.

But as we celebrated its 'Victory Day' last Tuesday, not all historians

found themselves on board with the unanimous and unambiguous narrative that places the Knights and the Maltese people as some kind of 'small but formidable' entity that took on a brutal military regime.

In fact, some – such as Aleks Farrugia, former presenter of historical TV programme Mixja tal-Poplu and visiting lecturer in critical theory at the University of Malta – believe that the over-romanticised adulation of Jean de la Valette and

his force can have unflattering after effects, as Farrugia witnessed on social media on the eve of Victory Day this year.

"Given the international situation, which is currently fomenting widespread prejudice – and resulting hatred – towards Islam, some people took the opportunity of Victory Day to portray the Siege as some sort of 'Christian ass-kicking' of Islam. But this couldn't be further from what the historical evidence

suggests."

Farrugia believes this perception to be largely drawn from bad history... or at least, a misconception about what the Siege was actually about in the long run. Positing that the Siege was in fact more a matter of "economics over religion", Farrugia points out that not even the rivalry between the Order and the Ottomans was as clear cut as it seems, explaining how during the 1600s, "the Maltese were trading with the Islamic North African countries and they did that on a regular basis".

Farrugia explains how in the 18th century, Grand Master Pinto, in a stand-off against the King of Naples, "ditched Sicily in favour of Tunis, as the regular supplier of grain to Malta. So, the relationship was not as straightforward as one would imagine".

Farrugia also questions any alleged intrinsic 'greatness' attributed to the Siege, and concedes that while the attack on the island in 1565 saw a "massive" deployment of the Ottoman fleet on the Maltese islands, "it wasn't so massive that they sent out their full force, as they did against Vienna".

Furthermore, he draws on research by historian Andrew Hess to point out that the biggest 'take

away' of the siege for the Ottoman side was a push to improve their lines of communication with Constantinople.

"In fact, the siege wasn't won because of 'courage' or 'heroism'; certainly, those elements played an important part for the siege not to be lost. But eventually, what proved to be the

Ottomans' main undoing was the impossibility of effective communication with Constantinople. In 1565, the world was still big enough to make the distance between Malta and Turkey a mile too far," Farrugia observes.

On the other hand, historian Prof. Victor Mallia-Milanes – whose research interests include the history of the Order of St John – says that we shouldn't diminish valour, heroism, and extraordinary courage during the siege, "on both sides".

However, he adds that "to attribute the final outcome of the siege to the Knights and their subjects would be absolutely historically inaccurate", and that while Hospitallers and indigenous Maltese did



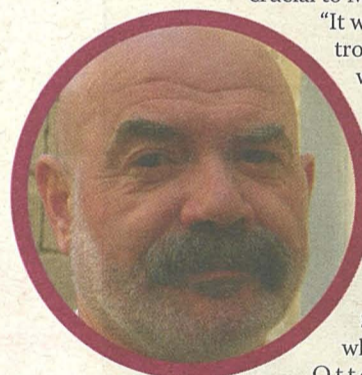
The Siege of Malta – 'Arrival of the Turkish fleet' by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio

a crucial role to play, the Siege was ultimately won thanks to the "collective impact of several forces".

According to Mallia-Milanes, these include, for example, a number of grave tactical and strategic errors performed by the Ottomans, especially in the early phase of the siege; the known division within the Ottoman leadership, which contrasted sharply with Jean de la Valette's firmness of character and his unusual decisiveness; the gran soccorso; and the approach of the seasonal storms in the Mediterranean: "The weather can be a very powerful force of change in history!"

Though perhaps certain distortions, if not downright inaccuracies, about the Siege persist in the popular imagination to this day, both Farrugia and historian Prof. Carmel Vassallo point towards the "powerful PR machine" at the Order's disposal – one which, for the purposes of the Siege's aftermath at least, la Valette exploited to the full... so much so that he even failed to mention the help he got from other quarters during the Siege in his post-mortem of the Siege sent to the Pope.

"In his first letter to the Pope after the lifting of the siege, the Grand Master completely failed to make any mention of the Spanish King or the repeated reinforcements of hardened and experienced Spanish troops sent to him by Don Garcia from Sicily," Vassallo says, adding that this help was actually more than crucial to Malta.



Carmel Vassallo

and it was they who made up the bulk of the piccolo soccorso without whom Birgu, and Malta, would have fallen."

In fact, Vassallo claims that if anything, a frank "reappraisal of la Valette's role is long overdue", even going so far as to suggest that the Siege was won "despite, not because of la Valette". Drawing on the work of French historian Fernand Braudel, Vassallo says that despite being Grand Master for eight whole years before the siege he is on record as being the one who "did least to improve the island's defences".

"Indeed the island's lack of preparedness on his watch was in sharp contrast to the high state of preparedness of the Order at Rhodes."

Neither did la Valette have a very high opinion of the Maltese populace, as can be evidenced in his correspondence following the fall of St Elmo during the Siege.

"In correspondence with the Viceroy after the fall of St. Elmo, the Grand Master certainly did

"Grand Master la Valette certainly did not express a very high regard for the Maltese and on the contrary labels them 'the enemy within'" – Carmel Vassallo

not express a very high regard for the Maltese and on the contrary labels them 'the enemy within'," Vassallo says, adding how in that same letter, la Valette also betrayed concerns that the Maltese 'popolazzo' could rise against the Order.

With this in mind, and while conceding that the Maltese "have not historically been associated with the sort of 'martial spirit' of say the Sikhs or the Nepalese", probably serving primarily as auxiliaries in combat, Vassallo doesn't discount that there may have been plenty of individual acts of bravery from the Maltese during the Siege, "especially seeing it was their families and homes they were defending".

Ultimately, the enduring appeal of certain Great Siege myths could simply be down to just how powerfully its key players stick in the imagination. While he disagrees with "traditional historians" who tended to depict the Siege as a major historical event – "it hardly had any long-term impact on the historical development of the Mediterranean" – he doesn't deny the seductive narrative that comes with it.

"To the popular mind, the inherent qualities of traditional history have their own particularly alluring charm and attraction. And perhaps understandably so. The turbulent, arresting drama of a siege like that of 1565, its emotional spectacle, and the determining, almost superhuman, qualities which traditional history attributes to the so-called 'great man', like Suleyman the Magnificent, Jean de la Valette, Philip II of Spain, and an infinite number of similar or lesser figures – all play an important role in the formation of popular perceptions."

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Is Jean de la Valette's role in the Great Siege due for a reappraisal?