

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MEDICAL ASPECTS OF THE SIEGE OF 1565

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*Lecture delivered to the Malta Branch of the British Medical Association
on the 23rd October, 1952*

PART I: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The historians that have occupied themselves with the story of the siege of 1565 have confined their attention almost exclusively to its religious, military and political implications. As far as can be ascertained no account has been written about its medical aspects and the psychological reactions of the civilian population under the stress of war. The amount of information on these aspects of the siege is very scanty. No medical man of that period appears to have made any observations on the subject, or, if any did, they have either been destroyed or not yet brought to light. Hence only lay sources are available. These are fragmentary since contemporary and later historians recorded only the more dramatic manifestations of medical happenings. Besides, the descriptions that they give are more often picturesque than detailed and medically informative. However, in spite of these shortcomings it is possible, from the material gleaned from various sources, to form a general picture of medical events and to follow the civilian population through its varying reactions in response to the invasion alarm, hatred of the enemy, the self-preservative drives, the joy of victory and post-war fears.

The siege of 1565 lasted four months, from the 18th May to the 8th of September. The main fighting took place in three areas — round the fort of St. Elmo (23rd May to 23rd June) at Senglea and at Birgu (6th July to 8th September). It has been estimated that the number of fighting men involved in the siege operations was 90,000 on the Turkish side(1) and 9,100 men under arms on the Order's side(2) together with the civilian population which must have numbered well over 22,000 souls(3).

Fear Reactions.

A Turkish invasion had been anticipated since a long time, but according to the calculations made by the Knights, the Turks were not expected to attack Malta before the end of June. As things turned out, however, the invaders appeared off the Island on the morning of the 18th May. This sudden, unexpected arrival induced great fear in the population(4). The first reaction, when the alarm was sounded, was one of bewilderment which soon gave place to turmoil and con-

(1) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, Carlo, *Lo assedio di Malta*. Torino, 1902. p. 612.

(2) ZAMMIT, Them., *Malta, the Islands and their History*. Malta, 1926. p. 131.

(3) PRESCOTT, G. *L'assedio di Malta*. Malta, 1861. p. 27 (footnote).

(4) BOSIO, Iacomo, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano* — Parte Terza. 1602. p. 513.

fusion(5). A number of country folk set out to collect their cattle and save their crops and carry them inside the fortifications, but others, overcome by terror, ran hither and thither not knowing what they were doing(6). Even those who in the past had earned a reputation for bravery and steadfastness in the face of danger could not hide, in the pallor of their faces, their uneasiness and fear(7).

Viperano, writing a year after the siege, gives a very vivid picture of the initial reaction of the population. "The arrival of the enemy" he says "excited so much fear and apprehension in the hearts of the Maltese, who are naturally timid and hardly used to war, that many hid themselves in their houses or behind walls while others chose the caverns and the cliffs. One could not help feeling pity for them in seeing some of them in tears and trembling with terror taking refuge here and there with their wives and children in the absence of the necessaries of life and without any hope of obtaining food(8)."

The Grandmaster had issued orders that in the event of an invasion all the heads of cattle and crops that could not be conveyed inside the fortifications were to be destroyed(9); but because of the initial panic that seized the population, this order was incompletely carried out with the result that a great quantity of provisions fell into the hands of the Turks later on(10). Another version has it that the loss of these provisions was due to the little care shown by the country people to save their animals because they were not anticipating that the Turks would remain in the Island for long(11).

Very probably both factors — panic and over-optimism in the face of danger — were operative, for in spite of the apparent contrasting characters of these two states of mind, each of them may spring from the emotion of fear. Panic is a very common response to a fear stimulus, especially where masses of people are involved; but over-confidence and the belittling of danger in the face of a real peril may also be a defence mechanism against fear. Those who panicked were terrified of the Turks and made no attempt to hide their terror neither from themselves nor from others; while those who did not bother to destroy their flocks and crops because they appeared optimistic about the outcome of the Turkish invasion, may have been as afraid of the enemy as those who panicked, but with this difference — they substituted a psychological flight for a muscular one. Indeed one way of escaping from danger is to minimise the importance of its threat to the self-preservative urges of the personality, or else to deny its existence altogether. This form of escapism from a fear-stimulus and its attendant anxieties and obligations manifests itself in the over-compensatory attitude of an unjustified optimism. The consequences were as harmful to the war effort of the community as those of panic.

(5) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 170.

(6) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.*, p. 513; GAUCI, Gaetano, *Il Grande Assedio di Malta nel 1565*, Malta, 1891. p. 11.

(7) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.*, p. 513.

(8) VIPERANO, G. A., *La guerra di Malta* (Translation by E. F. Mizzi), Malta 1931, p. 15.

(9) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

(10) *Ibidem*, p. 170.

(11) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 525.

The presence of a civilian population in a sterile and defenceless Island constituted a major problem for the Order in time of war. The Knights were well aware of it and since many years they had been trying, if not to solve it radically, at least to mitigate it. In fact as early as 1551 they had contemplated, in the event of a Turkish invasion, the mass evacuation of what they called the "useless civilians" i.e. the women, children and the aged, from Malta and Gozo and their transfer to the southern coasts of Sicily(12). Serious opposition had been encountered from the Gozitans against this scheme. They declared that they would only leave Gozo if induced to do so by active force and that they preferred to risk the hardships of a siege in their own castle of Rabat in the company of their wives and children rather than suffer separation from their families(13). It was afterwards discovered, however, that their real intention was to abandon Gozo and make for Malta if and when an invasion materialised(14). When, however, the Turks did come in 1551 the Gozitans had no opportunity of carrying out this manoeuvre. In fact they were overwhelmed by the Turks and after surrendering their castle, between 5,000 to 6,000 of them were taken slaves(15).

The Maltese were so impressed by the fate of the Gozitans that many families volunteered to emigrate to Sicily in that year and not a few of them settled there for good(16). In April 1552 one thousand persons — women, children and old people — left Malta for Sicily(17). As rumours of a Turkish invasion subsequently became less persistent, this exodus dried up, but when in the early months of 1565 news of Turkish military preparations against Malta again started reaching the Island, the evacuation of civilians was resumed. Between the 16th April and the 13th May 1565, "a great number of people", among whom there were many of the principal families of the Island, sailed to Sicily to be out of reach of the dangers of war(18). A further batch of refugees had already embarked on four galleys and were waiting for the opportune moment to sail when the Turkish fleet unexpectedly appeared off the Island and the voyage had to be put off(19).

While every official encouragement — including free passages — had been afforded to the Maltese to leave the Island, no detailed scheme had been prepared for the internal evacuation of the remaining population from the countryside to within the fortifications. The consequence was that at the announcement of the enemy's landing, the country folk found themselves without guidance. A number of old people, women and children hid themselves in the caves or Rdum where they were afterwards discovered by the Turks(20), but the majority of the villagers tried to seek refuge within the defences of Birgu. They argued that once the Grandmaster had fixed his residence in Birgu, this town must have been the strongest fortress in the Island, as indeed it was.

(12) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 280.

(13) *Ibidem*, p. 292.

(14) *Ibidem*, p. 292.

(15) *Ibidem*, p. 305.

(16) *Ibidem*, p. 307.

(17) *Ibidem*, p. 325.

(18) *Ibidem*, p. 502, 503, 511.

(19) *Ibidem*, p. 513.

(20) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 204.

This mass movement towards Birgu in time of war was not the first of its kind. A similar rush of the people on this town had occurred in 1551 when, during a widespread Turkish raid on Malta, some 12,000 persons had sought protection within its walls(21). In this month of May 1565, however, the Grandmaster viewed this second influx of so many people into such a restricted area with very grave concern. It had not yet been forgotten how in 1551 the refugees had to lie about in the streets of Birgu day and night because there was not sufficient room for them in the houses; how they suffered from thirst owing to scarcity of water and how, in conformity with the then current miasmatic theory of infection, fears of an outbreak of pestilence had tortured their minds owing to the "very foul odours derived from the breath, the sweat and the other exhalations of so many human bodies and animals crowded together(22)". He feared that the same scenes would repeat themselves and that some contagion might arise during the forthcoming siege with disastrous results. He, therefore, gave orders that the gates of Birgu that led to the countryside were to be shut to prevent further congestion inside the town. He also appointed a Knight, Fra Gabriel Gort, a Catalan, to take charge of the distribution inside the other fortifications of the Island of those civilians that had been left outside the gates of Birgu. Most of these refugees were eventually conducted within the walls of Senglea where they were "very charitably accommodated"(23).

A request to transfer themselves to Birgu came also from the inhabitants of Mdina. Finding themselves without adequate means of defence, they sent a delegate to the Grandmaster to ask for the supply of the necessary arms and of a sufficient number of soldiers to defend the city, or else to request that the inhabitants of Mdina be allowed to abandon their city and repair with their possessions within Birgu. This new threat to the internal security of Birgu was averted in time by the Grandmaster, who, choosing the first alternative, sent the required arms and men to Mdina. This move so satisfied the citizens of that citadel and raised their morale to such a pitch that, in the words of one of the Knights, "they performed their duty faithfully and bore themselves with valour during the whole siege"(24). Thanks to the measures thus taken, the initial panic of the masses was promptly and effectively dealt with.

The Influence of Religion.

The feeling of relief experienced by the civilian population when it found itself posted securely inside the bastions of Birgu, Senglea and Mdina was further strengthened as a result of the religious ceremonies held during the succeeding days of the war. On the first day of the Turkish landing, La Valette ordered the public exposition of the Holy Sacrament in the churches and appealed to the people to offer prayers for their deliverance. Further religious ceremonies and processions were held periodically during the siege(25).

(21) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 297.

(22) *Ibidem*, p. 297.

(23) *Ibidem*, p. 515.

(24) *Ibidem*, p. 516.

(25) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 171 & 181.

To appreciate the psychological effects of these religious activities on the people, we must bear in mind that more than a national motive was involved in the conflict: for apart from being their foes from the national viewpoint, the Turks were also the enemies of the Maltese in so far as they were the enemies of all Christians. A historian designates the Maltese of the sixteenth century as having been "very devout and good Catholics" while the Turks were labelled "the infidel dogs". Patriotic resistance in those days thus became identified with the religious motive and the struggles against the Moslems inevitably assumed the nature of a Holy War. Under such conditions, La Valette's public enlistment of religion could not but result in bolstering up the morale of the population. First of all the reliance on supernatural help infused hope and courage in an anxious population. The Maltese were convinced that in the past they had received supernatural assistance in times of national emergencies. Thus they firmly believed that during the Moorish siege of Mdina in 1428-29, St. Paul had been seen clad in armour and mounted on a steed attacking the enemy(26), while they still remembered how in 1551 Mdina had been besieged by the Turks and how the siege was lifted a day or two after the effigy of St. Agatha had been carried in procession to the walls of the city(27). They now saw no reason why supernatural forces should not intervene on their behalf as in the past. This expectation of divine help dispelled to a great extent what remained of the emotional tension that had been engendered by the invasion alarm. In the second place, it united the Maltese to their rulers. It must be remembered that the Knights, with their encroachments on the political rights and privileges of the Maltese in previous years, had provoked in the people an undercurrent of resentment and hostility against the Order(28). The treatment of the Maltese by the Order has been described as having been that of "a crowd of Christian slaves bound to obey all the whimsical laws of the Knights under the usual penalties of the birch, the oar and the gallows"(29). The Maltese and the Knights thus formed two separate communities with little or no cohesive bonds between them. It is remarkable that even during the siege the Knights maintained their aristocratic outlook — they and their soldiers were "i nostri" while the Maltese civilians were "la bassa plebe" or "il popolo minuto". Religion formed the only ground on which the people and their rulers could meet on an equal footing. The Turks by threatening this common faith of the Maltese and the Knights strengthened the religious bond between the two communities and thus caused the people to forget their grievances for the time being and to rally unhesitatingly around the Grandmaster and his Knights.

(26) A painting by Mattia Preti recording this tradition exists in the Cathedral Church at Mdina.

(27) CASSAR PULLICINO, J., *Pirates and Turks in Maltese Tradition*, in "Scientia" Vol. XIV, No. 4 of 1948, p. 164.

(28) "Ma l'ordine degli Ospitalieri invece di cattivarsi l'affezione dei sudditi coll'equità e la mitezza, inaugurò un governo despótico ed arbitrario." CARUANA, A. E., *Sull'origine della lingua maltese*. Malta, 1896. p. 323-24.

(29) ZAMMIT, Them., *The Inhabitants of the Maltese Islands*, in "Archivum Melitense", July 1913, p. 243.

Adaptation to War Conditions.

Though the initial excitement had been brought under control, the civilian population had yet to learn to adjust itself to exposure to actual warfare. Until this adjustment took place there were transitory moments of fear and discouragement. Thus the official historian of the Order reports that a group of Maltese workers, who were engaged in repairing the bastions of Senglea, showed such fear of the enemy fire when first exposed to it, that fleeing from their place of work they sought shelter "sotto le falde delle donne loro"(30). However, these men soon adapted themselves to the new war conditions and later on they not only lost their fear but became very daring. Those civilians, too, numbering some 5,300 men, who were conscripted into the army, proved to be worthy comrades of the Knights and of the regular soldiers by their valour and endurance though they received little training and had no special knowledge of the arts of war(31). The same adjustment was shown by the women; children and old people who, finding themselves in the battle areas, joined fearlessly in the fight(32). Thus it has been recorded that "wives and children fought with an intrepidity that equalled in some measure the resolute bravery of the Knights; and if paternal and conjugal love inspired their men with a courage and force to which they had been hitherto insensible, there were not wanting heroic women who ran to the assistance of their fathers, their brothers, and their husbands and who generously exposed themselves to the greatest dangers"(33).

Reactions to the Loss of St. Elmo.

The first serious psychological crisis of the war came after the loss of St. Elmo on the 23rd June. Apart from its military consequences this event was especially demoralising because it occurred on the eve of the feast of St. John Baptist, the patron saint of the Order. Mustafa did not fail to exploit the situation. In addition to grief and discouragement, he managed to inculcate terror in an already anxious population by a very effective form of propaganda. He caused all the dead Knights found in St. Elmo to be beheaded, and after tying their mutilated bodies to planks, he sent them floating in the Grand Harbour so that they could be seen by all the inhabitants and defenders on the bastions of Senglea and Birgu(34). This sight produced the desired effect on the besieged. Anticipatory fears of a major disaster gripped the hearts of the civilian population who understood that a like fate awaited them. The men of Birgu and Senglea met in subdued groups to vent their preoccupations, but the women showed their fear and grief in a more demonstrative manner by their loud lamentations in the streets of the towns(35).

(30) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 602.

(31) BEDFORD, W. K. R., *The Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem*, London, 1902, p. 70.

(32) GAUCI, G., *op. cit.* p. 181.

(33) VERTOT, *The History of the Knights of Malta*, London, 1728, Vol. II, Book XIII, p. 18.

(34) ZAMMIT, Them., *Malta, the Islands and their History*. p. 135.

(35) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 579.

La Valette realised the dangers of this state of affairs. He was aware that Mustafa's fear-propaganda aimed at alienating the people from their loyalty to the Knights and at stirring in them the desire for the suspension of hostilities(36). The way to ward off the immediate consequences of such a crisis was to restrain the too demonstrative show of grief and anxiety of the people; secondly, to divert their attention from their reverses; and, finally, to replace the fear-stimulus by another one of an opposite kind capable of arousing buoyant emotions and of elevating their damaged morale. Accordingly, he commanded the women to stop their moanings and lamentations, and gave orders that the feast of St. John was to be celebrated on the morrow with the usual festivities and fireworks(37). Then in a speech to the people at the piazza of Birgu, he warned them not to pay heed to any promises of leniency that the Turks might make to them as it was not the first time that the enemy had made similar promises in the past and then failed to keep them. Those persons, therefore, who might have thought it expedient to come to terms with the enemy erred gravely. It was wiser not to expect any quarter from the Turks and to wage a pitiless war to the end(38).

On that same day he issued a "bando" ordering that all Turkish prisoners of war were to be put to the sword and cut to pieces without being allowed the least quarter(39). He commanded, moreover, that this slaughter was to be carried out by the people "perchè (il popolo) a suo talento ne facesse giustizia"(40).

Cruelty of the Crowd.

The "bando", which, we are told, pleased everybody(41), was scrupulously carried out as soon as the occasion arose and the outbreak of hatred and violence that it unleashed reached histrionic heights. The behaviour of the Maltese crowds becomes frankly repulsive to watch but in judging the crowd of 1565 it is relevant to view it against its special historical background.

They lived in an aggressive age. Their lives and their property were continually exposed to the rapacity of the pirates that infested the Mediterranean. Threats of destruction and death impinged upon them at every hour of their lives. It is no wonder, therefore, that their hostile impulses were stirred to such a degree as to earn them the reputation of being very reluctant to forget the offences received(42). Apart from this external pressure, a good deal of aggression was interwoven in their social fabric. Through the institution of slavery they had developed a certain callousness to human suffering and a blurring for the values of human life. They lived in times when even the maintenance of public order and the administration of the law were based on extreme measures of violence. The infliction of torture, for instance, was taken as a matter-of-fact procedure in the extraction of

(36) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.*, p. 340-41.

(37) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 579.

(38) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 341.

(39) VERTOT, *op. cit.* p. 2. BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 580.

(40) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 341.

(41) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 580.

(42) *Ibidem*, p. 95.

truth from an accused person in a court of law. The execution of criminals was made an occasion for a public diversion so that the people became quite immune to the sight of men being marched and birched through the streets and then quartered or beheaded and their corpses thrown into the gutter; and also to the spectacle of gibbets with corpses dangling from them in the most prominent spots of the Island (43). We must, therefore, think of the Maltese crowd of the 16th century as being formed of a mass of unrefined folk in whose pattern of life violence, in one form or another, played an integral part and in whom it was not difficult to stir the desire for retaliation and vengeance especially when the invitation for violence came from the leader himself in times of stress.

The first slaughter took place on the 8th July. A number of Moslem galley slaves, chained in pairs, were made to repair a breach in the fortifications at Birgu. In this position they were exposed to the artillery fire of their co-religionists. Two of the slaves called out to the Turkish artillery men to warn them of their presence and to ask them to desist from firing to spare their lives. Not understanding what the slaves were saying, the Christian soldiers suspected that the slaves were inciting the Turks to assault the post. Thereupon, the slaves were seized upon by the people, and mobbed and stoned to death by a crowd of boys who afterwards trailed their corpses along the streets of Birgu (44).

Another scene of popular violence occurred, also at Birgu, on the 15th July when four captured Turkish prisoners of war were handed over to the people who after horribly mutilating them continued, for some time, to drag their lurid remains along the streets of Birgu and Senglea (45).

A similar scene was enacted at Birgu on the 23rd August when Turkish prisoners, after being tortured to extract military information from them, were handed over to the people "so that in its fury it will put them to death" (46).

At Mdina the execution of prisoners was an almost daily occurrence (47). The historian of the Order complacently remarks that these executions gave great satisfaction to the people who had become very avid for revenge (48). Even official justice utilised this lust for blood of the population for the execution of its death sentences. Thus the sentence of death decreed against a Calabrese renegade was ordered to be carried out by the children of Mdina who killed him by prodding him with pointed canes and then stoning and burning him (49).

(43) MIFSUD, A., *Knights Hospitallers of the Venerable Tongue of England*, Malta, 1914, p. 174. Similar scenes were still to be seen in the eighteenth century in Malta. Thus a number of slaves who plotted to overthrow the Order and kill the Grandmaster and the Knights were sentenced to death as follows in 1748:— two of them "tanagliati e divisi in quarti"; another two were "strozzati e decapitati"; and twenty-one were "scannati". See *Raccolta di varie cose*, Malta, 1843, p. 182.

(44) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 502.

(45) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLI, *op. cit.* p. 426.

(46) *Ibidem*, p. 426.

(47) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 580.

(48) GIGLIO, Ferdinando, *Il memorabile assedio di Malta del 1565*, Malta, 1853, p. 103.

(49) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 627.

A psychological analysis of these mass phenomena leads up to several points of interest. First, they afford an instance of how a people under stress accepts the directives of the leader uncritically, and how promptly the crowd regresses to a primitive level of behaviour once its collective aggressive emotions are aroused.

Secondly, though the leader must ultimately bear the moral responsibility for the excesses of brutality committed by the crowd, it is doubtful whether the people would have responded so enthusiastically to La Valette's call for revenge if identical desires for retribution had not already been simmering in themselves. In fact it appears that what the leader does in such circumstances is not to create a thirst for blood "de novo" but only to harness the aggression that is already smouldering in the people and to provide them with the victim or scapegoat on whom to vent their passion for revenge(50).

Thirdly, when ordered by the leader, violence is liable to be more brutal and fanatical than when it springs from the crowd spontaneously, because the leader's sanction remove all inhibitory moral influences and feelings of guilt that would normally tend to restrain the individual when acting on his own responsibility.

Fourthly, La Valette, in spite of his superior intellectual and cultural background, seems to have, himself, remained free from feelings of regret and remorse for the consequences of the outburst of violence which he provoked by his "bando". This is the more remarkable when we consider that his move served no useful purpose from the purely military point of view; in fact he was only avenging himself on an already vanquished and defenceless enemy. Besides, he was not forced to resort to it under the force of popular pressure; on the other hand it was he who spurred the people to violence. Moreover, he was the leader of a Christian community ostensibly engaged in a war in defence of all that Christianity stood for — charity, mercy, brotherly love and forgiveness — against an enemy that personified all that was evil and brutal. La Valette had called the Turks "atroci, bestiali e sceleratissimi barbari"(51) but he seems to have remained unaware that by his "bando" he had approached their pattern of behaviour very closely. Indeed the contradiction between the professed war aims of La Valette and the mass violence that he unleashed makes one wonder how such intense hatred could thrive side by side with religious fervour. Of course such instances of psychological dissociation are not uncommon, but one cannot help thinking that in those days the appeal of religion was more of an emotional than a spiritual one, and that in spite of their adherence to formal religion, the ethical standards of the Knights were not above the medieval atmosphere, still steeped in barbarity, in which they lived.

Food Situation.

It required a very serious threat to their self-preservative instincts to induce the people to turn their thoughts and energies in a fresh direction towards the end of July.

(50) This hatred persisted for hundreds of years. So much so that the Government had to issue a Public Notice in 1802 by which it was made an offence to insult or molest in any way Turkish visitors to Malta. See *Collezione Bandi*, Malta, 1840.

(51) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 580.

The food situation never gave the Knights any great worry for they had amassed enough biscuits, flour, salted meat, wine and vinegar to last them for many months. Some measure of control over bread consumption had been rendered necessary when the provisions brought by the refugees from the countryside became exhausted in the first week of June. Two commissioners were appointed to ascertain the number and condition of the people that had taken refuge in Senglea and Birgu. It was found that 17,000 persons had the means to buy bread, while 7,000 were so poor that they could not afford to do so. These were liberally supplied with bread free of charge during the whole period of the siege(52). Stricter measures of control were adopted on the 23rd June(53) when all the stores of foodstuffs and wine that had been laid up in private houses were taken over by the Government to establish a more orderly and a fairer distribution of provisions(54). Moreover, La Valette ordered the killing of all the dogs in Senglea and Birgu, as besides disturbing the garrison at night, they were daily consuming their provisions(55). Thanks to these measures the food situation was saved for the duration of the siege, so that even at its worst period, apart from other items of food, every one among the besieged received three one-pound loaves a day. The blackmarket in foodstuffs did not seem to have existed for besides being abundant, the main items of food were sold at prices that were within the means of the most modest pocket of both civilian and soldier(56). The citizens of Mdina, who numbered 4,000 souls, fared better still. In fact at the end of the siege they still had 1,000 head of cattle and 250 horses and mules, apart from fowls, bread and biscuits(57).

Water Supply.

The question of the provision of water, however, presented a different aspect. In spite of the storage of 40,000 barrels of water in the various fortifications(58), the situation of the water supply became critical at Birgu in the first week of July. Writing to the Viceroy of Sicily on the 8th of this month, La Valette recorded his anxiety at the sight of the great multitude of useless civilians within Birgu, who on account of the scarcity of water had already started to voice their discontent. He was also worried at the thought that, in spite of all efforts to limit water consumption, it appeared certain that they were going to be reduced to a grave extremity(59). In fact the water shortage increased as the days passed. The people of Birgu started reacting violently. There were great disorders; some hideous crimes were committed and were severely punished. The historian of the Order does not state what the disorders and crimes were but that the situation was desperate is shown by La Valette's admission that the supply of water could only last for a few days more, and that he was faced by one of two alternatives — either send out of Birgu the

(52) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 546.

(53) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 342.

(54) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 579.

(55) PRESCOTT, G., *op. cit.* p. 93.

(56) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 529.

(57) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 698.

(58) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 128 & 161.

(59) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 594.

civilian population, a step that was deemed to be brutal and also dangerous as it could have given rise to open rebellion; or else to perish with the people(60). Fortunately, La Valette was spared the choice, for on the 21st July a spring of water was discovered in a house in Birgu and a very serious threat to the safety of the Island was averted in time(61).

Housing Problem.

A less serious difficulty in the form of a housing problem had to be faced a few days later. A number of houses had to be pulled down at the beginning of the siege of Birgu extending from the post of Castille to the Infirmary for purposes of defence(62). More houses were destroyed by the defenders, later on in the siege, to obtain stones to hurl them against the enemy(63). The housing shortage became acute when the enemy artillery added its quota of destruction. Between the 22nd and the 28th July a heavy artillery barrage was opened against Sengiea and Birgu from Mount Sceberras and Mount Salvatore(64). It has been estimated that there were 77 pieces of artillery on Mount Sceberras alone directed almost entirely on Birgu. Entire houses were destroyed and a great number of women and children perished in this bombardment(65). The homeless survivors could not be accommodated in the remaining houses as these were already overcrowded. The need for shelter was therefore met by the provision of tents and huts that were erected under the protection of the ramparts(66). Strong defences of very solid construction were also put up to prevent the destruction of more houses. As the building of these defences involved great danger to those working on them, La Valette compelled the slaves to do the work. Hundreds of them were killed and those of them that attempted to retreat to safety were forced to turn back by the severe punishments inflicted on them by the besieged who cut the ears of the more obstinate slaves and even put some of them to death(67).

Reaction to Death of Melchior de Robles.

A severe damaging blow to civilian morale was occasioned by the death, through enemy action, of the "Maestro di campo", Melchior de Robles. To realise the magnitude of the effect of his death on civilian morale it is sufficient to mention that his reputation with the people was such that they "placed in him their main hope for deliverance" after God and the Grandmaster. Since such was his prestige, it is no marvel that the people felt terrified and lost at his disappearance from the defences(68). La Valette soon intervened to heal this new breach in the people's

(60) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 609.

(61) *Ibidem*, p. 613.

(62) GIGLIO, F., *op. cit.* p. 107.

(63) *Ibidem*, p. 161.

(64) SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *op. cit.* p. 446.

(65) *Ibidem*, p. 459.

(66) *Ibidem*, p. 451.

(67) PRESCOTT, G., *op. cit.* p. 119.

(68) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 633.

morale. In a public declaration he feigned that the loss of Robles was not so great as it appeared because the Knights and soldiers had been so well instructed by him in the arts of war that each one of them was capable of carrying out the work that had, up to then, been performed by Robles(69). Calm was again restored among the people and when on the 27th August La Valette ordered the women, children and the aged to work in the arsenal, to help in the repair of the fortifications and to clear the debris from the ruined bastions, the people bent to this new task without complaint. After all, before the issue of this official order, the women and children had on many occasions, quite spontaneously, joined the soldiers in the fight, so much so that La Valette did not hesitate to declare that without their help the fortress might, perhaps, have been lost(70). Although an imposed labour is always irksome, it is probable that La Valette's order, in spite of its apparent hardship, helped in an indirect way to raise the morale of the population. Indeed experience has shown that the active occupation of civilians in time of war diminishes anxiety and neutralises the feeling of helplessness that often overcomes non-combatants.

(69) GIGLIO, F., *op. cit.* p. 172.

(70) BOSIO, I., *op. cit.* p. 609.