Servants of Empire: The Maltese in the Royal Navy

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Malta has been an important base for the projection of power by others. It is, indeed, the area which has received most attention in the bibliography on Maltese maritime history with Maltese and other historians having written at length about the Order of St. John’s naval exploits and corsairing during the Early Modern period. The RN’s exploits in the Mediterranean in later centuries have also been well documented. Peter Elliott’s The Cross and the Ensign. A Naval History of Malta 1798-1979 (1980), constitutes a succinct introduction and despite the regrettable absence of notation, the author has clearly had access to a considerable amount of primary documentation. He also gives a good, basic, albeit now somewhat dated, bibliography. But our concern in this essay is not so much to look at the record of the naval actions of the RN but at the direct Maltese presence in the Senior Service.

A limited number of contributions have already looked at the nature of employment, voluntary or otherwise, in the Order’s navy, and there has also been some treatment of those involved in the private sector on board of corsairing vessels or in the merchant marine during the same period. The nature of sea-related employment in general during the British period, on the other hand, has received little or no attention. This has been particularly so for those engaged as seamen in either the Royal Navy or the Merchant Marine. As regards the Maltese who served in RN vessels and shore establishments, for example, we have only encountered a number of admittedly very interesting and moving interviews in the local media with Maltese survivors of extreme wartime experiences, such as the sinking of a ship and/or time spent in captivity in
prisoner-of-war camps. We know even less about the mundane, often humdrum, life they led in the RN during the long years of peace. It is clearly a priority for oral historians to tap this source, given that those who served are getting fewer and fewer as the years go by.

*The Maltese as Sailors*

The Maltese have a long tradition as mariners. By the fifteenth century they had a merchant marine which not only attended to the islands’ victualling needs but also acted as a carrier between different parts of Southern Italy. These vessels were probably doing a lucrative sideline in corsairing as well. The Order of Saint John had a maritime vocation even before its arrival on the island, and the maintenance and operation of its small fleet led to the creation of a considerable number of jobs ashore and afloat, as a number of authors have pointed out.

I have shown elsewhere that in the eighteenth century at least, Malta’s mercantile marine was almost wholly manned and commanded by the Maltese themselves, although the corsairing vessels had a more cosmopolitan crew. This seems to have also been the case during the nineteenth century, when the number of vessels in the Maltese merchant marine reached an all-time high and the Chamber of Commerce even had its own Sea or Maritime Captains’ section.

A somewhat different scenario emerges, perhaps understandably, as regards service in the navies of the foreign powers which held these islands between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.
Senior positions on board the vessels of the Order were the prerogative of the Knights but the Maltese, at least, had access to middling specialist posts such as clerks, surgeons, helmsmen, pilots, bombardiers, and so on.

During the course of the eighteenth century, however, the Order’s finances came under increasingly heavy pressure and this resulted in cutbacks in employment opportunities. The Grandmaster, until that time unwilling to allow Maltese mariners to be recruited by foreign navies, started to give permission to various foreign powers to sign up his subjects for service abroad. During the course of the eighteenth century we, in fact, encounter more and more evidence of Maltese sailors serving in foreign navies and merchant marines. The Maltese were held in particularly high esteem in the Spanish Navy, which seems to have recruited hundreds if not thousands. They were given pay and conditions of service equal to those received by Spaniards and even had the possibility of going to the lucrative Americas.

Other Maltese have been encountered serving on board of Russian, Dutch, Papal, Venetian, English and French ships. In the final years of the eighteenth century, recruitment, in fact, seems to have turned into a free-for-all, and it is probable that Maltese sailors fought on both sides during the Napoleonic Wars.

Maltese sailors in considerable numbers, in fact, served in both the French Navy and the French mercantile marine during the eighteenth century. There were 927 Maltese sailors, gunners and helmsmen in the former in 1780, while Le Goff claims that the Maltese were one of the most consistent groups amongst the many foreign sailors on merchant shipping operating out of Marseilles and formed around ten per cent of all
foreign sailors in the period 1769-1785. It is also known that thousands of Maltese were recruited by Napoleon on his way to Egypt.

The RN was also desperately short of men in the Early Modern period, especially during wartime. Foreigners were present in considerable numbers and although no overall figures are available, these could constitute around 15% and more of a ship’s complement. In 1793, Admiral Hood applied to the Grandmaster for permission to recruit a thousand Maltese sailors although in the end only about 440 were actually signed on. There were at least twenty-five Maltese serving on board English ships at Trafalgar in 1805. H.M.S. Victory, probably the best known warship in naval history, in fact, had a crew in which foreigners made up 14.63% of the ship’s complement: these included six Maltese - two Royal Marine privates; Gaetano Altomaro and Domque Gentile, and four Ordinary Seamen; Josh Benjna, Emanuel Camelaire, Natbl Pirch and Jno Tart. But a few years later, hostilities came to an end, with inevitable consequences for the strength of the armed forces. From a peak of 142,098 men in 1810, the strength of the RN collapsed to a low of 21,141 in 1835. The foreigners would have been the first to go. The long peace of 1815-1914, in fact, saw considerable changes in the Senior Service and it eventually became the most ‘English’ of the armed forces, almost entirely manned by Britons, unlike the Army, which relied so heavily on native troops recruited in the Colonies. The Maltese were one of the exceptions.

*Rule Britannia*

As Parry has pointed out, Britain ruled the waves in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, not so much because it had ships everywhere but because no one else
had any ships anywhere. As regards Maltese seamen serving in the RN, therefore, it is probable that their numbers were by far outweighed by the numbers serving on board of Maltese-owned and captained merchant shipping during the latter’s Golden Age. There were as many as 2,227 merchant seamen in 1871, in contrast to 255 in the RN, but as the century evolved the numbers serving in the RN increased, at the same time that the size of Malta’s own merchant fleet and the number of merchant seamen receded. The following graph gives the total number of RN personnel in the Mediterranean (left-hand axis) and the number of Maltese serving in the RN (right-hand axis) over the century from 1861 to 1964.

**Total Personnel and Maltese in the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean 1861-1964**

![Graph showing total personnel and Maltese in the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean 1861-1964.](image)
The censuses for Malta and Gozo between 1891 and 1931 give detailed tables of the officers and men serving on board H.M.’s ships at Malta, divided into English and Maltese. Based on these and Admiralty sources, it would seem that the Maltese may have constituted between 4.7% and 9.9% of total RN personnel in the Mediterranean in this epoch. In the First and Second World Wars, total Maltese enlistment in the RN was around 2,000 in both cases, although we are unable to say how many were on board ships and how many were ashore.

*The Characteristics of the Maltese in the RN*

The Maltese who served in the RN can be usefully divided into two groups. The first group, normally consisting in the period 1891-1938, of about a hundred to two hundred men, were attached to the base ship H.M.S. *Hibernia*, subsequently H.M.S. *Egmont*. They were employed in harbour services mostly, as able and ordinary seamen, and as stokers. Smaller numbers were tradesmen such as shipwrights, coopers and so on. They had limited, if any, seafaring experience.

The other, more numerous, group consisted mostly of stokers and what, in 1891-1911, were referred to as domestics, but who would later be defined as stewards and cooks. This second group was assigned duties on board the individual ships of the fleet, with the larger capital ships, such as H.M.S. *Royal Oak* or H.M.S. *Resolution*, having a couple of dozen, and lesser ships having less. Up till the end of the First World War, there were also a number of bandsmen, until these were replaced by Royal Marine bands. The bulk of these men seem to have served in the Mediterranean but a small proportion were to be found on ships stationed elsewhere, especially in times of emergency or war.
At least one in four of Maltese RN personnel who died during the First World War perished outside the Mediterranean, notably at the Battle of Jutland. In times of peace, on the other hand, Maltese RN personnel would be found overwhelmingly, but not entirely, in Mediterranean waters, where, incidentally, the RN would often have up to half of its strength. In 1901, for example, there were small groups of Maltese serving outside the Mediterranean on board ships in St. Helena, Aden, Hong Kong, Australia and the Atlantic: they constituted around ten per cent of those Maltese serving afloat. No details are available on where the casualties of the Second World War died.

The main “divide” in the RN overall was that between officers and men. Excluding a couple of very rare exceptions, the Maltese belonged to the latter category. Initial findings based on a detailed analysis of information contained in Commonwealth War Graves Commission records, which we are using as a proxy, in connection with work currently in progress, would seem to indicate that the average age of Maltese RN personnel who perished in the First World War tended to be just a few months older, at somewhat over thirty-two years of age, than the sample of British servicemen. This gap widened to over two years in the Second World War with the Maltese averaging just over thirty-one years of age. The Maltese, on the other hand, were twice as likely to be married men (63.8%) than the British (31.4%), at least as regards the First World War. This, and their seeking to stay in the Mediterranean area, would seem to indicate that for the Maltese at least service in the RN was primarily motivated by a desire to provide for their families, rather than the pursuit of adventure. In the Second World War, the proportion of married men amongst the Maltese slid to 56% whilst the corresponding
figure for the British had increased to 39.5%. This narrowing of the gap probably reflects the effects of conscription in both countries.

During the First World War, the majority of Maltese fatalities were engaged as firemen, trimmers, stokers or combinations of these three, followed by stewards, cooks and bandsmen. The British fatalities, on the other hand, were mostly seamen, stokers and Royal Marines, in that order; although one must not lose sight of the fact that half the RN’s losses during the First World War were on land.

By the Second World War, the situation had changed somewhat, and the overwhelming majority of Maltese who died in the RN in that conflict were stewards (57%), and cooks (22%), Stokers, with 7%, had slid to third place. The proportion of stewards and cooks had, in fact, nearly doubled between the two world wars. The distribution of the British remained, more or less, the same as in the First World War, except that the number of stokers had nearly halved, a reflection of the retreat of coal.

As regards origin in Malta, the bulk of Maltese RN personnel serving in the First World War would seem to have come from Valletta (22%); Senglea (12%); and Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Hamrun with around 8% each. All these localities are in the immediate harbour area. By the Second World War, the Grand Harbour area had lost considerable ground to fast-growing towns like Sliema and Gzira. Valletta, nevertheless, remained in the lead with a reduced 17% followed by Sliema (16%), Gzira (9%) and Hamrun (9%).

The Maltese serving on board RN ships, particularly as stewards and cooks, were considered by fellow Maltese as la crème de la crème of those lucky enough to be employed in the service of the Empire. They were certainly well paid, and owing to their
proximity to officers, probably also had ways of supplementing their income. Wages were in the region of £15 a month at a time when a skilled boiler-maker at the Dockyards received £2-2s per week. In his remarkable four volume autobiography, Herbert Ganado, the Maltese politician who was interned by the British during the Second World War for his Italianate leanings, speaks of the affection and respect which existed between British RN officers and their Maltese stewards. He also emphasises that the relationship seems to have been materially beneficial to both parties and cites the case of one Maltese RN steward, whose accounts he had to certify, who was owed sums which in some cases exceeded a hundred pounds, by over twenty British officers, when he had been serving on one of the big capital ships. Speaking in more general terms, Ganado, who was no Anglophile, claims that, in general, the Maltese were happy with the British.

The Maltese in the RN were employed on what were known as Non-Continuous Service contracts, unlike the British who had Continuous Service contracts, and thus enjoyed more security. Long-service, disability and widows’ pensions, on the other hand, would seem to have been similar to those of the British. According to the 1921 Census there were 311 RN pensioners and 53 widows in receipt of a RN pension, in comparison to 119 Army pensioners and 14 widows in receipt of an Army pension. At a time when social welfare provisions were minimal or non-existent, the prospect of a pension must have constituted a considerable incentive to join the RN, but there was a downside to all this.

During most of the British presence in Malta, service in the Services was no more hazardous than any civilian job, and as we have already seen, in fact, offered considerable financial rewards, but in time of war, those who had signed up for the
King’s shilling were in the front line of hostilities. Stokers, firemen and trimmers, buried deep in the ships’ entrails, were particularly at risk. The RN lost around 30,000 men in the First World War, of whom half died fighting on land in the Royal Naval Division. The remaining 15,000 or so who died at sea included at least 255 Maltese who are known to have died in that war serving with the RN, and who, as a consequence, constituted somewhat below two per cent of all RN casualties at sea. Taking into consideration the relatively small population of the island it is a very notable figure.

During the Second World War, total RN losses were much heavier at 50,000 dead, while the number of Maltese who lost their lives whilst serving in the RN was somewhat lower at 198, but these still represented ten per cent of the 2,000 Maltese who are known to have enlisted in the RN during that conflict. By way of contrast, the 50,000 British RN losses represented somewhat less than five per cent of the 866,000 men and women in the RN in 1945. As a consequence, twice as many Maltese RN personnel perished in that conflict as a proportion of the total number of Maltese serving than was the case for Britons. Having said that, we must not overlook that in the Second World War, the number of civilian casualties in Malta, as elsewhere, far outweighed the losses of men and women in uniform.

The contribution to the war effort by men and women from the far-flung corners of the British Empire, not just the Anzacs, Canadians and South Africans, but also Indians, West Indians and Africans is finally being recognized. But although good enough to shed their blood for the British Empire, colonial peoples in general, and certain colonial peoples in particular, were often not perceived very positively by the British.
'Maltese, non-Europeans and men of colour…'

In 1817, George III enacted legislation relating to trade which declared ‘That for the purposes of this Act, and for all purposes whatever, the Island of Malta and its Dependencies shall be deemed and taken to be in Europe.’ But the matter of Maltese “Europeaness” has always tended to be a moot point, at least during the British period. Speaking about the British Empire in general, Stoler has, in fact, argued that ‘colonial control was predicated on identifying who was “white” and who “native”…’ Eugenics, the science of improving a population by controlled breeding fell into disfavour after its doctrines had been perverted by the Nazis, but around the turn of the century, decades before that had come to pass, it had achieved a certain political prominence in the Western world, with racial and sexual purity being held in particularly high regard by empire builders. This is very much reflected in the attitudes of certain senior Admiralty officials towards the Maltese, and “coloured”, in a manner of speaking, their perception of the latter’s ability to serve in the Senior Service, the much vaunted guardian of the Empire.

In a letter dated 20 July 1921, Rear Admiral J. D. Kelly remarked that the ‘Maltese are not white men…’ (“not” underlined by Kelly). He felt that although in peacetime they were steady, sober, docile and not lazy, they lacked “guts” and initiative and, as a consequence, were unreliable in action and could definitely not be put in command of Englishmen. In support of his assertions, he cited his own experience with Maltese stokers on board H.M.S. Dublin. While in action in the Dardanelles, he, apparently, had had to force the stokers back to the stokeholds at the point of Royal Marine bayonets.
Kelly was not the only senior RN officer to recognize the “peacetime” positive qualities of the Maltese. Malta-based Rear-Admiral Barttelot, for example, declared that from his experience ‘…the educated Maltese is equal to the English boy in intelligence and in many ways he is quicker,’ while Admiral Fremantle declared that the Maltese seafaring man had a strong physique, was hardy and hard-working, and was endowed with powers of endurance.

Kelly’s 1921 remarks seemed to have made a considerable impression and were still being cited in correspondence concerning the matter of the status of the Maltese in the RN in the late 1930s, just before the outbreak of war, despite Governor Bonham Carter’s assertion that the key to securing the loyalty of the Maltese was by ensuring ‘the removal of any ground, however illusionary, of discrimination against the Maltese.’ In fact, the Admiralty did not relent about allowing the Maltese equal access to all branches of the Service, but one must, nevertheless, also note that the self-same Admiralty ensured that the Maltese in general, as well as men of colour who were resident in England and formed part of the regular forces of the Navy, were to be paid regular pensions, and not reduced ones as the UK Ministry of Pensions was proposing for non-Europeans entered locally for service in foreign stations. In British, and specifically, in the RN’s eyes the Maltese would seem to have occupied some sort of middle ground; although not held to be quite the equal of the British they seem to have been perceived somewhat more favourably than the Lascars, Malays or Chinese recruited in foreign stations; but there were other factors setting the Maltese apart from the rest of the men on the lower deck of RN vessels.
Independently of their aptitude, or otherwise, for combat duties, the Maltese typically messed separately from the rest of the ship’s company. Senior RN officers, in fact, claimed that when English and Maltese stewards or cooks had messed together, the arrangement had not survived beyond a short period. In a small self-contained community like a ship ‘…comradeship began in a ship’s messes…’. Another factor which tended to set the Maltese apart from others was their special relationship with officers, whose stewards and cooks they were.

In overall terms, therefore, the Maltese would seem to have constituted a tiny group of Catholic individuals whose Mediterranean appearance, cultural characteristics, habits and language set them apart from the English-speaking, and mostly Protestant, Northern Europeans who constituted the overwhelming bulk of the crews on board of H.M.’s ships. This feeling of being a group apart is confirmed by the information supplied by the handful of Maltese individuals who had served in the RN whom I been able to establish contact with and who have very kindly accepted to either answer questionnaires or be interviewed.

A Changed World

The World Wars, but particularly the second one, were a watershed. Fire and blood seem to have bonded the British and the Maltese in a manner which it is difficult to conceive nowadays. In 1946, there were 1,736 Maltese men in the RN, probably an-all-time record in peacetime. After the war, the RN eventually offered the Maltese both the opportunity to serve in Malta within the Malta Port Division with local conditions of service or to join the RN or Royal Marines in the UK under exactly the same conditions.
as other people recruited in the UK. The first batch of young recruits joined up in 1952 and eventually proceeded to the UK for further training on H.M.S. *Ganges*. The Malta Port Division was finally disbanded in 1979, when the British forces finally took their leave.