

## Prologue

### Cervantes in Malta

#### *Cervantes the Soldier*

In 1573 Miguel de Cervantes was in Malta. In later life he would become world-famous for his *Don Quixote* but in that year he was serving as a rank-and-file soldier at the orders of Captain Manuel Ponce de León, commander of one of two companies of Spanish soldiers with a total strength of 317 men stationed on the island. The companies were units of the *Tercio* of Don Lope de Figueroa, under the overall command of Don Juan de Austria, the victor of Lepanto.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Report by Contador Sancho de Corrozo in Palermo on 8 November 1573, Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, leg. 1140, doc. 56, verso, reproduced in Belloso Martín 2016, 97, Annex 2. The Tercio was the renowned pike and shot military unit of circa 3,000 infantrymen that was the mainstay of Imperial Spain's power projection capability in the Early Modern period. A Tercio would be composed of a number of companies whose full strength at the time of the Siege of Malta in 1565 was approximately 150 to 200 men. (Vassallo, 2018, 16, fn 20) Attrition rates arising out of losses attributable to action or disease could be quite high so actual strength could fluctuate considerably. The Tercio de Figueroa was somewhat different from other Tercios in that it was not associated with a particular city or region where it was normally based, such as the Tercio de Sicilia, the Tercio de Napoles or the Tercio de Lombardia, and was what in present-day parlance could be called a Rapid Intervention Force. The need for such a force to attend to special situations had become evident as a consequence of the considerable time it had taken to gather a force strong enough to lift the siege of Malta in 1565 (Belloso Martín, 2015, 148). Don Juan de Austria, illegitimate son of the Emperor Charles V and half-brother to King Philip II, is a well-known enough figure in history. Not so the commander of the Tercio, Don Lope de Figueroa, who although one of the most renowned warriors of his time, would eventually be immortalized mainly because he commanded the regiment in which Cervantes served at Lepanto and because he was the general who opposed Pedro Crespo, the protagonist of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Alcalde de Zalamea*, one of the most famous plays of the Golden Age of Spanish drama (Belloso Martín, 2000, 225-230).

The island had undergone a siege of epic proportions just eight years earlier and after the devastation of war came not only the reconstruction of what had been destroyed but also the commencement of the building of a brand-new city. The latter became the capital on 18 March 1571 when Grand Master Pierre de Monte moved from his seat at Fort St Angelo in Birgu to the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta. Nevertheless, despite the considerable resources being poured in from all over Europe and the frantic pace of construction, the consolidation of the island's defenses was still very much work-in-progress and the Ottoman threat was ever-present.

As had happened before the siege, in the years immediately after, Grand Master Jean de la Valette had wanted to abandon the island and Viceroy Toledo had informed his sovereign, King Philip II, that if need be Imperial troops were to be posted to Malta to take the place of the Order (Vassallo, 2018, *passim*). In the event the Order stayed on and to strengthen the Hospitallers' resolve contingents of Imperial troops were periodically posted to Malta during periods of heightened tension in the confrontation with Ottoman Turkey. The presence of Ponce de Leon's company and Cervantes in Malta must be seen in the context of this policy.

Cervantes is best remembered for his groundbreaking literary work *Don Quixote*, often called the world's first novel in the Western tradition of the term, and the present collection of essays offers some glimpses into the considerable influence that this work has had on other writers, but some brief comments on Cervantes's life as a soldier may not be amiss so that the reader may have a fuller picture of the man.

Cervantes's career in the military spanned the years 1569–1584, according to military historian Belloso Martín (2015, 140). In this he includes his five years as a captive in Algiers (1575–1580), during which he is reputed to have tried to escape no less than four times; his supposed participation in the campaign in Portugal (1580–1583), which led to Philip II of Spain also becoming Philip I of Portugal; and the naval battle of San Miguel in the Azores in 1582, in which a Spanish fleet won a decisive victory against a French fleet. Other researchers disagree with Belloso Martín concerning the duration of Cervantes's military career and have instead suggested that his time in Royal service was of shorter duration. He may have served in the Papal forces before 1571 but there would seem to be no documentation showing that he had been in Royal service prior to that year. (Sanchez Martin, 2016, 177–178). As regards his discharge from the service, it has been argued that Cervantes ceased being a serviceman in 1580, once he was ransomed from captivity and was repatriated to Spain (Ramos Oliver, 2015, 86–87).

The reasons for a young man like Miguel de Cervantes deciding to join up could have been many and varied. For Venetian military engineer Giulio Savorgnan, writing in 1572, men enlisted in the army “to escape from being craftsmen, working in a shop; to avoid a criminal sentence; to see new things; to pursue honour.” (Cited in Martínez, 2016, 13) But these were the few, continued Savorgnan, and the most joined in the hope of having enough to live on. In Cervantes's case he may have been drawn by the fact that his younger brother Rodrigo had already enlisted. Another reason may have had to do with the debate concerning the claim that Cervantes had a

*converso* background. There seems to be no clear-cut resolution of this debate but Garrido Ardila, citing Francisco Márquez Villanueva, has argued it would be more difficult for Cervantes to be considered a *cristiano viejo*, in other words without any Jewish blood, than otherwise (Garrido Ardila, 2018, 265). Be that as it may, the army was definitely one of the institutions in which the *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of blood, statutes were never introduced (Martínez, 2016, 13). In other words, the army was a perfect place to hide in plain sight, with periodic wages and occasional opportunities for plunder to boot.

Once he had joined the service Cervantes would seem to have become an harquebusier (Ramos Oliver, 2016, 57). This is very interesting given the rejection of firearms on ethical grounds by Don Quixote, the personage created by Cervantes (Ramos Oliver, 2015, 91). This highlights the tensions between the old ways of making war and the new realities of war in the Early Modern period, between the aspirations of Cervantes's creation Don Quixote and what Cervantes himself experienced at first hand, namely a new form of waging war which one writer has described as characterized by "larger numbers, greater permanence, and a new firepower" (Mallett, 2006, 17).

Cervantists have traditionally followed the well-documented movements of the main body of the troops serving under Don Juan de Austria and Field Marshall Lope de Figueroa, to trace the whereabouts of Miguel de Cervantes in the early years of his army career after his discharge from hospital in Messina, once he had recovered from the wounds sustained in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. There are, nevertheless, reasons to believe that the key indicator of where

Cervantes was and what he was doing during the hectic early 1570s lies instead in the whereabouts of his company commander Captain Manuel Ponce de León, especially given that having arrived in Sicily from Malta in late 1573, Cervantes's unit was detached from the Tercio de Figueroa and together with another company attached to the Tercio de Sicilia to strengthen that island's defenses (Belloso Martín, 2016, 89-91).<sup>2</sup> In the winter of 1573, when Don Juan decided to send 14 companies of Figueroa's Tercio to spend the winter in Sardinia, these did not include the companies of Juan de Anaya or Ponce de León and as a consequence Cervantes was not in Sardinia from late 1573 until May of 1574 as claimed by Martín Fernández de Navarrete in his influential *Vida de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (1819) and others after him. He was in Malta and Sicily.

Subsequently, at some stage during 1575, Cervantes was transferred to Naples because it was there that he was given permission to return to Spain and having set out on the galley *Sol* was captured on 28 September 1575, off the coast of

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2. The Tercio de Sicilia to which Cervantes was transferred had had a very important role in the siege of Malta a few years earlier. The reinforcements of about 800 seasoned Spanish troops sent by Don Garcia de Toledo, Viceroy of Sicily on 8 May 1565, just before the start of the siege, and on 28 June 1565, must have drawn considerably on the Tercio de Sicilia for manpower before other fighting men starting gathering for the relief force from other parts. They were the mainstay of the garrison which fought to the last in the fort of St Elmo according to Spiteri and bought precious time for the island as a whole, while they constituted the bulk of the Piccolo Socorro which prevented Birgu from falling according to Balbi. (Spiteri, 2005, 96–98 & 161 and Balbi, 1568, f66r) The commanding officer of the Tercio de Sicilia himself, *maestre de campo* Melchor de Robles, who led the second contingent of reinforcements from Sicily, died defending Fort St Michael.

Marseilles, together with his younger brother Rodrigo, and enslaved in Algiers.

At present, service in the armed forces in Western society no longer enjoys the prestige that it had at certain junctures in the past and many sectors of contemporary society fail to understand that ultimately no amount of 'soft power' EU style will ever deter an aggressor intent on mischief and that only a society which is prepared for war can truly hope to avoid it. Cervantes had no doubt about the merits of soldiering and that the price of peace is eternal vigilance, but he was also keenly aware that even in his time, at the height of the Habsburg Empire's spread, soldiers were often considered a breed apart and not given their due (Saavedra Vázquez, 2015, *passim*).

In his famous 'Discurso de las armas y las letras', in chapter 38 of book 1 of the *Quixote*, Cervantes is, despite the wretchedness of a soldier's life, clear and unequivocal in considering the bearing of arms as being superior to a career in *letras*, translated in the excerpt below as 'letters' but which could in contemporary parlance correspond variously to Law, the Arts or the Humanities.<sup>3</sup>

... let us return to the superiority of arms over letters, a matter still undecided, so many are the arguments put forward on each side; besides those I have mentioned, letters say that without them arms cannot maintain themselves, for war, too, has its laws and is

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3. It may be of interest to note, in passing, that starting in the mid-sixteenth century there is a steady shift towards the study of law in Spain's premier universities, in a practical bid by students to secure entry to clerical and secular careers. By the late seventeenth century, law students at the universities of Salamanca and Valladolid, who would typically study both canon and civil law, outnumbered students of theology by over twenty to one (Kagan, 1970, 54-55).

governed by them, and laws belong to the domain of letters and men of letters. To this arms make answer that without them laws cannot be maintained, for by arms states are defended, kingdoms preserved, cities protected, roads made safe, seas cleared of pirates; and, in short, if it were not for them, states, kingdoms, monarchies, cities, ways by sea and land would be exposed to the violence and confusion which war brings with it, so long as it lasts and is free to make use of its privileges and powers. And then it is plain that whatever costs most is valued and deserves to be valued most. To attain to eminence in letters costs a man time, watching, hunger, nakedness, headaches, indigestions, and other things of the sort, some of which I have already referred to. But for a man to come in the ordinary course of things to be a good soldier costs him all the student suffers, and in an incomparably higher degree, for at every step he runs the risk of losing his life (Cervantes, 1605).

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* would seem to have subscribed to Baldassere Castiglione's dictum, as set out in *Il Cortigiano* (1561), that the principal and true profession of the courtier ought to be that of arms.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Castiglione's ideal gentleman was not expected to be proficient only in arms (Castiglione, 1561/1900, *passim*). He was also expected to be familiar with good literature, skilled at oratory, play an instrument, draw, dance and have a set of other skills all of which he could carry out effortlessly. But Castiglione's Renaissance ideal type relating to those of noble extraction was

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4. Castiglione's publication must have considerably influenced 'public' perceptions concerning what qualities a perfect gentleman was to be endowed with. By the early twentieth century it had been published in no less than 140 editions, including Spanish (1534), French (1537), English (1561), Latin (1561), and German (1566).

far removed from the realities of life in the armed forces as experienced by Cervantes himself.

First of all, it must be made clear at the very outset that the Spanish professional soldiers associated with early modern warfare were overwhelmingly of plebeian extraction, as had been the case with the Conquistadors (Martínez, 2016, 12–13).<sup>5</sup> Badly fed, badly housed, and badly paid, if at all, it is no wonder that those entrusted with carrying out the Empire's dirty work were prone to mutiny when it got too much. Once discharged, veterans, especially if maimed by war, had no golden retirement to look forward to either, as poignantly put by Cervantes himself in Chapter 24 of the second part of his novel: "It is not right that [crippled soldiers] be treated the way blacks are treated who are emancipated and freed when they are old and can no longer serve, and are thrown out of the house and called free men, making them slaves to hunger from which only death can liberate them" (Cited in Martínez, 2016, 176–177). As it turned out, Cervantes himself got off fairly lightly with just the loss of the use of his left hand and seems to have been able to re-adapt reasonably well to civilian life, unlike many of his former comrades, the 'soldados rotos' or broken soldiers, who on their return 'home' ended up on the margins of society in the underworld of Spanish seventeenth-century cities, together with pícaros and thugs (Martínez, 2016, 187).

Cervantes went on to become a master of 'letters' but he was not alone in being a soldier author. Indeed, many did not

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5. Around 1587, at the height of Spain's imperial might, hidalgos, or individuals with some claim to 'nobility', were underrepresented in the armed forces, constituting around 8% of the population but only 5–6 % of the military (García Hernán, 2014, 24–27).



have to choose between *armas* and *letras* and some of the most important men of letters in Golden Age Spain combined in their lifetime service in the armed forces, typically during their youth, with superlative literary creation. One class of such writings were the autobiographies by soldiers such as Alonso de Contreras, Alonso Enríquez de Guzmán, Diego Duque de Estrada, and the nun and ensign Catalina de Erauso. These could vary in quality but almost invariably constituted fascinating stories as in the case of Pedro Ordóñez de Ceballos's *Viaje del Mundo* of 1614, describing thirty years of soldiering and seafaring encompassing all of Europe, northern and southern Africa, the Middle East, America, the Philippines, Japan, China, Cochin China, India, and Persia (Zugasti, 2020). In his recent work on soldiers' writing in the Early Modern Hispanic world Miguel Martínez coins the term 'a soldierly republic of letters' to describe this by-product of Imperial Spain's spread across the globe (Martínez, 2016, 1). In his fascinating study he highlights that these typically plebeian soldiers tended to be more literate than their civilian peers (Martínez, 2016, 12–14).

In addition to soldiers who set down accounts of their life, there were also first-class writers who at some stage in their lives had been under arms. Notable examples, apart from Cervantes himself, include Garcilaso de la Vega, the best known poet of the Spanish Renaissance, who fought in various theatres of war and died of his wounds close to Nice at the young age of 35, and the great playwrights of the Golden Age, Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. The former fought in the Azores and in the Great Armada against England whilst in the navy, while the latter served in Italy and Flanders.

But coming back to our “hero”, it is very possible that had Cervantes’s life not been put on hold by five years of captivity on the coasts of Barbary he would have gone on to build a notable career in the military. When captured on his way back to Spain he was apparently carrying letters of recommendation from Don Juan de Austria and the Duke of Sessa that would have facilitated the possibility of promotion to captain (Ramos Oliver, 2015, 87 and Fernández Nieto, 2016, 25). His courage in insisting on being placed in the thick of the fighting during the Battle of Lepanto despite having been ordered below deck owing to fever, and subsequently being shot no less than three times during the fighting, had been noted. Don Juan de Austria visited him during the months he spent in hospital in Messina recovering from his wounds and not only praised his courage but also gave instructions for him to be paid a special allowance (Belloso Martín, 2015, 141). How Cervantes’s military career would have panned out had he not been enslaved is clearly in the realm of speculation. What we can be pretty sure of is that ransoming Miguel de Cervantes and his brother Rodrigo must have constituted a considerable strain on their family’s financial resources and after trying his luck at a variety of jobs after demobilisation Miguel de Cervantes went on to become the literary giant whose works have come down to us.

### *Cervantes the Writer*

Some four and a half centuries later, in 2016, Cervantes was again in Malta but this time he was there in spirit at the behest of the Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies of the University of Malta for a conference on the influence on foreign

writers of his masterpiece, *Don Quixote*. Involving Maltese, Spanish, and American scholars the event was sponsored by the University of Malta, the Alistair David Robert Chalmers Trust, and the Embassy of Spain in Malta, who also generously funded this publication.

*Don Quixote* is one of the most influential books ever, if the number of translations into other languages is any indicator. Although the Bible is by far the most translated of any text by a huge margin, *Don Quixote* is one of the most translated texts aimed at an adult audience ever written. By all accounts, it is also one of the “best” books ever written. In a 2002 poll conducted by the Norwegian Book Clubs, 100 leading writers from no less than 54 countries voted *Don Quixote* the best work of fiction ever written (Reuters, 2002). Closer to our times, Garrido Ardila has argued that *Don Quixote* is not only the first important modern novel but also the one that has had most influence on world literature (Garrido Ardila, 2018, 257-258). It was on this last aspect that our department decided to focus its contribution towards marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Miguel de Cervantes’s passing.

The conference was organized over three days, between 28 and 30 November 2016, and during these three days, participants spoke on a range of topics which very clearly demonstrated the wide-ranging impact of *Don Quixote*.

In normal circumstances, the publication of the proceedings would have followed a couple of years later but a set of events impacting on both the department and the editor have resulted in the publication taking somewhat longer to see

the light of day. I nevertheless trust that you find the contributions collected here of interest.

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