# THE BRITISH PRESENCE IN MEDITERRANEAN ISLANDS, 1793 - 1815.

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Between 1794 and 1815 Britain occupied no less than eighteen islands in the Mediterranean, though several were very small indeed (Capraja, Lampedusa, Camino, Cerigo and Ithaca, for instance). Most were held until the wars ended, though some were given up earlier : Corsica in 1796, Elba in 1797, Minorca in 1802, Capri in 1800 and Ischia and Procida in 1809.

Can any common purpose or purposes be discerned in this amazing dispersal of effort? First, there was the quest for a sovereign base from which the navy could operate to safeguard trade in the Mediterranean. Second, there was the wish to save Italy from falling into the grips of France and, when this became impossible to attempt a recovery of that peninsula in cooperation with Austria and Russia. Third, there was the determination to preserve Egypt, the route to British possessions in India and ultimately the whole Turkish empire, from conquest from Napoleon, by the occupation of strategically placed islands.

Soon after the outbreak of the war with France, a British fleet under Admiral Hood was sent by Pitt to the Mediterranean. Hood's instructions were to bolster morale of states bordering on that sea who were already at war with France or seemed to be threatened by her aggression; give them such naval and military assistance as the fleet and a small British army could afford; disrupt all French seaborne trade, while protecting that of the allies; and attack the French fleet when occasion offered.[1]

After the allies were forced out of Toulon in December 1793 - the base having been surrendered to Hood by the French royalists during the summer - Hood and his forces seized Corsica, at the invitation of the Corsicans. Corsica provided the British with harbours, a base well placed from which to watch Toulon and the remnant of the French republican

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fleet, and support the armies of Austria and Sardinia on the mainland of north Italy. Capraja and Elba were also seized. But in October 1796 the British were forced to withdraw from Corsica and Capraja, and from Elba in April of the following year, due to Napoleon's victories in Italy.

The Corsican episode had been unpopular in Britain. An experiment in granting a constitution (liberal by the standards of the time) and the creation of a joint kingdom under a British Viceroy (and not the Corsican leader Paoli) had not appealed to the Corsicans as a whole, and their refusal to pay taxes led to a widespread and successful revolt. This failed venture in colonial rule was to colour the views of British statesmen when, in 1812, they had to decide on Malta's future form of Government.

In November 1798, after the British fleet had again entered the Mediterranean (having been absent for two years) and Nelson had destroyed the French fleet at the battle of Aboukir Bay, the British occupied Minorca (Spain now being an ally of France). Minorca, which had been a British colony for much of the eighteenth century, until it was returned to Spain at the end of the American War, has a fine harbour at Port Mahon. It was much valued by British admirals who were given the task of watching Toulon, though with France and Spain both at war with Britain it remained a liability, needing the constant presence of the navy to ensure it remained inviolate. Though its repossession was clearly important in the war to dominate the Mediterranean, now that Corsica was lost, the reason for its capture was not (curiously) naval. Dundas, the secretary of state for war in William Pitt's administration, wanted to distract the attention of Spain from a projected invasion of Portugal, whose harbour Lisbon, at the mouth of the Tagus, was of vital importance to British trade.[2] The island was given back to Spain at the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. By that time the much finer harbour of Valletta had been in British hands for eighteen months.

Naval opinion differed sharply on the relative importance of Minorca and Malta for the performance of the navy's tasks in the Mediterranean theatre of war. Captain Alexander Ball and Admiral Lord Keith both strongly favoured Malta, as did General Sir Ralph Abercromby, as being more easily definable and a place where good water was more plentiful and the cost of provisions notably cheaper.[3] The island was given back to Spain at the treaty of Amiens in 1802. By that time the much finer harbour of Valletta had been in British hands for eighteen months. Nelson however thought Malta useless for his purpose. He told the prime minister in 1803 that

"Minorca may have its inconveniences, but its conveniences are so great, that trust at the moment a Spanish war is certain, that we shall be able to secure it." Malta, on the other hand he considered" a perfectly useless place to refit in" or one from which to procure refreshments, owing to its distance from the waters off Toulon and the prevalence of unfavourable winds.[4] Pitt, in 1805, pressure from the Tzar to give back Malta to the Knights, toyed temporarily with the idea of advised him strongly against. When in 1808 Spain rose in revolt against the occupation of the French, and offered the facilities of Port Mahon once again to the British fleet, Minorca, though not occupied by the British, became an important British base. Admiral Cotton, commanding the fleet wrote to the admiralty in 1811 that it was vital to retain the use of Minorca. "The fleet in Toulon cannot be efficiently watched, or the blockade at all kept, without the advantage of this island".[5]

Malta came into British hands at the surrender of General Vaubois of the port of Valletta in September 1800. In giving naval and military assistance to the Maltese in revolt against the French, Britain was primarily interested in denying the island to France. It had been discussed by Napoleon, who seized it, as "the watch-tower of the Mediterranean". During the course of the siege, Britain had agreed with the Tzar that, at the peace, the Maltese islands would be handed back to the knights of St. John, the Tzar being by then elected as their head. Grenville, Pitt's Foreign secretary, had been responsible for this arrangement, having no very great opinion of the importance of Malta to Britain, though Dundas, the secretary of state for war, profoundly disagreed on this point.[6] In 1802 the new ministry under Addington honoured the previous British commitment at the Peace of Amiens in 1802. The settlement was intended by the government to keep the island in neutral hands and prevent them falling to the French once again. Once it became clear that Napoleon had not relinquished his designs on Egypt, to which Malta was a necessary stepping-stone, and so to designs on the British in India, Britain decided to renege on the treaty. Her continued occupation of Malta was a purely defensive measure.

It was only after 1806 (Napoleon's Berlin Decree) and the intensification of the economic war, that Britain looked at Malta in a new light - a base for smuggling her manufactures and colonial produce through Napoleon's blockade. The prosperity that Malta then began to enjoy as a result of pursuing this plan induced the British government in 1812 to annex Malta as a crown colony. Not only was Malta a colony that looked



able to pay its way (a consideration of importance to the Westminster Parliament), but "a place of eminent importance as the central point of a great commerce, and the seat of English influence in the Mediterranean" (words of the Under Secretary of State to Sir Thomas Maitland, the new Governor of Malta).[7]

Malta and Sicily were interdependent. The latter was occupied by the British in February 1806 with the consent of the king of Naples, after a small British army had been forced to evacuate the kingdom of Naples. It had been hoped that, with Russian assistance, the French could be driven of Italy, but Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz had effectively put paid to all that. By agreement with Ferdinand the king of Naples(then in exile in Palermo) to whom the British paid an annual subsidy, Britain retained in Sicily a force of never less than 10,000 and sometimes as large as 20,000 troops. The aim was to keep a military base from which to launch attacks on Italy with the assistance of the Austrians and Russians, and to be able to exert influence on policy of the Ottoman Empire. Little ever came of the formed alliance, save a brief occupation of several islands situated in the Bay of Naples, though Capri was held for two years, as a kind of listening-post on Europe. The latter aim led only in 1807 to two highly successful expeditions - a military one to Egypt, and a naval one to the Dardanelles.

Sicily, like Malta, was useful to Britain as a base for trading contraband to the mainland; it was also vital as a source of supply of essential food and drink for Malta. If Sicily ever fell to the French, the British could not have remained in Malta. The British government in 1806 were right to refuse napoleon's offer to recognize British possession of Malta if they handed over Sicily. Sicily also had useful ports, and both Collingwood and Cotton, the officers who successively commanded the British fleet in the Mediterranean from 1805 to 1812 used Sicily's harbours extensively during the middle years of the war.

In 1809 Collingwood arranged for the occupation of the southern five Ionian Islands - the sixth followed in 1810. The aim was to safeguard the mainland of Greece, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Napoleon had obtained these islands from Russia at the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807 and had strongly fortified Corfu. His occupation of the province of Illyria, taken from Austria in 1809, seemed to Collingwood to pose a series threat to Constantinople. The British command in the Mediterranean would like to have gone on to assault Corfu, were reinforcements made available, but the

government in London was opposed, stressing that nothing must compromise the continued retention of Sicily and Malta.[8]

Once it became obvious that Britain's main effort on land against Napoleon must be made in the Iberian peninsula, and that Napoleon's attentions were now focused on Spain and Russia, not the Mediterranean, the government in London lost interest in its islands and their garrisons, save as sources of reinforcements for Wellington. Troops were sent to him from Sicily and Malta in 1811 and 1812. The fear of a French attack on Sicily had subsided after 1810 and Murat's abortive assault on the island, while Malta was never considered imperiled, save by a revolt of the Maltese themselves.

Due to the exigencies of war, all the Mediterranean islands occupied by Britain were governed as military fortresses (save only Corsica), and although civil commissioners were appointed to head the islands' administration, those civil commissioners were infact generals or, one case, a naval captain/Rear Admiral. Sicily was not a British possession but its king was persuaded, against his wishes to adopt a British-style constitution. It did not work and, by 1812, the British minister, who was also commander of all land forces in the Mediterranean, found himself in a position of having to act as an Oliver Cromwell.

There was never any long term government strategy during the course of the wars against France between 1793 and 1815, to enlarge Britain's empire in the Mediterranean, though there were individuals who favoured such a policy. One was Henry Dundas who died in 1811; another was the writer Francis Gould Leckie who, in his Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, published in 1808, advocated Britain annexing the principal islands of the Mediterranean;[9] and Lord William Bentinck, the commander in Sicily and British minister of the court of Palermo, when disillusioned by the Sicilians' failure to work the constitution he had wished on them, suggested at one stage that Sicily should be made a part of the British Empire, though he Shortly after disowned his plan.[10]

When the war with Napoleon finally ended, only Malta was retained as a colony, for reasons already mentioned. The Ionian Islands became a British Protectorate, but only because the Allied Powers were unable to agree a better solution. The Admiralty never favoured Corfu or developed it as a naval base. It was in Malta alone that they were interested, as was the British government, and so remained for a century and a half.



## NOTES

[1]D. Gregory, The Ungovernable Rock (Londin and Toronto, 1985) p. 51, citing Dundas to Admiralty 18 May 1793 PRO/CO 173/4.

[2]D. Gregory, Minorca The Illusory Prize (London and Toronto, 1990) p. 196, citing J Fortescue History of the British Army vol 4 p. 606.

[3]D. Gregory, Minorca pp. 204, 259 n26, citing Keith Papers vol 3 pp 214 - 16; Abercromby to Dundas 9 December 1800 PRO/WO 1/344, 565; Ballis Memorandum 1801 PRO/WO 1/83/17.

[4]D. Gregory, Malta, Britain and the European Powers 1793 - 1815 (London, 1996) pp 256 citing Nelson to St. Vincent and Nelson to Addington 27 September 1803 Nelsonís Dispatches and Letters vol 5 pp 214 - 15.

[5]C. Gregory, Minorca p 261 n25 citing Cotton to Yorke 26 December 1810, 17 July 1811 BM.Add MSS 37292 ff 260, 262.

[6]D. Gregory, Malta p 67 citing Dundas to Grenville 20 April 1800; Grenville to Dundas 23 April 1800 Dropmore vol 6 p. 200.

[7]D. Gregory, Malta, p.192, should be citing Bunbury to Maitland 6 June 1815 PRO/CO 159/5/6. The reference given in this book is incorrect.

[8]D. Gregory, Sicily the Insecure Base, p78, citing Liverpool to Stuart 29 November 1809 BM ADD MSS 38245 f 295.

[9]D. Gregory, Malta, p 193.

[10]D. Gregory, Sicily p 120 -125. Liverpool wrote to Castlereagh deploring Benedickís idea: ìYou know other Powers are more jealous of our obtaining power in the Mediterranean than in any other quarter. Circumstnces have made it necessary for them to accept our retaining Malta, but the idea of our possessing SicilyÖ.could not fail greatly to revolt themî. C. Webster The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh 1813 - 1822 vol 1 p 526.