

The Events that led to the Great Siege of Malta 1565

Summary of May Lecture by Joseph Borg

The reasons for the Great Siege of Malta of 1565 have their roots going back to the rise of Islam in 630. With the expansion of Islam, the Holy lands fell under their influence. This affected the Eastern Roman Empire as well. Later, the spread of the Mongolian hordes impacted on the eastern end of this empire.

The crusades started when the emperor in Byzantium asked the Pope to help him fight these invaders. The message of the crusades was to reclaim the holy land to Christianity as it was before Islam took over. The result of this was the formation of the various orders of Knights, amongst which were the Knights Hospitallers. The fourth crusade was to diminish the power of the Byzantines and the formation of the Outremers.

Saladin organised his forces and after some 200 years of European presence the whole area was once again under Arab rule. Meanwhile, the Turks started their move westwards and within another 150 years they had conquered Constantinople and parts of the Balkans. The Order of St John (Hospitallers) had by this time moved to Rhodes.

Over in the West, Spain was reunited by Ferdinand and Isabella, and the Moors were ordered

out of the country. The New World was also discovered and trade was flourishing in both directions, i.e. from East to West and vice-versa, with some of the Italian kingdoms having a great say in the matter (Venice, Genoa, Pisa).

The exiled moors were bent on revenge and, through the agency of two famous brothers, Kheir-ed-Din and Aruj Barbarossa, the Barbary pirates came to the fore. They preyed mainly on Spanish shipping but they also raided the coasts of lands facing the North African coast, from Morocco all the way to Tunis. Apart from pillaging, they also dragged a lot of innocent people to their lairs as slaves. Malta was in the thick of this.

Meantime, the Knights were expelled from Rhodes where they took part in attacking and looting Turkish vessels (Corso). They transferred to Rome from where the Grand Master, De L'Isle Adam managed to talk Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, into ceding Malta and Tripoli to them. Charles' reason for this was obvious: he wanted someone to guard the south-western flank of his empire.

Charles started a series of offensives against the corsairs and this often required the knights to join in, much to the anger of the corsairs, among whom we now meet Dragut. He formed an alliance with Suleiman in Constantinople, so the influence of the Turkish navy spread into the Western Mediterranean. Unfortunately, Charles V and Francis I of France did not see eye to eye because of heritage issues and were frequently at war with each other. In fact, Francis even had an alliance with Suleiman against the Spaniards. Thus there was no united European force against the spread of the Ottoman Empire. Only Charles faced this problem because he was after all a Hapsburg, and it was central Europe that was being invaded by the Turks. The Reformation also split alliances because of religion. This also led to a weakening of the strength of the Order as both the English and some German Knights left the Order

The knights in Malta resumed the Corso into the Eastern Mediterranean, since they always dreamed that one day they would re-conquer Rhodes. Accordingly they were not very happy with the idea of protecting Malta and Tripoli. However, since no other place was made available for them as a base, they reluctantly started to fortify the areas around the Borgo and Senglea, and they even built a fort (St Elmo) at the tip of the Sciberras peninsula and another (Fort St Michael) on the landward side of Senglea.

Internal squabbles in the Order were also present, mainly because of the feuds between Charles V and Francis I. The Spanish and French langues of the Order were frequently

antagonistic to each other.

The Corsos were bringing in a lot of loot to Malta. The best known commander of the Corso was none other than Romegas, one of the heroes of the siege that was to follow. On one of his expeditions he attacked and captured several large merchantmen, amongst which was one that belonged to the chief eunuch of the court of Suleiman. He also captured many notable people including the nurse of one of Suleiman's daughters.

Agitation in Suleiman's court against these piratical acts led him to issue an edict, calling for the building of a great fleet with sufficient numbers of men, weapons and supplies in order to remove the Knights from Malta.

Powerpoint and recording of lecture: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ovsvcl1cgegzav9/AADLLUsONYo5Z9BIVWeLwbiMa?dl=0>

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