

BOOK REVIEW

by The Editor

France in the Maltese Collective Memory

Perceptions, Perspectives, Identities after Bonaparte in British Malta

Charles Xuereb

Quill rating: 

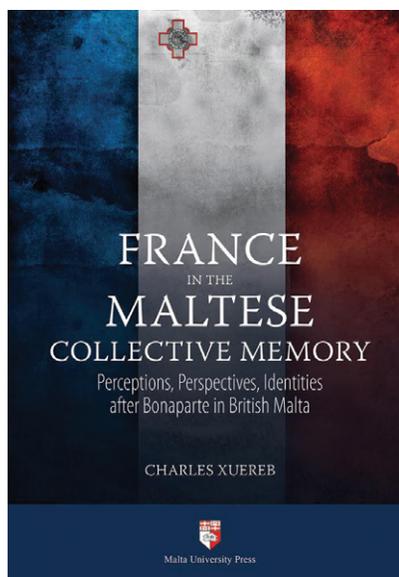
IN 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Malta. He pillaged its churches, stole the Knights of St. John's (the previous rulers) treasures, which he never returned, and forcibly conscribed the Island's men into the French military machine. In response, the Maltese revolted. That is the story my schoolday history books taught me. Dr Charles Xuereb paints a very different picture, and it's based on cold hard facts.

The truth seems much sadder. Before 1798, Malta had three rulers: the Knights, the Curia (Catholic institution), and the Inquisition. The city folk prepared Malta for the French takeover and the knights did not resist, conflict was minimal and the Grandmaster was handsomely relocated to France. The Curia realised the economic and power loss due to French rule and encouraged the countryside to revolt. Then they used British protectionism to ensure the safety of their assets. Both parties rewrote history.

The book is based on Xuereb's doctoral research, which is unfortunately its main failing. Although having a good style of academic writing with enough humour to keep readers engaged, the

book needed a more extensive rewrite. It still comes across as an academic study with little narrative uniting the book chapters. The reader also needs to know the historical background of the Maltese Islands making the book challenging.

While at times a tough read, it is captivating. Let's take a look at September 1798, the peasant revolt started in Mdina while Maltese notaries commissioned by the new republican government (the majority of whom were Maltese) were auctioning off church items. Apparently, Maltese insurgents lynched over 60 French soldiers, cut them open, then cooked and ate their livers. Their women and children were also killed. Maltese French sympathisers either had to eat human liver or faced death. After this horrific incident the peasants circled the built-up harbour region of Malta, and more brutality followed. Two young boys and a lady were brutally killed when leaving the besieged area for vegetables, while a French soldier was beheaded for eating a fig, his head left on a spike. Xuereb postulates that these events were orchestrated by mercenaries in the employ of the religious



and merchant leaders to tie the hands of the peasantry. After such brutality there was no going back.

According to some sources, the two-year siege left around 20,000 men dead and the country six million scudi poorer (around £500,000—a lot of money back then). When the Maltese insurgents finally overthrew the French, the British did not pay any dues or allow them to enter the city. The Maltese were not involved in the signing over of the Island to the British empire around a decade later neither. The Curia also forgot the fallen. Conversely, Bonaparte had insisted Maltese leaders are present at the signing of Malta to France in 1798. The history books still do not laud the sacrifice of the Maltese peasants, but normally exalt how Malta was saved and protected by the British Empire.

Xuereb's study has strong implications for Malta's love affair with its previous colonial rulers, while suggesting a readjustment of its attitude towards the French—after all the Order had several French knights who ruled for around 300 years. *France in the Maltese Collective Memory* is an important read, be prepared to open your eyes and mind. ●