

THE FRENCH OCCUPATION PERIOD

The Plot of January, 1799

by Dr Alfred Bonnici M.D.

FRANÇOIS.

de

MALTE.

LIBERTÉ



ÉGALITÉ

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE.

Au Quartier Général de Malte le 27. nivose
an 7 de la République Française ; une et indivisible.

VAUBOIS, GÉNÉRAL DE DIVISION ;

Commandant en Chef dans les Isles de Malte , et du Gozo.

Au consul Français Gri.

Le citoyen Ossoir vient de me dire que deux
Grecs avoient été chez vous et vous avoient dit
qu'on devoit se méfier des habitans qui devoient
exciter un mouvement aujourd'hui. Je vous prie
de m'assurer si le fait est vrai, j'en pourrais
de rien négliger en précaution.

Salut et cte
Gaubois

To the French Consul GUI

"Citizen Ossoir has come to tell me that two Greeks had approached you, and told you that we must be watchful of the inhabitants who are starting an uprising to day. I hasten to assure you that if that is a fact, it is my custom never to neglect to take precautions."

The Plot of 11 January, 1799

by Dr Alfred Bonnici M.D.

Regiment
of
Malta

Liberty

Equality

French Republic
General Headquarters of Malta, 11th January 7th Year
(i.e. 11 January, 1799)
of the French Republic, one and indivisible.

VAUBOIS Major General
Commander in Chief of the Islands of Malta and Gozo

To the French Consul GUI

"Citizen Ossoir has come to tell me that two Greeks had approached you, and told you that we must be watchful of the inhabitants who are starting an uprising to day. I hasten to assure you that if that is a fact, it is my custom never to neglect to take precautions."

A letter written on French Occupation watermarked stationery of the period by Major General and Commander in Chief VAUBOIS, of the French Occupation Forces in

Au citoyen
Guy consul français
de Malte

Malta. It was one of the many historical letters offered for sale in the Coates Sale by Christies Robson Lowe of the 4th November, 1990.

It is written by Voubois to the French Consul of Tripoli GUI, who happened to be in Malta, (the French Consul to Malta at that time was Jean Andre Caruson), enquiring about rumours of a plot by the Maltese against the French Occupation Forces in Valletta.

The plot was in fact real, and it was being concocted by the Maltese living in Valletta. Dun MIKIEL XERRI, MATTHEW PULIS, a Corsican pirate GILIERMU LORENZINI and the rebellious Maltese in the countryside under the leadership of Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana, General of the Maltese Army.

Events leading to the plot

On the 9th June 1798, Napoleon arrives off Malta with the French Fleet, and Grand Master Ferdinand Hompesch surrendered on June 11, 1798.

Napoleon walked through Valletta on June 12, 1798 and stayed up to the 18th, when he departed for Egypt, leaving a French garrison under the command of General VAUBOIS, who soon rendered himself very unpopular by introducing various controversial legislative measures. Matters came to a head on September 2, 1798 when the Tapestries of the Carmelite Church in Mdina were going to be auctioned. This sparked massive protests, leading to a confrontation with Louis Mason the French Commander of Mdina, who was eventually killed and his body thrown over the balcony of the house he had gone into to take refuge. The Insurrection had started. The French locked themselves up in Mdina, Valletta, The Cottonera, Forts Manoel, Tigne and Ricasoli.

Mdina was captured within twenty-four hours because the Maltese were able to enter through a side door in the bastion which the French were unaware of, but Valletta and the Cottoner, etc withstood the siege for two years, capitulating on September 5, 1800.

The Plot of January, 1799

When the insurrection started on September 2, 1798 it was quite obvious to the Maltese leaders outside Valletta that the French were not going to be easily dislodged from their strong entrenchment behind the massive city bastions. So the plan was to starve the French into surrendering. They thought that this could be achieved by asking for help from King Ferdinand of the two Sicilies, but as the King himself was having great problems with the French (who eventually captured Naples during this period, and had to flee with his Court to Palermo), the Maltese asked for his permission, which was granted, to seek help from the British, who at that moment had Nelson in the Mediterranean. This was done and Nelson sent Capt Ball to Malta, to organise the Maltese militarily, and blockade the sea lanes so that the French could not get reinforcements, and supplies from France by sea.

After fifteen months of blockading the French by land and sea, the Maltese inside Valletta, who were enduring great material hardship, began to think about a plan to surprise the French inside Valletta and open the City doors to their compatriots outside the City walls. Dun Mikiel Xerri and Lorenzini were the main architects of this plan, ably assisted by Matthew Pulis living in Valletta, who was the chief Disinfectant Officer employed by the French at the Lazaretto, on Manoel Island on the left hand side of Valletta, across Marsamxett Harbour.

Pulis because of his job was allowed to go out of Valletta from Marsamxett gate (now removed when the existing road was constructed) and row across the harbour every day, and so he was able to ferry the letters of Dun Mikiel Xerri and Lorenzini across the harbour to the Lazaretto for onward transmission by his son to Canon Caruana, without arousing suspicion. He was also in possession of the keys of the large store room belonging to the Lazaretto situated near Marsamxett Gate, known as the Lazaretto Medical Stores, in which the attacking Maltese were to hide during the night, so that they could enter Valletta through Marsamxett Gate, after it was opened by the Maltese from inside Valletta.

Dun Mikiel Xerri was one of the Professors of the *École Centrale* who wrote eleven letters during the period December 7, 1798 to January 8, 1799, all signed *Nota Manus* (the Known Hand), which are preserved in the Public Library in Valletta. In one of the letters there are two paragraphs written in invisible ink which became visible only when heated.

From these letters we get a very clear picture of all the intrigue, what was happening in Valletta; the various alarming rumours circulated to demoralise the Maltese inside the City, advise on absolute secrecy, and caution about certain Maltese leaving the City, useful information about the French Forces, and various weaknesses in the defences, and how Dun Mikiel Xerri and Lorenzini wished that the attack be carried out.

In his letter of the 6th January 1799 Lorenzini wrote as follows:

“The agreed signal will be given when we will be assured that 200-300 men mentioned by D. Mikiel will be in the stores, which have to be brought there by means of boats from Msida accompanied by Filippu Pulis the Disinfectant Officer.

“These should be among the bravest and most trustworthy, armed with rifles and given a double ration of ammunition. Five or six hundred other men should be at Marsa, in the Jesuit's Palace, armed as the others, and should remain hiding quietly up to five minutes past eight of the morning, when the signal will be given.

“The signal will be the ringing of the main bell of St John's. We at the same time, will attack the enemy, that is, the three Main City Gates, the Palace, whilst the reserve forces will attack St George's Gate, the armoury and Castille and other sites.

“At the same time those that would have been hiding in the stores of the Lazaretto

near (Marsamxett Gate) will enter from the Lazaretto (Marsamxett) Gate that would have been occupied and opened by us, and together we will go towards the door of St George to help the already attacking forces. The others with the same speed will go towards the Palace.

“The group of 500-600 at the Marsa are at the given signal to go towards the quay, and occupy it, and when this is done they can attack and conquer the low lying walls under the Kappucini. Apart from the passage that goes to the quay this barrier is not higher than *hames qasab* (35ft) and guarded by twelve soldiers only.

“At the same time of this attack, when the signal of the bell would have been given, a large quantity of men are to march from Tas-Samra or 'San Guzepp' so that one gives the impression that the main door of 'Tal-Bombi' was about to be attacked, and when these men reach the point where the road divides towards Marsa, they will fork towards Marsa so that 500-600 men will enter Valletta from the Quay Gate.

“It is important to tell those that enter Valletta, that no pillaging was to take place and that heavy penalties would be given to those who disobey these orders. At the same time all the batteries are to open fire continuously, to give the impression that an attack on the Cottonera was on, but I am not of the opinion that an attack should be launched prior to the signal, as otherwise the enemy might have suspicions, and they might expell us from the city, as they threaten us often, that they would do this.

“As regards the naval forces, these should remain where they are blockading and not let anybody escape. This, gentlemen, is my plan. I hope that if you do not accept it, as it might not exactly be what you wish, at least accept my enthusiasm and my readiness to sacrifice myself for my Faith and for the defence of this country that I consider as if my own.

“May I remind you that the usual signal will be given 48 hours before the attack, that is if the signal is given on Monday, the men are to go to the Marsamxetto Stores during Tuesday Night and the assault will take place on Wednesday. The other signal that the men are ready for the assault is that from the trenches opposite Fort Maneol. Three shots will be fired at six am one after each other, but with longer intervals.”

Further down we find written:

“Shown, agreed and approved *Id Maghrufa*.”

Further letters of Dun Mikiel more or less keep to the above plan with further clarifications and instructions.

How was the plot discovered?

From letters written by Vaubois on the 15th January 1799, to the French Minister responsible for war; from the letter of Admiral Villeneuve on the 17th January, 1799

to the Minister responsible for the French Navy; and from the Diary of Admiral Decres, we have the following clear picture of what happened.

In the early morning of January 11, 1799, the Genovese ship *Galathee*, Capt Cavazza, was able to avoid the blockading British ships and enter harbour, loaded with provisions informing Vaubois that the king of Sardinia had abdicated, and that the French Army had recaptured Rome from the King of Naples. This was indeed good news, and an occasion to rejoice and celebrate, the French troops flocking to the top of the bastions, waving their hats, and shouting with joy.

This unlucky event coincided with the time and date that the agreed signal was to be given, and Lorenzini, the brain behind the plot, began to have second thoughts about the success of the plot and postponed the agreed signal for later on during the day. At 11 am Vaubois ordered all the batteries on the bastions to fire their guns, and because of this, the signal by Lorenzini was again postponed. Some Maltese mistook the firing as the agreed signal that the attack was on, and advanced but had soon to return back. That Friday evening, Vaubois as part of the celebrations in honour of the arrival of the *Galathee*, ordered a special theatre performance at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta.

After nine pm, Lieutenant Roussel and the Commander of Fort Manoel Bouvard came out of Marsamxett Gate to go to Manoel Island, where they were stationed. On going past the Marsamxett Stores Rousell heard some voices coming out of the stores (in the stores were the 200-300 men who had been there since Thursday/Friday night – 10/11th – as agreed).

When Roussel arrived on Manoel Island he took French soldiers back by boat to the Marsamxett stores to investigate, and finding the Maltese hiding there began to fire on them taking them by surprise. Some fell dead, some tried to escape, and the rest captured.

Lorenzini, Dun Mikiel Xerri and Matthew Pulis were executed by a firing squad in the Palace Square, Valletta, on the 15th, 17th and 29th January 1799 respectively.

In all 49 patriots were executed, 34 of whom were from outside Valletta. The plot had failed, and the French remained occupying Valletta up to the 5th September, 1800 when they capitulated to the British.

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