

The Great Siege of Malta

Background

The Order of Saint John arrived in Malta in October 1530 subsequent to their defeat by the Turks led by Suleiman I and their banishment from Rhodes, their home of some 212 years (1309 to 1523). In search of a new home and wishing to stay away from the internal turmoil of mainstream Europe, the Knights realised their best option was to locate on the periphery of the then Christian world. On the 23rd March 1530, Emperor Charles V of Spain granted the Order the islands of Malta and Gozo and the north African city of Tripoli.

The Order's maritime skills and their formidable fleet, located in the finest harbour in the Mediterranean on the strategically located Island of Malta, represented a significant threat to Ottoman trade and their aspirations of western expansion into Europe. This came at a heightened period of intense struggle between the Christian and Islamic faiths commencing with the Crusades (1096 to 1291). In order to fulfil his expansionary aspirations, Suleiman the Magnificent had to rid himself of this Christian block represented by the enclave of Malta.

The Turks assembled an armada of more than 190 vessels, including some 158 galleys to transport an army of 28,000 men including the Sultan's elite force of 6,300 Janissaries. Including sailors and support troops, the entire Turkish invasion force numbered some 40,000 men. The opposing defenders numbered about 9,000 men including 500 Knights under the command of the grand master, Jean de la Valette.

The Great Siege

The Turkish invasion force arrived off the coast of Malta on the 18th May 1565 and landed the next day. Their first objective was Fort St Elmo whose gallant defence endured continuous attacks for thirty-one days before capitulating on the 23rd June. This action cost the Turks 8,000 casualties whilst the defenders losses amounted to 1,500 men including 120 knights. With Fort St. Elmo in their hands, the Turks now commenced attacks on Forts St. Michael and St Angelo across the harbour. By July, the Knights were completely encircled by the Turkish forces.

Grand Master La Valette made appeals for assistance to the Viceroy of Sicily whilst rejecting an offer to surrender with honours in July. The Turkish invaders stepped up their attacks with heavy barrages on Birgu, assaults on the Post of Castille below Fort St. Angelo and penetrating attacks on Fort St. Michael. Each time the defence held and the Turks were driven off with heavy losses.

A small relief force comprising a squadron of four galleys did reach Malta on 5th July and after landing on the western side of the island went to the aid of the defenders of Birgu. Suffering heavy losses and running short of reinforcements, ammunition and provisions which had failed to arrive, the Turks turned their attention to attacking the inland fortified old citadel of Mdina. These plans were thwarted by the heavy and well-prepared defences of the city.

The long-awaited relief force of some 12,000 Spanish and Italian troops arrived on the 7th September 1565. Fearing that they would be cut off, the Turks lifted the siege the next day (8th September) and completed a hasty retreat back to Turkey. This four-month siege had cost the Turks heavily and it was reported that at the lifting of the siege, only 600

defenders were capable of bearing arms and of the 500 knights that started the siege, over 300 had lost their lives and 80 were wounded.

The Significance of 8th September

The Knights of Saint John and the Maltese' gallant defence and sacrifices throughout the Great Siege had checked the western expansion of Islam thereby preserving Western Europe as a Christian domain. This heroic feat was well recognised by the Christian world and all of Europe rejoiced in celebrating the victory. The Grand Master ordered that the victory was to be remembered each year with the 8th September set aside for special commemoration and with great religious solemnity.

In many areas of the present-day Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Knights Hospitaller, the lifting of the Great Siege of Malta is still commemorated each year on or as close as practical to the 8th September. The significance of the 8th September to Maltese society is embodied in its celebration of Victory Day on that date which is a national day set aside to acknowledge the end of three significant historical sieges, namely:

1. The Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman Empire in 1565;
2. The Siege of Valletta by the French Blockade in 1800; and
3. The Siege of Malta by the Axis forces in World War 2 in 1943.

References

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