

Cholera Epidemic of 1837

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Cholera was diagnosed on the 9 June 1837, at the Ospizio Hospital in Floriana, Malta, in two inmates, who fell ill with vomiting and diarrhoea, by Dr A Axisa. They were investigated and confirmed by Dr L Gravagna (Medico di Polizia) and another physician.

By the 13th June twenty seven inmates had been attacked with seventeen fatalities.

Because of this the Governor ordered the removal of six hundred and forty five out of seven hundred and fifty inmates of both sexes from the Ospizio to Fort Ricasoli (Fig 1.) in the hope of arresting the progress of the malady in the isolated and well aerated position occupied by the Fort. In spite of this precaution the epidemic exploded and two doctors who contracted the disease had to go home to be treated. Soon it became impossible to keep order at Ricasoli and insubordination was rampant. Eighteen convicts were discharged from prison on the 18 June to transport and bury the dead, but had to be re imprisoned because of various contraventions committed by them. Another nine convicts were liberated next day, but they also proved to be unreliable and were re imprisoned.

On the 21 June Dr A Speranza was entrusted with the administration of Ricasoli, and he quickly brought the situation under control.

In the mean time the epidemic had now spread to Floriana, Senglea, Birkirkara, and the military and naval hospitals, which alarmed greatly the population.

The method of transmission was unknown, and theories such as non contagious and contagious, were advocated among the Maltese and British Medical Profession.

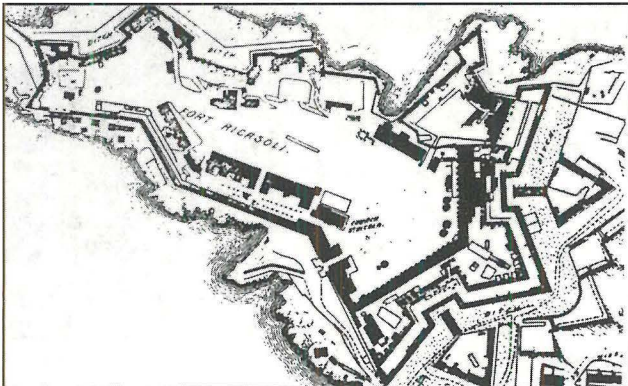


Figure 1. Fort Ricasoli.

At one point the Russian armies were blamed for introducing cholera from the East into Europe but it was generally admitted that the primary agent of the disease was unknown.¹

While these speculations formed the subject of endless discussions, the disease

RAPPORTO GIORNALE DI COLERA, pel 27 Agosto 1837.

Luogo	Rimasti dall'ult. Rapporto.	Nuovi Casi	Morti	Guariti	Rimasti	Rimarche
MALTA						
Valletta	3	1	—	1	3	
— Ospedale Civile . .	1	—	—	—	1	
Floriana	1	—	—	—	1	
— Ospedale di Colera	10	—	1	3	6	
Vittoriosa	2	—	1	—	1	
Cospicua	—	1	—	—	1	
Senglea	3	—	—	—	3	
Città Vecchia Osp. di Colera	17	3*	1	2	17	* Dal Rabbato.
— Rabbato	5	—	1	—	4	
Casal Birchircara	4	—	1	1	2	
Casal Lia	1	1	1	—	1	
— Osp. di Colera. . .	6	1*	1	—	6	* Da C. Birchircara.
Casal Zabbar	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Zebbug	4	—	—	—	4	
— Ospedale di Colera	11	—	1	1	9	
Casal Zeitun	1	1	1	—	1	
Casal Siggieni	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Curmi	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Luca	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Nasclaro	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Crendi	1	—	—	—	1	
Casal Musta	3	—	—	—	3	
Casal Balzan	1	—	—	—	1	
	79	8	9	8	70	
GOZO	15	9	3	2	19	Del 26 Agosto.

N. B.—Le Spezierie aperte nella notte del 27 Agosto sono — Per la Valletta del Dr Fenech, e del Dr Duclos, tutti e due in Strada Reale.
 Per la Floriana del Sig. Sammut, Piazza S. Anna. — Per la Cospicua del Sig. Raudon, Strada S. Teresa.
 Per la Senglea del Sig. A. Pulficino, Strada Vittoriosa. — Per la Vittoriosa del Sig. Azopardi, Piazza S. Lorenzo.

L. GRAVAGNA,
Medico di Polizia.

was causing havoc in the Island. The epidemic reached its peak in July when 6,286 cases were known to have occurred with 2,743 deaths.

On the 6th July the disease reached Gozo where five hundred and ten cases with one hundred and eighty three fatalities were registered by the end of the month.

The Parishioners of the Collegiate, Basilica Church of St George Martyr,



Statue of St. George – Victoria, Gozo

Rabat, Gozo sought Divine intervention for deliverance from the epidemic and a vow was made to have a new statue of St George, which was eventually done sculptured by Maestro Pietro Paolo Azzopardi, sculptured in wood, which became the first titular statue in Gozo. Statue of St George

The severity of the epidemic started to wane in August, as shown in the published daily report of the 27 August (Fig 3). It shows that there were eight new cases and nine deaths in Malta, and nine new cases and three deaths in Gozo, on the 26 August. It continued to diminish in September, and by the 11 October it had ceased completely, and a clean bill of health was issued by the Quarantine Office.

A total of 8,785 cases are known to have occurred in Malta and Gozo between the 9th June and 10 October 1837 of whom 4,252 lost their lives. The population at that time, being 120,000

Other notable epidemics occurred in 1847, 1850, 1854, 1856, 1865, 1867, 1887, 1911.

¹ The microbe was discovered by Koch in 1883, called by him the “comma bacillus” and generally known as *Vibrio Cholerae*, generally confined to the intestines, but may be present in the gall bladder and Biliary passages, commonly transmitted by means of water or food contaminated by the organism. (2) Textbook of bacteriology Browning. (P 402/415)