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GREAT BRITAIN AND MALTA DURING THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

WITH ~~SPECIAL REFERENCE~~ TO THE ROLE OF SIR ALEXANDER BALL, 1798-1809

by

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ABSTRACT

Great Britain and Malta during the Napoleonic Wars
With Special Reference to the Role of Sir Alexander Ball, 1798-1809

Britain had little interest in the Mediterranean and almost none in Malta until Napoleon Bonaparte seized the island in 1798 and forced her to take heed. Thereafter, the question of who should control Malta became one of the most contentious issues affecting the diplomacy of the period, particularly during the peace negotiations at Amiens in 1801-2. The inability to settle this issue led to a resumption of hostilities the following year. Some Englishmen wondered whether allowing peace or war to hang on Malta gave the island an importance it did not merit. Britain would control Malta for thirteen years before the other powers acknowledged her legal right to it. During this period her resolve to keep it steadily increased, as did her appreciation of its value, and the person most responsible for promoting this appreciation was Britain's Civil Commissioner at Malta, Sir Alexander Ball. Of the two themes to be developed here, the first explains the reasons for Britain's decision to keep Malta in the face of formidable international opposition, while the second examines the island's possible value to a great power, and asks whether it was intrinsically important, or merely symbolically so. Malta's most serious drawback was its distance from the French naval base at Toulon. However, this became less important as Britain's strategic priorities shifted further east. Even so the commonly held belief that Malta acted as a barrier protecting Egypt was highly questionable because this would have required a large fleet to be stationed at Malta, and Britain was loath to bear such an expense. She eventually came to see that her very possession of the island was a cheaper alternative. By keeping Malta in defiance of international opinion, Britain, in effect,

declared the island to be the symbol of her determination to prevent other powers from dominating the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Malta's value to Britain shifted, in conjunction with the international situation, between substantive and symbolic poles that were not mutually exclusive.

To

'A N G E L A

Who gave me the strength to finish

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ABBREVIATIONS

Add. MSS	British Library, Additional Manuscripts.
CO	Public Record Office, Colonial Office Records.
Cornwallis	The Correspondence of Charles, First Marquess Cornwallis, C.Ross (ed.), 3 vols., (London, 1859).
Correspondance	Correspondance de Napoléon 1er: publiée par ordre de l'empereur Napoléon III, 32 vols., (Paris, 1858-70).
Despatches	The Despatches and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson, Sir N.H. Nicholas (ed.), 7 vols., (London, 1844-6).
Dropmore	Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of J.B.Fortescue Esq., Preserved at Dropmore, (London, 1892-1927).
Egerton	British Library, Egerton Manuscripts.
FO	Public Record Office, Foreign Office Records.
Hardman	A History of Malta During the Period of the French and British Occupations, 1798-1815, (ed.) John Holland Rose, (compiler), William Hardman, (London, 1909).
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.
Parl. Hist.	Parliamentary History of England, William Cobbett (ed.), 36 vols, (London, 1820).
PRO	Public Record Office Manuscripts.
Stowe	British Library, Stowe Manuscripts.
Third Coalition	Select Despatches Relating to the Formation of the Third Coalition Against France, 1804-1805, John Holland Rose (ed.), (Royal Historical Society: Camden 3rd Series, vol. VII, London, 1904).

INTRODUCTION

> We have been admiring the wonderful strength of this place, both by nature and art. It is certainly the happiest situation that can be imagined. The city stands on a peninsula betwixt two of the finest ports in the world which are defended by almost impregnable fortifications ... The ditches, of a vast size, are all cut out of solid rock. These extend for a great many miles; and raise our astonishment to think that so small a nation has ever been able to execute them.
>
> - Patrick Brydone [1]

Thus Patrick Brydone described Malta in 1770, a place visited by few Englishmen in the late eighteenth century. Three years later, Brydone published an account of his trip that became the standard reference work on Malta and Sicily. Few contemporary Englishmen would have disputed his affirmation of Malta's military strength, but most would have thought it irrelevant to Britain's position in the Mediterranean. Britain did not then regard Malta as a potential naval base. It lay too far to the south and east to accomplish her principal naval objective in time of war, the blockade of the French naval station at Toulon, and it was controlled by the Order of the Knights of St. John. Satisfied that the Order's traditional policy of neutrality was sufficient to keep any of the other great powers from establishing itself at Malta, Britain regarded the island in a negative manner: any positive or intrinsic value it might possess was, therefore, irrelevant to her.

When the Knights of the Order first came to Malta in 1530, they had been reluctant to make it their home. One of them described it as:

> just a big wide rock rather than an island, and given its adverse natural features, ... it could never have obtained either great riches or a great name.[2]

Centuries later, Britain would share this reluctance to become involved with such a seemingly barren place. Malta was about the size of the Isle of Wight, and except for an abundance of building stone, had no natural

resources. Water was scarce in summer, and there were no permanent streams. Its rocky soil did not grow enough to feed its population, making imports of grain from Sicily a necessity. Given these negative features, it was not surprising that the Knights did not wish to go there. They did so because they had no choice. The Order represented the last remnant of the crusading movement, and having been recently expelled from Rhodes by the Ottoman Turks, was looking for a base from which to rebuild. Malta, offered as a gift by the Holy Roman Emperor, was accepted in desperation.

The Knights remained there for almost three centuries. Their initial disappointment was overcome by the realization that Malta had advantages which had been originally underestimated. It possessed many natural harbours, one of which numbered among the best in the Mediterranean. Its climate was healthier than in other Mediterranean coastal regions, and its natural infertility was compensated by a frugal and hardworking population.[3] Under the Order's rule, Malta prospered, and the population grew from 25,000 in 1530 to almost 100,000 in 1789. When compared with its tiny area, this population made the island one of the most densely populated places in all of Europe.[4] Malta's economic well-being during this period was a direct result of the huge sums of money spent there by the Order. In each of the major Catholic states of Europe, it owned vast estates that remitted a substantial part of their revenues to Malta each year. Added to this was the revenue produced by the Order's privateering raids on Muslim shipping. Compared to the sums spent by the Order to develop Malta, Britain's subsequent outlays in the first half of the nineteenth century were meagre. Travellers to Malta in the eighteenth century were amazed by the contrast between the prosperity

of this barren island and the wretched poverty of its more fertile neighbour, Sicily.[5] Indeed, one British officer remarked that "this certainly appears in favour of the government of the Order".[6] The comment was uncharacteristic, however, because the British generally preferred to justify their own rule by denigrating that of the Order.

Since the Order was constantly at war with the Muslim principalities, the improvements made to Malta's infrastructure reflected an uneasy balance between the availability of wealth and the need for security. The fortification of the island represented two and a half centuries of ongoing effort, during which the techniques of siege warfare became a science. The Order continually adopted the newest methods of construction to cope with the rapid changes. It was obsessed with staying up-to-date, and work was commissioned from the most renowned military engineers.[7] Significantly, most of the engineers employed by the Knights were Frenchmen. By 1798, there was some question about whether Malta's fortifications had become old-fashioned, but both British and French experts could agree that they were still formidable. Charles Pasley who became one of Britain's most eminent military engineers concluded:

> The Fort of Valletta is the finest specimen of the Ancient style - the depth of the ditches [is] tremendous - Never had I before seen a work deserving of the name of a Fortification.[8]

Napoleon Bonaparte's chief engineer, General Max Caffarelli, was even more to the point when he remarked in 1798: "It's a lucky thing there was somebody there to open the gates for us."[9]

Although the Knights believed it their duty to wage holy war against Muslims, they saw nothing incongruous in helping Europe's Christian nations trade with these enemies of the faith. As a result, the

Order did much to improve Malta's commercial facilities. Foremost among these was the establishment of a lazaretto, essential for trade with the Levant and Barbary because ships going to these plague ridden regions needed a reliable place in which to perform quarantine. During the eighteenth century, many countries took advantage of Malta's lazaretto. Indeed, unquarantined goods were prohibited entry into England by an act of 1753, and Malta was specifically designated as one of the approved lazarettos where goods could be aired.[10] John Howard, the British hospital reformer, was impressed by his inspection of the quarantine facilities at Malta in 1785, and there were many in Britain who came to regard them as the finest in Europe.[11] Indeed, one of Bonaparte's reasons for seizing Malta in 1798 was to use it as a hospital station to which he could send his sick and wounded from Egypt.[12]

Brian Blouet has stated that Malta's strategic importance has had less to do with such advantages as the fortifications and the lazaretto than with its relationship to Sicily. He claims that Malta had a strategic advantage over Sicily, in the past, only when the two islands were controlled by different powers. When one power was in control of both, Malta's strategic significance dwindled, and, economically, these have been the most difficult times for the Maltese.[13] This pattern did not repeat itself, however, during the Napoleonic Wars. Britain controlled both islands, but Malta remained the more important, as Britain came to realize that Malta possessed a comparative advantage that could be utilized only by a maritime power. Piers Mackesy has noted that the maintenance of effective sea power depends not only on the number of available warships, but also on the number of disposable troops available for amphibious operations. To be effective, a base must not reduce such a

force by tying up large numbers of troops as a garrison. [14] Since Sicily had a greater land area and population than Malta, any power interested in ruling it must expend proportionally more resources and manpower to do so. Furthermore, Sicily, as a permanent possession, would have been prone to constant diplomatic interference from European friends and foes alike. In this respect, it was more suited to rule by a land power. Malta, on the other hand, lent itself more readily to the needs of a sea power. The island, manageably small, did not make large demands on scarce naval resources, and if attacked, possessed a population large enough and fortifications strong enough to defend the place until a naval squadron could be brought back to its relief.

After 1793, Britain was locked in a protracted struggle with France that lasted until 1815. Colonial expansion was not a primary concern, yet, ironically, Britain came out of the war with a greatly enlarged empire. This had occurred because Britain had found it more lucrative to seize enemy colonies than she did to involve herself directly in fighting on the Continent. Such colonies were not only commercially valuable, but could also be used as bargaining counters during peace negotiations. Britain's seizure of Malta in 1800 was largely determined by such considerations, as were her subsequent reluctance to give it up and her eventual determination to keep it, even at the risk of international censure. [15] This three phase process explains how Britain acquired the island permanently, and makes up the first theme of the dissertation. Phase one begins with Bonaparte's capture of Malta in 1798. Britain laid seige to the island while at the same time using it as bait to tempt Russia to join the Second Coalition. Thus, the reasons for Britain's initial involvement with Malta were equivocal, and the island

became the crux of a larger struggle within the British government between supporters of a maritime or Continental strategy. In September 1800, Malta fell, but by then the coalition was faltering, and Britain no longer trusted Russia sufficiently to hand the island over to her. Even so Britain had no intention of keeping Malta herself, and regarded it as a temporary possession to be disposed of as part of a peace settlement.

Phase two is delineated by the search for peace. In a preliminary agreement in 1801, Britain agreed to give up Malta in return for a peace settlement; however, the negotiations at Amiens from November 1801 to March 1802 proved more troublesome than expected. The outcome was a treaty that neither side thought would last. Britain wanted to make sure France would not again take Malta, but the treaty's guarantees were unworkable, and Britain felt she had no choice but to refuse to evacuate the island. This led to a renewal of the war in May 1803, and the beginning of the third phase. Britain again tried to coax Russia into a coalition, but Russia was wary, because Britain's refusal to evacuate Malta in the interests of peace made the tsar suspicious that she was an untrustworthy ally. However, his fear of France eventually overcame his mistrust of Britain, and the Third Coalition was formed in the summer of 1805. Thereafter, the question of Malta remained on the periphery of the diplomacy of the period until the island was ultimately ceded to Britain in 1814.

The second theme of the dissertation examines Malta's changing value to Britain during this period. Five distinct shifts in emphasis can be traced, though they were not mutually exclusive, and all influenced Britain's decision to keep the island. The first has already been designated Malta's negative value. This manifested itself in Britain's

desire to keep the great powers, including herself, out of Malta. She had a similar goal in the eastern Mediterranean, and, ironically, her possession of Malta eventually came to be seen as the means of effecting this. The second shift relates to Malta's diplomatic importance. Some Englishmen wondered whether the question of Malta had been a red herring that had been given a disproportionate significance. They were incorrect in this assumption because the possession of Malta determined, to a large degree, the type of strategy its possessor could pursue. Bonaparte knew this instinctively when he first seized the island, but Britain took much longer to come to the same conclusion.

Malta's strategic importance forms the third shift. The British navy could not make up its mind about Malta. Admiral Horatio Nelson had no use for it, primarily because it was unsuited to be a base from which to blockade the French naval station at Toulon. However, his successor as Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, was not convinced that closely blockading Toulon was useful. He saw an expanded role for Britain in the eastern Mediterranean protecting the Ottoman Empire from great power intrusion, and Malta as an ideal base for such a task. However, the task would have required Britain to maintain a large fleet at Malta, something she did not wish to do on account of the expense. The fourth shift relates to the attempt to find a cheaper alternative to the latter strategy. After Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt, Britain had realized that maintaining weak buffer states in the Middle East was the best means of protecting her position in India. By 1806, her diplomatic intransigence had made it clear to all that her possession of Malta was the symbol of her resolve not to see the Ottoman Empire partitioned by the other great powers. Merely showing the flag at

Malta was meant to save Britain from the expense of keeping an extensive fleet there, and during the first half of the nineteenth century, she was largely successful in this bluff. The last shift relates to Malta's commercial importance. Although many Englishmen promoted the island's trade potential, it was never fulfilled. Malta did experience a boom after 1806 owing to the artificial conditions brought about by Napoleon's Continental System, but it soon burst after an outbreak of plague in 1812 from which the island's trade never fully recovered.

Finally, the dissertation will explain the role of Sir Alexander Ball who directed the two year siege of Malta from 1798 to 1800. He was again sent there in 1803 to implement the provisions of the Treaty of Amiens, and after the war was resumed, he stayed on as Civil Commissioner until his death in 1809. Throughout his career he staunchly believed in Malta's importance, and was the person most responsible for promoting an appreciation of it within the British government. Although he had a genuine affection for the Maltese people, it has been blown out of proportion by later writers who have ignored the fact that he was essentially an imperialist. That he was able to set his character on the type of colony Malta would become had much to do with the poor communications that existed at the time, allowing any representative on the spot great initiative. In this sense, Ball was typical of Britain's early empire builders, with one eye on increasing his influence in London to further his career and the other on minimizing his immediate administrative difficulties. His role should not be overemphasized, but he is significant because he was deeply involved in the debate about the retention of Malta and its value to Britain as a colony.

Historians have neglected Ball, and no monograph has been written

about his role at Malta. This may stem from the scarcity of his private papers. Two collections, however, have been drawn upon in this dissertation. The first consists of sixty-one private letters to Nelson, now kept at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. Ball and Nelson remained lifelong friends, but were at odds over the strategic importance of Malta, and their disagreement manifested itself most clearly in these letters. The second collection, in the British Library, is a volume of letters to Granville Penn, an Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office. For Ball, Penn was both a friend and a channel through which he could present his views to the government. As a result, these letters are more cordial but less candid than those to Nelson. Together the two collections permit one to assess more precisely the role of Sir Alexander Ball in helping to formulate Britain's Mediterranean strategy during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

INTRODUCTION – NOTES

1 Patrick Brydone, A Tour through Sicily and Malta (London 1773), I, 73. In 1769, Sir William Hamilton, Britain's ambassador at the Court of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, wrote a similarly impressive account of Malta's almost impregnable defences after he was inadvertently blown off course there: Hamilton to Weymouth, 10 July 1769, reprinted in Paul Xuereb, "Sir William Hamilton's Account of his First Visit to Malta," Melita Historica, VI (1972), 22-4.

2 Jean Quintin d'Autun, The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons, 1536) English translation, H.C.R. Vella, (Malta, 1980), 19.

3 Ibid., 29-37.

4 Contemporary estimates of Malta's population at the end of the eighteenth century vary between 90 and 110 thousand; those for 1530 between 20 and 27 thousand: Journal of Captain Thomas Walsh, 1800, Annual Register, (ed.) J. Dodsley, (London, 1758-1819), ILV, 943; A Description of Malta with a Sketch of its History and that of its Fortifications, translated from the Italian with notes by an officer resident on the Island, (Malta, 1801), 30-1; C. Wilkinson, The Epitome of the History of Malta (London, 1803), 112. Using the median population figures and including the area of Gozo, Malta's sister island, in the calculations, this results in a population density of 79 pers./km.sq. in 1530, and 316 pers./km.sq. in 1800.

5 Brydone, I, 307; and Richard C. Hoare, Recollections Abroad during the Year 1790: Sicily and Malta (Bath, 1817), 197-8.

6 Description of Malta, 31.

7 Alison Hoppen, The Fortification of Malta by the Knights of St: John, 1530-1798 (Edinburgh, 1979), 10-7.

8 Charles Pasley, Diary, Add. MSS 41972, f. 43.

9 Walter F. Lord, England and France in the Mediterranean, 1660-1830 (London, 1901), 129; Christopher Herold, Bonaparte in Egypt (London, 1963), 46.

10 Alfred C. Wood, The Levant Company (Oxford, 1935), 149.

11 Joseph Galea, "The Quarantine Service and the Lazzaretto of Malta," Melita Historica, IV (1966), 191; cf. Hoare, 180; and an article in the Edinburgh Review that claimed Malta had the best lazaretto in Europe: II (April 1805), 195.

12 Galea, 193.

13 Brian Blouet, The Story of Malta (London, 1967), 16-7.

14 Piers Mackesy, The War in the Mediterranean, 1803-1810 (London, 1957), 16-7. Charles Pasley estimated it would take a force of at least 25,000 to subdue Sicily, and many years of efficient government before it would be able to pay for itself: Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire (London, 1811), 65-6.

15 This study concentrates on Malta's role in the international relations of the period. It does not have a section that deals with the internal affairs and social relations of the Maltese. This was done consciously because these topics have been thoroughly covered elsewhere. Should the reader feel a need for such background, he is directed to the works of Cavaliero, Laferla, Lee and Hardman in the bibliography.

CHAPTER ONE

Malta in the late Eighteenth Century and its Capture by Bonaparte, 1798

> There has been no instance of a salary ever having been allowed to a British Consul at Malta.
>
> - Lord Grenville [1]

The sharp reply of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, to a bothersome consul in 1792 illustrates Britain's indifference to Malta in the late eighteenth century. Only after Bonaparte seized the island in 1798 did she begin to take notice. This event marks the start of Britain's involvement with Malta and the first chapter will outline the background leading up to it. Initially, Britain only wanted to get the French out, not to keep the island herself; however, Bonaparte's reasons for seizing it and those of the Knights of St. John for not putting up more resistance to him would later influence her decision not to give it up. As this decision would also affect Britain's relationship with Russia, it is important to set out the latter's attitude to Malta. The question of who should possess the island eventually became a symbol of the mistrust that developed between Britain and Russia, damaging their united effort to defeat France. Thus, the topics discussed in this chapter will all have an influence on Britain's future relationship with Malta despite their limited relevance to it during this earlier period.

I

In 1801, an English officer at Malta, stated that the island was "by far the most valuable possession that could have been acquired by the British Nation in the Mediterranean".[2] Another went further claiming that it was "perhaps the strongest [place] in the world".[3] Such statements stood in sharp contrast to Britain's characteristic indifference to Malta a mere three years before. Indeed, she had regarded the whole

Mediterranean as something of a backwater. Her main trade routes were elsewhere, and her sole interest was to ensure that no other power established predominance there. Britain did try to prevent the Russian seizure of Ochakov in 1791, but more in an attempt to preserve the balance of power in Central Europe, as Allan Cunningham has shown, than to expand her interest in the Black Sea and eastern basin of the Mediterranean.[4] In time of war, her principal strategic objective was confined to the western basin where her squadrons would blockade the French naval base at Toulon to prevent vessels stationed there from linking up with their Atlantic fleet.

To facilitate the blockade, Britain established bases at Gibraltar and Minorca, but few could agree on their relative merits. Gibraltar's harbour was hopelessly exposed, and in winter, no fleet dared anchor there. This base may have been advantageously located at the entrance to the Mediterranean, but in an age of sail, its location did not give absolute control over the shipping passing through the straits, since unpredictable winds sometimes blew vessels towards Spanish held Algeçiras. It was also too far away to be used either to protect Minorca or to blockade Toulon. Britain came to regard it as an expensive liability, and during the first half of the century, offered it to Spain no less than five times in exchange for an alliance that would have confirmed Britain's possession of Minorca.[5]

In contrast, Minorca's harbour was both secure and capacious, and was conveniently located close to the main blockading station off Toulon. Despite these advantages, Minorca had serious limitations. Unfavourable topography rendered the port vulnerable to attack. It could not be defended by the existing fortifications, and military experts doubted

whether any sufficiently strong could be built.[6] A naval squadron stationed there, therefore, was held hostage to its base, as the island could be easily captured as soon as it had left.[7] Thus, when Spain seized Minorca in 1783, Britain gave it up without a fuss, trusting that it could be easily re-taken if the need arose. Ten years later, she instead seized Toulon, but was forced to withdraw from it shortly thereafter, and decided to experiment with a new Mediterranean base thought to be an improvement on Minorca.

In January 1794, Admiral Hood signed a convention with a band of Corsican rebels by which they ceded their island to Britain. The British experience in Corsica proved, however, to be a disaster. The island was too large and mountainous to be controlled by the available forces. Few supplies were to be had locally, and the inhabitants were as intractable to the British as they had been to the French. Britain had accepted the island partially on the advice of Horatio Nelson, who could see no further than the immediate need to maintain the blockade of Toulon.[8] Not all naval officers agreed with him. Commander Cuthbert Collingwood, for one, foresaw an expensive drain on British resources that would ultimately make Corsica untenable as a base.[9] His prediction proved correct: the British were forced to evacuate it less than two years after they had arrived.

During this period, Britain never considered Malta as an alternative. Had she done so, its comparative advantages might have been discovered. Its harbour was as good as Minorca's, and its fortifications ensured that this harbour could be defended for a considerable time by a force much smaller than would be required to besiege the place. Furthermore, Malta was more compact and less rugged than Corsica, making

it easier to control both the terrain and the inhabitants. By 1796, however, the Corsican experience had soured Britain on the Mediterranean altogether. The First Lord of the Admiralty argued that the fleet could not operate there, once Spain had allied herself with France, and Naples had declared her neutrality.[10] Some Cabinet members objected, but the inertia of Britain's long indifference carried the majority. Thus, the withdrawal from the Mediterranean in October reflected an attitude prevalent for most of the century.

Britain's commercial interest in the Mediterranean was just as circumscribed. The Levant Company had been active for nearly two centuries, but the volume of its trade had been nowhere near as great as that between Britain and her colonies, especially those in the West Indies. By 1750, the company was in decline: most British merchants preferred to circumvent its monopoly by dealing with Italian middlemen in the entrepôts at Leghorn and Genoa.[11] Few Englishmen, as yet, realized that the eastern Mediterranean was the backdoor to their Asian possessions. George Baldwin, Britain's representative in Egypt, was the exception who claimed that this area was a "necessary link in the chain of communication with India".[12] However, ignored by his government, his plan to establish an overland trade across Egypt in 1786 came to nothing.[13]

Ultimately, Britain's indifference to the Mediterranean was reflected in her apathy towards Malta. Trade between the two was almost non-existent. Only a few British ships put into Malta's harbour each year, and they had a bad reputation. They often disregarded the harbour regulations, and their privateering threatened to compromise the neutrality of the Knights.[14] In November 1793, Admiral Hood sent a ship

to Malta with an offer of British protection in exchange for 1,500 Maltese seamen. His offer was more an admission of the critical shortage of manpower in the Royal Navy than a genuine attempt to establish closer ties. In this instance, he was only able to recruit 414 volunteers; the Grandmaster, however, received an admonition from France. Five years later, Bonaparte would use this incident as one of the pretexts for seizing Malta.[15]

Similarly, Britain's diplomatic ties with Malta were kept to a minimum. Her consuls were generally appointed by the Grandmaster, and London would usually humour him by recognizing the appointee. Neither government treated the post seriously, and as Britain had no real need of a representative at Malta it acquiesced in the arrangement.[16] Of the non-entities who held the consul's post, the most significant was William England. His correspondence with the Foreign Office during the 1790's exemplified Britain's lack of interest in the island. England was a Bristol seaman who had been cast off at Malta by his French captors in 1783. He had no means of returning home, and in 1790, the Grandmaster encouraged him to apply for the post of consul. The new Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, reluctantly acceded to his request, but only after England had paid a hefty fee for the unsalaried post.[17] His persistent request for some sort of remuneration met with an angry reply. Thereafter, Grenville chose to ignore him and during the critical period when French agents were gathering the intelligence to facilitate the French seizure of Malta, England did not receive replies to his despatches for as long as a year and a half.[18]

Although the tone of England's correspondence indicates that he was something of a nuisance who probably deserved no better treatment, he

was, nevertheless, one of the first Englishmen to point out that Malta was strategically important (the British consul at Genoa having preceded him in this by two months).[19] In August 1794, England submitted a detailed memorandum to the Foreign Secretary in which he claimed that as the Knights were no longer capable of defending the island, Malta would soon have to place itself under the protection of one of the maritime powers.[20] Either France or Russia might use it as a stepping-stone to the partition of the Ottoman Empire; therefore, Britain must act to forestall them. Her possession of Malta would cause the least international tension; both France and Russia would rather see her in control than the other. This conjecture would eventually be proved correct, but not until 1805-6, and then only after loud protests from all quarters. In 1794 however, England's prophetic memorandum went unanswered. The price for such apathy would be two years of hard fighting before the walls of Valletta, and another five years of diplomatic wrangling in the chancelleries of Europe.

France's attitude towards the Mediterranean was the antithesis of Britain's. Her trade with the Levant was important, and the use of Malta's harbour and lazaretto were essential to it. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, France had threatened to expropriate the Knights's French properties if they did not end their annual raids on the Turks.[21] By 1740, Ottoman ships were no longer molested, and French vessels increasingly used Malta as a depot *en route* to the Levant. French merchants were attracted by its many warehouses, and the incentive to use these had been increased in 1733, by the lowering of the duty on transfer cargoes to one percent.[22] Malta was also a convenient place at which to undergo quarantine. In the two decades from 1760 to 1780, French ships

using the lazaretto amounted to 40-65% of the total, a figure disregarding the large number of French vessels that just touched there.[23]

Therefore Malta, although still professing its independence, had become, by the middle of the century, a French sphere of influence, or as Jacques Godechot put it, "une colonie de fait".[24] Indeed, Frenchmen had always outnumbered others joining the Order, and in 1789, they made up two thirds of the Knights.[25] Similarly, a large part of the Knights's revenues came from France. Its treasurer, Bosredon de Ransijat, who betrayed his Grandmaster for Bonaparte, estimated that the French estates brought in almost one half of the receipts while the rest were shared among six other European states.[26] Thus, the Order of the Knights of St. John was an integral part of the ancien regime, and when the revolution began, it found itself dangerously dependent on France as a source both of manpower and money.

II

The French Revolution shattered the Order as a political institution. The Grandmaster, Emmanuel de Rohan, himself a Frenchman, recognized that its survival depended upon keeping out of France's internal affairs. However, deciding where France's affairs ended and those of Malta began was not an easy task. Unless the Order could demonstrate its usefulness to the Assembly, it would be unable to justify the retention of its estates in France. One Knight even went so far as to argue that the island was a "frontier of France" that would always provide asylum to its seafarers.[27] Such arguments were to no avail; in September and October 1792, a series of laws suppressed the Order in France, and confiscated all

of its properties there. Spain, Portugal, Naples and Piedmont were quick to follow suit by imposing excessive taxes on its possessions in their realms. Almost overnight, the Order lost most of its income, and found itself desperate for outside support. To find another patron as generous as France would not be easy; the Order's special relationship with her had been extremely beneficial as France had not only supplied financial aid, but also guaranteed the territorial integrity of Malta. The Knights's despondency is illustrated by their unsuccessful attempt in 1794 to conclude an alliance with the United States, by which they offered the use of Malta's port, as well as protection against piracy, in exchange for a grant of land in America.[28]

A few months later, the Order tried again, this time with Britain. In February 1795, a little more than a year after Hood's visit, it submitted a draft treaty to London that asked for British protection in return for the Royal Navy's use of the harbour and its right to recruit Maltese seamen.[29] Such a treaty would have ended Malta's neutral status, and de Rohan was risking a great deal in proposing it. Grenville neither cared about this, nor was he interested in the treaty. Although William Windham, one of his Cabinet colleagues, supported it, and urged him to meet with the Grandmaster's envoy, he refused.[30] Grenville placed little value on a maritime strategy, and felt that the resources needed to protect outlying bases could better be used in defeating the French on the Continent. Furthermore, de Rohan's timing had been bad. Britain was currently trying to extricate herself from the disaster of Corsica, and did not wish to make the same mistake twice.

Acceptance of the Order's offer might have led to the postponement of the decision to withdraw from the Mediterranean, that "most desperate

of all measures", as Windham characterized it.[31] Once Britain had withdrawn, however, the Order needed outside help more than ever. This help eventually came from Russia, the power most distrusted. The trepidation the Order felt was aptly expressed by one Knight who wrote:

> Russia is now in our diplomatic orient, and from her comes the light, faint it is true, and false, but seeing that it has lit up the horizon, we must follow where it leads.[32]

Russia had maintained a tenuous relationship with Malta since the time of Peter the Great. Peter had been interested in learning about naval warfare from the Knights; his successors had viewed Malta as a possible Russian base. For this reason, relations had not always been good. In the summer of 1770, a fleet sent by Catherine II had requested the use of the harbour and the Order's naval support in a campaign against the Turks. The Grandmaster pleaded neutrality, but many of the Knights later regretted that they had not played a part in the Russian victory off Chesme. To have done so, however, would have alienated the French, and few doubted, at that time, that France was a more benevolent patron than Russia might prove to be. Catherine's goals were unquestionably acquisitive. In 1775, her ambassador was expelled from Malta for attempting to foment an uprising that would have brought a Russian faction to power. Thereafter, the tsarina bore the Knights a grudge. She tried unsuccessfully to purchase the King of Naples's feudal rights over the island, and at the conclusion of the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, she stopped the Order's revenues from that country.[33] Its ambassador at St.Petersburg was unable to obtain their restoration until after Catherine's death in 1796.

Unlike his mother, Paul I esteemed the Knights, and, more important, his interest in Malta did not appear to be acquisitive. He was

obsessed by ritual, a trait which translated itself into a psychological affinity for the military and religious rites of the Order. Paul's contemporaries believed him mad, and cited his fascination with the Knights as proof. However, two recent studies by Hugh Ragsdale and Norman Saul dispute this interpretation, arguing that Paul's policies were singularly consistent despite the idiosyncratic way in which they were often implemented.[34] Although not proving him mad, his relationship with the Order does suggest the key to understanding his personality. He was terrified by the French Revolution and appalled by the ideology that had produced it. For him, the Order symbolized the ideal of the ancien regime, and he believed it to be a natural ally in the counter-revolution.[35] The Knights were by no means united in their opposition to the Revolution, as he believed them to be, but most did agree that there was no better patron than one whose underlying goals were ideological rather than territorial.

In January 1797, Paul committed himself to the annual payment of a large sum of money to the Order. The terms of the convention he offered were much more generous than had been expected, and his patronage seemed to provide an opportunity for regeneration. However, the French intercepted a copy of the convention; indeed, the Knights first learned of it when it was published in Paris. De Rohan, who immediately saw the danger from French resentment, was unable to do anything to head it off because he was dying. In December, the tsar made things worse by ceremoniously declaring himself "Protector of the Order". In itself, his declaration should not have been seen as a provocative act as both the King of Naples and the German Emperor had previously claimed such status, but coming on the heels of his financial succor, it proved too much of an

opportunity for intervention for the French to ignore.

France had always been cynical about Malta's neutrality; she respected it only because this seemed the cheapest way of preventing another power from taking the island. By 1797, however, the Directory began to have second thoughts about continuing to observe it. According to Jonquière, Malta was the "key to the Levant", and its loss would have been a commercial disaster.[36] The new Foreign Minister, Talleyrand, claimed that Malta's central position gave it the power to disrupt navigation in the whole of the Mediterranean, and he was afraid that intrigues were underway that would deliver it into the hands of either Russia or Austria. General Napoleon Bonaparte was therefore instructed in September to take the necessary steps to prevent this from happening.[37] Although Bonaparte had already realized that Malta's current weakness demanded immediate action, his attitude was more positive than that of the Directory. Three months before, he had written:

> The island of Malta is a major interest for us. The Grand Master is dying, and it looks as though his successor will be a German. It would take 500,000 or 600,000 francs to have a Spaniard made Grand Master ... Valetta [sic] has 37,000 inhabitants who are very well disposed towards the French; there are no longer any English in the Mediterranean; why shouldn't our fleet or the Spanish, before going into the Atlantic, sail to Valetta and occupy it? There are only 500 knights and the regiment of the Order is only 600 strong. If we don't, Malta will fall into the power of the King of Naples. This island is worth any price to us ...[38]

Bonaparte, who dreamed of establishing a chain of island bases in the Mediterranean that would make France its master, with Malta the first and the strongest, saw the Order's weakness less as a threat than as an opportunity. Paul's recent interest in Malta had disturbed him less than he led the Directory to believe. Russia's fleet had not entered the Mediterranean for nearly thirty years, and had the tsar been serious about gaining a foothold there, he would have been more secretive about it.

If Bonaparte concluded that Russia posed no immediate threat to France in the Mediterranean, Austria was another matter. Despite the signature in April 1797 of a preliminary treaty of peace with her, little progress had been made towards a general settlement. Indeed, Austria had used the hiatus to seize Ragusa on the Adriatic coast. The Directory regarded this as the first step toward the development of a strong Austrian navy. The dynastic ties that existed between Austria and Naples were equally worrisome since the King of Naples claimed a titular suzerainity over Malta. Legally, the Knights held the island as a fief of Naples, but the king's influence had been limited to granting noble titles, and appointing bishops. Now that the Order was collapsing, Naples, encouraged by Austria, might seek to strengthen her hold, and ominous signs seemed to suggest that this process had already begun. In July, de Rohan was succeeded by Ferdinand von Hompesch, the only German ever to hold the post. Although he had lived most of his life at Malta, Hompesch maintained close contact with his fatherland and had acted as the Austrian ambassador to the Order for twenty-five years.[39] His election convinced the French of the need to capture Malta, which they now saw as serving the dual role of compensating them for the Austrian seizure of Ragusa while at the same time checking Austria's further maritime expansion.

The fighting on the Continent ended with the Treaty of Campo Formio in October 1797. Only Britain still remained at war, and she had previously evacuated the Mediterranean. Therefore, Bonaparte could afford to be generous with Austria by giving her a share of the Venetian Republic. She got the city, while France got the Venetian navy and the Ionian Islands. Bonaparte valued the latter enormously since they gave

him control of the mouth of the Adriatic.[40] What he found most alluring about them, however, was their proximity to the Ottoman Empire. His imagination was fired with dreams of territories that would replace those lost to Britain. The Ionian Islands would serve as the stepping-stones to his future conquests, with Malta as the essential link between them and Toulon.

Although Bonaparte seemed to shift his priorities during the autumn of 1797, and plan for the invasion of England, his ambition to seize Malta was not forgotten. In December he sent an agent there who happened to be related to the captain of the port, and was able to gather a wealth of information about the Order's sorry state. There were only 300-400 Knights on the island most of whom, being Frenchmen, disliked the new Grandmaster, and scarcely more than 2,000 other troops capable of defending the place. Malta's treasury was almost empty, and the majority of the inhabitants were disaffected.[41] The island's seizure appeared to be an easy task, far easier than the proposed invasion of England, which was eventually rejected as too risky. Bonaparte had hoped that Admiral Brueys at Corfu would make short work of capturing Malta, but neither Brueys nor the Minister of Marine were enthusiastic about the project. Brueys eventually got out of it by pleading that the Venetian ships he was expected to use were unseaworthy.[42]

When the plan to capture Malta was revived in the spring of 1798, it became part of a bolder design to establish French control over Egypt. It is doubtful whether Bonaparte intended the expedition to Egypt to be the first step towards an invasion of India. Not only were the logistical problems enormous, but also the capture of Malta en route, in wasting precious time, would have been a serious tactical error. As the winds in

the Red Sea alternated with the seasons, he would have arrived too late to catch the monsoon he needed.[43] It appears more likely that Bonaparte believed Egypt to be intrinsically valuable as a colony, and as a constant threat to Britain, necessitating the dispersal of her scarce military and naval resources. In planning the expedition, Bonaparte had concluded that the capture of Malta was essential to the viability of the new colony. It was the necessary link between Toulon and Alexandria, and he could not risk passing by it.

At the beginning of May 1798, the news that Bonaparte was assembling an armada at Toulon caused the British to send a naval force under Nelson back into the Mediterranean. Nelson tried to monitor the movements of the French, but was blown off station, permitting them to sail away unhindered. On 9 June, Bonaparte arrived off Malta. After one day of skirmishing in which no more than three Frenchmen were killed, and another of desultory negotiations, the Knights surrendered. Much speculation has been given to the subject of why they capitulated so quickly. A letter exists, dated five days before the French arrival, that warns of an imminent invasion, but it may be a later forgery intended to discredit Hompesch.[44] Had de Rohan still been alive, the impregnability of Malta's fortifications might have been tested. Hompesch seems to have succumbed to what he took to be a hopeless situation. He had only a few troops at his disposal, and given his doubts about the loyalty of the French Knights and the Maltese militia, could not rely on them. Moreover, he made a serious tactical error in trying to defend the whole island rather than just the fortified urban strongholds as General Vaubois would later do against the English.

Perhaps most important, the pensions offered to the Knights by

Bonaparte made heroism on their part seem foolish. Their capitulation was almost unconditional, and they were ignominiously expelled within a few days. The fall of Malta on 12 June was a psychological rather than a military victory. When Bonaparte learned that a British fleet was nearby he was so worried about his exposed situation that he was prepared to offer a bargain that would have given the French the fortifications and the harbour, but left the Order in control of the rest of the island.[45] Such a compromise proved unnecessary because the Knights no longer had the will to resist. Indeed, the French, putting it down to a lack of moral fortitude, were somewhat indignant that the Knights had not put up more of a fight.[46]

Had the Knights done so, the outcome might have been very different. Delaying the French by a fortnight would have resulted in the arrival of the British fleet, and the battle of the Nile might have been fought off Grand Harbour. Unlike Nelson's subsequent victory that merely re-affirmed the stalemate between land power and sea power, such a battle would have been decisive: Bonaparte would have been stranded before formidable fortifications, without provisions, in an island with few natural resources. Nelson never understood this because he never understood the strategic importance of Malta. He mistakenly assumed that the French had gone there to use it as a spring-board for an invasion of Sicily. Indeed, he dreaded a naval engagement there because he thought that the enemy would have the advantage.[47] Nelson was unable to envisage how vulnerable Bonaparte would have been had the Knights resisted. His indifference to Malta, however, merely mirrored the myopia of his countrymen. Bonaparte had not been so easily deceived. He wrote triumphantly to the Directory: "We now have in the centre of the

Mediterranean the strongest fortress in Europe, and it will cost anyone dear to dislodge us."[48]

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CHAPTER TWO

Malta and the War of the Second Coalition, 1798-1800

> Whoever for a moment casts an eye on the map of Europe must be satisfied that the possession of the island of Malta from its situation, harbour, and impregnable fortifications, requiring only a small garrison, must be of the highest importance to England.
>
> - Sir Mark Wood [1]

The easy seizure of Malta had contributed to France's confidence in her ultimate victory, but by the end of 1798, she had lost control of the Mediterranean, and on the Continent, she was being confronted by a powerful new coalition. During the War of the Second Coalition, Malta was to assume unprecedented importance. The issue of who should control it was a principal cause both of the formation of the coalition, and of its collapse. Although Britain was no longer able to ignore the island, she wanted nothing more, initially, than to remove the French from it. Captain Alexander Ball did not agree that it was important only in this negative sense. He strove to convince his government, though with minimal effect, that it was intrinsically important and should not be given away lightly. Nevertheless, Britain did see fit to announce that she would keep it temporarily, and at the cost of a breach with her main Continental ally, Russia.

I

The Maltese had been generally pleased to see the Order expelled, and when Bonaparte sailed for Egypt on 18 June 1798, there was even some enthusiasm for the new rulers. The terms of the capitulation had guaranteed the property rights and customary privileges of the inhabitants, and there had been a promise that no extraordinary taxes would be levied. More important, the Maltese were assured of the freedom of practicing their Catholic religion.[2] These guarantees were soon violated, and on 2

September, a forced sale of church property brought about a revolt that compelled the small French garrison to seek refuge behind the walls of Valletta. Britain's ambassador at the Sicilian court, William Hamilton, claimed that the revolt had been caused by the news, at the beginning of August, of Nelson's destruction of Bonaparte's fleet in Aboukir Bay.[3] There is no doubt that the rebels were encouraged by it; however, the grievances against the French had become so widespread that a revolt would probably have occurred in any event. It is more likely that Nelson's victory dissuaded the French from taking a more vigorous approach to suppressing the insurgents. General Vaubois's speedy retreat to the well-stocked capital was made in anticipation of a British blockade. The French military commander thereby husbanded his resources, and saved himself the responsibility of having to feed Malta's large population.

Nelson heard of the revolt on 13 September, and immediately sent a small Portuguese squadron to blockade the island. He was primarily interested in capturing the French frigates that had sought refuge in its harbour after elluding him at Aboukir Bay. His choice of the Portuguese showed that Malta had a low priority. The Maltese expected little from Britain and threw themselves on the mercy of Ferdinand IV, King of the Two Sicilies, whom they now proclaimed their sovereign, albeit unenthusiastically. At the end of the month, a group of their deputies, crossing to Sicily, met with Nelson, and requested arms and ammunition.[4] This event signalled the start of Britain's involvement with Malta. At that time, however, Nelson saw little value in possessing the island, and was quite willing to see it revert to Naples. In his opinion, expressed in a letter to Lord Spencer, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Malta's only value was negative. He wrote:

> The possession of Malta by England would be a useless and enormous expense ... I attach no value to it for us, but it is a place of such consequence to the French that any expense ought to be incurred to drive them out of it.[5]

Alfred Mahan, Nelson's biographer, was taken aback by the latter's reluctance to put more value on Malta.[6] Nelson would never do so, and, throughout his life, he developed an antipathy towards the island that bordered on the irrational.

At the end of October, Nelson chose Captain Alexander Ball to take charge of the blockade of the island.[7] Ball had been one of his more audacious commanders at the Battle of the Nile, and Nelson thought highly of him despite the fact that Ball's family background and ostentatious manner were in sharp contrast to the more plebeian roots of his superior. When they had first met, years before, Nelson had considered him a "great coxcomb", but had changed his mind in June 1798 when Ball had resolutely towed Nelson's dismasted ship to safety.[8] Thereafter, Nelson praised him as, "eminently conspicuous for his conciliatory manners as for his judgement and gallantry".[9] These were traits that were noticeably lacking in Nelson, and the contrast in temperament between the two would become more pronounced as a result of their differing attitudes towards Malta. Unlike Nelson, Ball had no doubts about the intrinsic importance of the island. His letters are full of its advantages, and he believed that it would make the best base for Britain in the Mediterranean. In a letter to Hamilton, he asserted that Malta's strong fortifications precluded the need for a large garrison, and argued that the cost of maintaining the necessary garrison could easily be made up from local revenues, after a few years of efficient administration. He also felt that the Maltese were much hardier and more trustworthy as soldiers than either the Minorcans or Corsicans.[10]

Ball realized, however, that none of these advantages applied until he had forced the French to surrender. His direction of the blockade and siege was skillful, but he was hampered by the lack of regular troops and proper siege artillery, and at one point, had to off-load his ship's cannon for land use.[11] Moreover, a shortage of food caused great hardship among the Maltese. The island's granaries were all within the fortifications, and corn had to be imported from Sicily. Neither the Sicilian government nor Nelson provided much in the way of money or supplies. In January 1799, it seemed as if the besieged were eating better than the besiegers.[12] Because Nelson's opinion of Malta was the only one accepted by the Admiralty, Ball had to make do with whatever half-hearted support he could cajole. The island's reduction was unnecessarily prolonged by this short-sightedness. Meanwhile, the lack of food and supplies was causing the Maltese to squabble among themselves, and Ball saw the need for someone to act as their "Chief". He got Nelson to convince Ferdinand to appoint him governor of the island, and at the end of February 1799, was taken off active service in the navy in order to become the viceroy of a foreign king. Despite this formality, Britain's flag flew alongside that of Naples, and in this anomalous manner, she first established a foothold on the island.[13]

In London, the government was concerned with more important matters. With Bonaparte stranded in Egypt, Grenville saw an opportunity to rebuild the coalition against France. This was not an easy task, as the collapse of the First Coalition in 1796 had shown that victory sometimes led to unacceptable territorial gains by present allies who had been past rivals. Nevertheless, Grenville worked diligently, in the autumn and winter of 1798-9, to re-establish the coalition; the

disposition of Malta was one of the tools he used. He put no importance on it, however, except as a pawn to be used in exchange for some other advantage. Grenville had perceived that Malta might serve as the bait to lure Naples and possibly Russia into the coalition, though he could not see how "such an acquisition would be advantageous to either of those sovereigns".[14]

Bonaparte had mockingly written that Paul should be thankful to France because the occupation of Malta saved his treasury 400,000 roubles annually that would no longer have to be paid to the Order. Thus, France had understood the interests of Russia better than the tsar himself.[15] Paul did not agree; having assumed the patronage of the Knights, he felt personally insulted by France's occupation of Malta. This insult, combined with the French threat to the Ottoman Empire from their bases in the Ionian Islands, caused him to reverse his former policy of neutrality. He accused Hompesch of being a traitor for not resisting more vigorously, and allowed himself to be convinced by the Knights residing at St.Petersburg that the office of Grandmaster was vacant. In a highly dubious election, the Orthodox ruler of Russia was made head of the Catholic Order of Malta. Protestant England's reaction to this event was pragmatic. Grenville believed it expedient to humour the tsar, and instructed that Paul's new digiñity be recognized. Charles Whitworth, the British ambassador at St.Petersburg complied, though privately he believed that the tsar had foolishly neglected Russia's interests for "the barren rock of Malta".[16] Even so, he suggested to Paul that Britain would subsidize the Order's re-establishment in Malta. Although Whitworth was severely reprimanded by his government for this unsanctioned liberty, the die had already been cast; Britain's main objective was to persuade Russia

to join the coalition, and Malta was a small price to pay for this.[17]

Britain and Russia signed a convention in December 1798. Malta was not explicitly mentioned, but all parties acknowledged that its disposition was the basis of the accord.[18] In a letter to his ambassador in London, Paul explained that Malta would be temporarily garrisoned by a tripartite force, with Naples being the third power. Furthermore, it was understood that eventually the island would be restored to the Order.[19] In conveying this news to the Admiralty, Grenville stressed the importance of demonstrating Britain's good faith to her allies, even if this meant giving up territorial gains made in the Mediterranean.[20] A month after this initial convention, Russia joined the coalition in return for a large British subsidy. Austria still distrusted Russia, but France's expansion beyond her limites naturelles was a more immediate danger, and she, along with Naples, joined the Second Coalition in the spring of 1799.

The December convention was not popular in Malta. The inhabitants disliked both the Order and Russia with an equal intensity and Naples only a little less so. Ball claimed that the Maltese regarded British rule as more desirable than any other. Both he and Nelson distrusted the Russians, and doubted whether the Neapolitans would have the resolve to keep the French out. Ball asserted that he would not allow Russian forces to land because he could not guarantee their safety at the hands of the inhabitants.[21] He was also worried that the Maltese might go over to the French, if either Russia or the Order were forced upon them; to Nelson, he wrote: "They would have remained very contented under the French had their religion and laws been respected, and they treated with kindness and humanity."[22] Spencer scolded his subordinates for

attempting to flout government policy, but he too was not enthusiastic about Russia gaining control of Malta.[23] Thereafter, Ball and Nelson had no choice but to obey. While Nelson's letters were full of sarcasm about doing so, Ball was beginning to welcome the thought of Russian troops as a necessary solution to the deteriorating military situation in which he found himself. Nevertheless, all of Russia's forces in the Mediterranean were entangled in the Ionian Islands, and she made no serious attempt to send any to Malta.

II

Nelson's victory at Aboukir Bay gave the Royal Navy complete control over the Mediterranean. In the patriotic upsurge that followed, it was easy to miss the point that this victory was defensive. Both Nelson and the British government overestimated its significance, and in so doing, they underestimated the new geo-political reality that demanded British control of the eastern as well as the western basin of the Mediterranean. Britain found it difficult, thereafter, to play her customary role of fighting on the Continent as a subordinate because the French in Egypt now posed a perpetual challenge to her position in India.[24] They had to be removed, but this was impossible to accomplish at the beginning of the War of the Second Coalition because Britain lacked the land forces necessary to follow up her maritime victory.[25] As a result, her naval strategy in the Mediterranean during this war was often confused and contradictory.

In 1798, Minorca was the only base considered by the Royal Navy. It was easily taken in November without the loss of a single man, but the ease with which it could be captured was its principal shortcoming. Its capture had been an instinctual reaction. The Sea Lords argued that it made an ideal base from which to blockade Toulon, and blockading was

another instinctual strategy.[26] Indeed, Nelson had rejected Malta primarily because its distance from Toulon made it unsuitable for this purpose. As a strategy, blockading had severe limitations. It was extremely wasteful of naval resources, and if the enemy chose to remain in port, it would never lead to a decisive victory. The "close" blockade of Brest was justified by that port's proximity to England and Ireland, but Toulon did not pose such an immediate threat.[27] Moreover, no blockade of Toulon had ever prevented the French from leaving it for long. They had merely to watch from the high ground above the city for the British to be blown off-station by the appropriate winds. Mahan, the enthusiast of seapower, recognized that the Mediterranean's long indented coastline with its numerous peninsulas limited a seapower's effectiveness. By controlling the internal passageways formed by these peninsulas, a land power needed only to make short hops across narrow stretches of water in order to secure its vital communications.[28] This was what Bonaparte had in mind when he had seized such strategically important points as Malta, the Ionian Islands and the heel of Italy.

The Admiralty was reluctant to ask whether Britain needed to blockade Toulon closely. It was influenced by the memory that "close blockade" had been associated with victory in the Seven Years War while "distant blockade" had contributed to defeat in 1783. However, this was a faulty analogy in reference to the Mediterranean. Had Malta been used as a base, it would have been sufficient to monitor the French at Toulon with a few fast cruisers because its central position ensured that the fleet could catch up with the French wherever their destination might be. In this way, Malta could be used to cover not only the eastern and western basins of the Mediterranean, but also the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic seas as

well. This new strategy was advocated by Ball who was one of the few naval officers to recognize that Britain's priorities had changed as a result of Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition. For him, Minorca had become obsolete because "Gibraltar and Malta place the enemy, as it were, between two fires from their eastern and western situations".[29] Malta was also useful as a convenient place at which to keep a disposable force that could be quickly despatched to wherever it might be needed. The Admiralty, however, refused to consider such an innovative approach until after Nelson's death in 1805.

Malta was one of the most difficult places in Europe to blockade. A squadron attempting this was faced with some very special problems, as Ball was to discover to his discomfort. Its small size and numerous harbours made it necessary to station ships in each of the four quarters of the compass, and it was almost impossible not to have some of these blown off-station at any one time.[30] The sea around Malta became extremely rough during the winter, and the French were sometimes able to take advantage of the lull between storms to slip supplies into Valletta. Ball was criticized for allowing this to happen, but the forces allotted to him were too few to prevent it. Maintaining the blockade under such conditions was costly in men and ships; however, the very difficulty of the operation could be interpreted as an advantage since only the Royal Navy had the resources and expertise necessary for such a gruelling task. Once Malta was in British hands, the French would never attempt it.

Over-confidence after Nelson's Nile victory caused Britain to disperse her forces foolishly in the Mediterranean. The Commander-in-Chief, Lord St.Vincent, was ordered to accomplish an impossible number of tasks. He was to protect the Italian and Adriatic coasts while at the

same time lending support to the land forces of Austria and Naples; he was to co-operate with the Russo-Turkish squadron that had just been sent through the Straits, and insure that all communication between France and Alexandria was severed. Only lastly, was he expected to bring the blockade and siege of Malta to a conclusion.[31] The reduction of the island was therefore unnecessarily prolonged because of the Admiralty's unwillingness to concentrate its available forces. Such a strategy showed that Malta's value had not yet been grasped. Britain was safe in dispersing her forces only if the remaining French fleet could be kept confined at Brest; however, in the spring of 1799, Admiral Bruix was able to break the blockade, and sail his fleet unchecked into the Mediterranean. Admiral Keith, who had just replaced St.Vincent as Commander-in-Chief, had no choice but to order the concentration of the various British squadrons, so as to prevent their being picked off piecemeal by the French.[32] On 18 June, Ball was commanded to lift the blockade of Malta, and rejoin Nelson off Sicily. Instead of rushing to protect Minorca with his enlarged squadron, as he had been commanded to do, Nelson uselessly held his ships in reserve where he was. He thereby disobeyed a direct order, but luckily for him the French did not attack Minorca, and he got off with a reprimand instead of having his career ruined.[33] Nevertheless, Ball's blockade had been ruined and for nothing; between May and June, the French were able to re-supply Valletta. At the beginning of July, Bruix returned irresolutely to Brest, and Ball was sent back to Malta.[34] His tactic of starving the French into submission had to begin all over again. Clearly, Britain's naval strategy in the Mediterranean had been myopic and unsuccessful.

III

The blockade and siege of Malta continued in a desultory fashion for almost two years. During this time, Britain's attitude towards the island underwent a transformation. Her former complacency about Neapolitan or Russian control over it changed to a firmer stand that saw its temporary retention as necessary to the successful conclusion of the war. This change came about as a result of the struggle between the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, and the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Henry Dundas. Together with William Pitt, the Prime Minister, these three men formed an "inner Cabinet". As the war dragged on, Pitt's mental and physical state began to decline. Increasingly unable to make up his mind, he was influenced in turn by each of these ministers with the result that Britain's war policy often seemed vacillating and ineffectual.[35] Pitt's procrastination eventually led to the downfall of his administration, but not before Dundas had brought about a transformation of Britain's policy in the Mediterranean in which Malta was to play a pivotal role.

In October 1799, Britain was faced with the defeat of a joint Anglo-Russian expeditionary force to Holland. Both Grenville and Dundas had been equally responsible for this fiasco, but each had learned a different lesson from it. Grenville wanted to continue supporting the coalition despite its impending breakdown, but Dundas supported the alternative policy of reverting to maritime warfare. The goal of such a strategy was to increase Britain's wealth through the expansion of commerce. The captured colonies also had the potential of being used as bargaining counters at future peace negotiations. In surrendering

European hegemony to France, Dundas risked permanently alienating Britain's allies, a prospect that was totally unacceptable to Grenville. Because he opposed Dundas's maritime strategy, the Foreign Secretary put little value on the acquisition of Malta. He wrote to Dundas: "I am clear we have no interest in keeping it, nor any other concern about it than to keep it out of French hands".[36]

Dundas's attitude towards Malta had been influenced by a political advisor named Mark Wood. Wood had been a successful East India Company official in Bengal who had formed strong views about the island on a return trip to England via Egypt in 1779. He had been favourably impressed by the shortness of this route compared to that around the Cape of Good Hope, and felt it necessary, in 1796, when the proposal to withdraw from the Mediterranean was being discussed, to warn both the Prime Minister and Dundas to take steps to secure this backdoor to India. He believed that Britain needed "some tenable port" in the Mediterranean, and suggested Malta. In British hands, it would serve as a barrier preventing France from taking Egypt. A fleet based there would have command of the shipping between the Levant and Europe; the coasts of Italy, Spain and France would be subject to the constant vigilance of its patrols. Malta would no longer have to depend upon Sicily for food because it would be free to develop its trade with North Africa and the Levant; it also had the potential of becoming a depot for naval stores brought from the Black Sea.[37] Dundas sympathized with Wood's views, but believed the latter was overly optimistic about the ease with which Britain could acquire Malta. Moreover, he had already been convinced, by the Admiralty, that it lay too far east to serve as a base. Wood's second letter to Dundas dated two months before Bonaparte's eastern expedition,

was even more urgent. In it, he predicted the invasion of Egypt, and claimed that this made Malta's eastward position even more desirable. Once the French got Egypt, Britain could expect to spend far more to defend India, he argued, than it would have cost to acquire Malta, which he described as "an impregnable post which could be defended against all the world at a small expense either of blood or of treasure".[38] This time Dundas took the warning seriously, and at the end of April 1798, he supported the sending of a naval force back into the Mediterranean; however, it was already too late to stop the French.[39] During the next two years, Dundas would often regret he had not acted sooner, but such regret served only to strengthen his resolve to challenge Grenville on this vitally important issue.

The confrontation between the two now began in earnest. Grenville wrote to Dundas urging him to be expeditious about removing British forces from Malta because the Russians were becoming anxious. It must be handed over to them as soon as possible, and the Royal Navy would have to be content with Minorca as its Mediterranean base.[40] Dundas was beginning to have second thoughts about the reliability of Russia as an ally, and he recommended that the treaty with her be scrapped. She should not be allowed, he wrote:

> to seize upon the whole Watch Towers of the Levant and the Adriatick [sic]. Malta stands the foremost in that description and if we were to make our choice between the two, there cannot be a doubt that a preference is due to Malta over Minorca ... With Gibraltar at one end, and Malta at the other, joined to our Naval Superiority, ... these two Fortresses without any other would at all times keep the Mediterranean and Levant in perfect order.[41]

His words came close to paraphrasing the advice he had received from Wood. Grenville was not convinced, and he urged Dundas to reconsider before any damage had been done to Britain's relationship with Russia.[42] The

latter remained adamant, and the most he would concede was a restoration of Malta to the Order if Russia agreed to allow Britain to use its naval facilities.[43]

Dundas was beginning to be as worried about Russia's influence in the Near East as he was about the French in Egypt. Various naval and military commanders had advised him against trusting her, and despite their reservations about Malta's strategic value, they were in agreement that Russia should not be given the island. Keith was incensed that Russia had sent neither ships nor men to aid in the blockade and siege of Malta, and he felt that she had, thereby, forfeited any right to it.[44] The British ambassador at Constantinople had sent a private warning to the Admiralty that the Porte was alarmed at the prospect of Russia controlling Malta. The Turks felt that Russia had already taken unwarranted liberties in the Ionian Islands, and wanted Britain to retain Malta as an assurance that Russia would not encroach further upon their territory.[45] General Charles Stuart, Dundas's appointee to the command of Britain's disposable forces in the Mediterranean, asserted that he would refuse to allow the Russians to land at Malta. Because of this blatant insubordination, Dundas was forced to accept Stuart's resignation, but he let Grenville know that he agreed with the General's views on not allowing the Russians into Malta.[46]

Sir Ralph Abercromby, Stuart's successor, was not able to reach the Mediterranean in time to help the Austrians who were decisively defeated in June, at Marengo. This battle had a major effect on British policy which now shifted away from a Continental strategy, back to the more limited maritime warfare Dundas preferred.[47] Grenville clung to the fantasy that the coalition could be revived, and tried to aid the

Austrians by bribing them with a subsidy to prevent them from signing a separate treaty. Since Russia had broken with Austria several months before, such efforts were now futile. In July, Talleyrand made his first attempt at a rapprochement with Paul by offering to release Russia's prisoners of war, and to cede Malta to him. The Russian chancellor urged Paul to accept, but the tsar realized that Bonaparte's offer was hollow since Malta was on the point of surrendering to the British.[48] Bonaparte's secret negotiations with Paul convinced Dundas that a break with Russia was now necessary. In August, he persuaded the Cabinet, over Grenville's objections, to reverse Britain's policy. Russian troops were now to be discouraged from landing at Malta. If they did so, they were to be kept apart, not given any role in the reduction of the city, and, afterward, were not to be allowed to garrison any of the fortresses. Dundas justified his position by claiming that Russia had denied Britain the use of Corfu's naval facilities, and would do the same in Malta if she gained control of it.[49]

In August, Bonaparte offered to make peace. The prerequisite of his initiative was a naval and land armistice. This was a thinly disguised ruse intended to consolidate his position on the Continent while preventing the British from bringing the siege of Malta to a successful conclusion. A general negotiation would have prevented Austria from signing a separate treaty, something Grenville wished to avoid. However, Dundas convinced the Cabinet against accepting this bait since he believed that Austria was now a spent force. Moreover, France had no intention of giving up the Netherlands, Britain's most important aim in a general settlement. Bonaparte was stalling for time, and a naval armistice would allow him to resupply his forces in Malta and in Egypt.

Britain could not rely on being able to starve the French into submission in Egypt, a country that would revert back to the Ottoman Empire as part of any peace settlement. Therefore, Malta was the more critical of the two. Not only were the French forces there on the point of starvation, but also the Knights had been discredited, and France feared that Britain would not give Malta back to them once she had gained control of it. Eventually, it was Bonaparte who broke off the talks at the end of September when he learned that his garrison at Malta had surrendered. The abruptness with which he ended these discussions, just when they were showing progress, proved that his principal aim was the relief of his forces there; when this could not be accomplished, he no longer saw any point in negotiating.[50]

IV

The French in Malta surrendered on 5 September 1800, two years after the siege had begun. It had taken far too long because of the lack of regular troops and proper artillery. British officers had high praise for the Maltese volunteers, but they were no substitute for trained professionals. In June, Abercromby had sent a force of 1,500 British regulars, but they too had been insufficient to accomplish the task. The French eventually succumbed to starvation, proving the worth of Malta's fortifications. Despite Ball's conspicuous efforts during the siege, the credit for its success went to the British army. He was excluded from the capitulations because his mandate had come, albeit at the request of his own government, from the King of Naples. Afterward, he was made Civil Commissioner, but this post was subordinate to the authority of the island's military commander, and Ball felt that he was being treated with less dignity than a "Town-Major".[51] Abercromby was of two minds about him. He

acknowledged the latter's efforts, and requested that he be recompensed for them, but also felt that Ball's position was now incompatible with the military authorities.[52] Abercromby was not a disinterested party, however, since he regarded Malta as a ripe opportunity for patronage, and feared that Ball's disapproval and his popularity with the Maltese might prove disruptive to this end.[53]

Britain's ambassador at Naples, Arthur Paget, was not informed of Dundas's reversal of policy. Abercromby's implementation of it at the conclusion of the siege put Paget in an extremely embarrassing position. Unlike Russia, Naples had contributed men and money, only to be excluded from the capitulations. Grenville attempted to mollify Naples by pleading that the reversal of policy had been Russia's fault. He claimed that the subject had been of such "great delicacy" that he could not risk divulging it until after the surrender. Naples was better off with Britain in control of Malta, he said, than either Russia or France, because Britain was her only true friend. Even so, Paget was to assure the Neapolitan court that Britain's occupation of Malta was only temporary, and did not "prejudice the question of the future disposition to be made of the Island at the conclusion of a general peace".[54]

Paul reacted as angrily to Britain's decision to keep Malta as he had to the original French invasion. Russia's relations with Britain had been deteriorating throughout the summer, culminating in August with the recall of the Russian ambassador. In the same month, Bonaparte had attempted to reconcile his differences with the tsar, and Britain had seen this as an indication of Russian treachery. Paul was beginning to feel the same about his allies. During the campaign, Austria had used every opportunity to aggrandize herself in Italy at Russia's expense until the

tsar had finally broken with her. Britain's decision to keep Malta, in violation of a solemn convention, appeared to be following the same course.[55] On 7 November, Paul placed an embargo on all British ships in Russian harbours until Malta was restored to the Order, and in December, he announced the formation of a league of Baltic powers that would maintain an "Armed Neutrality" against Britain. Grenville claimed that his government had not been given sufficient time to consider Russia's request before hostile action had been taken. This may have been true, but his assertion, to the Russian chancellor, that the 1798 convention was merely a proposal and therefore not binding, was a gross distortion of the original agreement.[56]

By the end of the year, the Second Coalition no longer existed. This came about not only as a result of the defection of Russia but also because Austria's only remaining army was destroyed at Hohenlinden on 3 December. Grenville believed that Britain's retention of Malta was the main cause of the coalition's collapse; however, its viability had been shaky from the start. It was doomed by the breakdown of co-operation between Austria and Russia, and by Russia's distrust of Britain's willingness to commit her forces to a Continental campaign. It was also impossible to ignore Bonaparte's military victories as a cause. These features would have remained to destroy the coalition even had Britain sought to placate the tsar by giving him Malta.

As the coalition crumbled, Dundas's views gained ascendancy. Even before he learned of Valletta's surrender, he was attempting to get the Cabinet to sanction a military expedition to remove the French from Egypt; on 3 October, it agreed to do so. The fall of Malta was regarded as something of a bonus since the island could be used as a place to rest and

re-organize the troops before they continued on to Egypt. Windham, who like Grenville had opposed Dundas's plan, agreed that the possession of Malta made the expedition less hazardous, but he also argued that Britain might now safely postpone the expedition until it could be mounted on a larger scale because naval forces based at Malta were certain to intercept any relief being sent to the French in Egypt.[57]

Dundas was of two minds about Malta. To the king, who was upset about the proposed expedition, he argued that its possession made all the difference because it minimized the risks involved.[58] To the minister in charge of transports, he was not so optimistic. Dundas had despatched the expedition hastily and without properly supplying it. He feared that the troops landing at Malta, "by increasing the numbers of mouths will rather add to their difficulties".[59] As a result, they might be delayed while waiting for supplies to arrive. A common complaint about the island was that it depended upon the importation of a major part of its food supply. Ball believed that this point had been overemphasized. He admitted that Sicily's proximity made it a convenient place from which to import corn and oil, but once the Order had been removed, Malta was no longer at its mercy for these supplies. They could now be obtained anywhere in the Mediterranean, including the Muslim principalities, and at a cheaper price.[60] This altered situation made it difficult for an enemy to cut off all the island's sources of supply, especially if that enemy did not have a predominant navy. The recent siege had shown that Malta's underground granaries were capacious enough for it to hold out until it could be relieved, if it were ruled by a power with naval superiority.

The expedition's officers were favourably impressed by Malta.

Their attitude was epitomized by Sir John Moore, a subaltern who was later to gain fame in Spain. He considered it a "most remarkable place", and spent his time there inspecting the fortifications which, he claimed, were still the strongest in Europe, though in need of repair. He also attested to the usefulness of Malta as a place where fresh produce and meat could be obtained. Its harbour had adequate facilities for cleaning and repairing ships, and there was no want of lodgings on shore while these tasks were being carried out.[61] Abercromby, who had been named the expedition's commander, was similarly impressed by Malta. He praised it highly in a letter to Dundas in which he asserted:

> As a military station it may be pronounced to be the most complete in his Majesty's possession, and the harbour, which is capacious and perfectly safe, is perhaps the best port in the Mediterranean.[62]

Abercromby had wanted to sail directly from Malta to Egypt. However, the government had insisted on a prior stopover at Marmorice in Asia Minor to make joint plans with the Ottomans from whom the British were to receive horses and supplies. He felt this stopover would have been unnecessary had the government sent him off properly equipped. He was as disappointed with his stay at Marmorice as he had been delighted with his sojourn at Malta. The supplies, horses and reinforcements promised by the Turks never materialized, and the only real use it served was to give his troops an opportunity to practice amphibious landings.[63] Both Moore, and Captain Ben Hallowell, one of the few naval officers with any experience in the eastern Mediterranean, agreed with him that the expedition should have sailed directly from Malta.[64]

Abercromby's good opinion of the island had been largely influenced by a report written by Ball. This report made a detailed comparison between Minorca and Malta, and concluded that Malta's

fortifications and harbour were superior. The harbour's entrances were impregnable to an attack from the sea, and its dockyard, though small, was complete. Furthermore, there was an adequate supply of fresh water, a resource that was scarce during the summer in Minorca. The report also contained a section outlining the potential commercial advantages of keeping Malta. Ball felt that it could become a great entrepôt selling English manufactured goods in exchange for Mediterranean and Levantine products. A copy of Ball's report did find its way into the archives of the Colonial Office, but at that time, his ideas had little effect on the government.[65]

Britain had achieved her aim of removing the French from Malta, but her continued occupation of the island was considered temporary. The collapse of the Second Coalition had demonstrated how sensitive the allies could be over such issues, and Britain knew that it was not possible to defeat France without a renewed coalition. Thus, Ball's entreaties were seen as potentially embarrassing to this wider policy aim. Over the next few years, Britain would begin to re-appraise the importance of Malta, but not before she had first promised to give it up as part of a peace settlement.

CHAPTER TWO - NOTES

1 Sir Mark Wood, The Importance of Malta Considered in the Years 1796 and 1798 (London, 1803), 3.

2 Articles of Capitulation, 12 June 1798, Correspondance, IV, 2636.

3 Hamilton to St.Vincent, 29 September 1798, Nelson's Letters to his Wife and Other Documents, (ed.) George Nash, (London, 1958), 417-8.

4 Saumarez to Nelson, 26 September 1798, Despatches, III, 124.

5 Nelson to Spencer, 6 April 1799, ibid., III, 315.

6 Alfred Mahan, The Life of Nelson, the embodiment of the sea power of Great Britain (London, 1897), 560 and 629. In a footnote, N.H. Nicholas, the editor of Nelson's Despatches, was similarly incredulous of his assessment of the island's worth: III, 315.

7 Nelson to Ball, 25 October 1798, Despatches, III, 157.

8 Nelson to Locker, 1783, Memoirs of the Life of Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson, (ed.) Thomas Pettigrew, (London, 1849), I, 19; and Carola Oman, Nelson (London, 1947), 279-80.

9 Nelson to St.Vincent, 30 December 1798, Despatches, III, 250.

10 Ball to Hamilton, 9 February 1798, Nelson's Letters to his Wife, 498-500.

11 Ball to Nelson, 12 April 1799, Add. MSS 34910, f. 200.

12 Petition of the Maltese Deputies to Captain Ball, 26 January 1799, Hardman, 169.

13 Nelson to Ball, 28 February 1799, Despatches, III, 273; and Ball to Acton, 2 October 1799, draft on one of the back pages of Ball's diary, Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

14 Grenville to Hamilton, 3 October 1798, Hardman, 129-30.

15 Bonaparte to the Directory, 17 June 1798, Letters and Documents of Napoleon, I, 243-4.

16 Whitworth, Memoir on the State of Russia, July 1800, Dropmore, IV, 283.

17 James Kennedy, "Lord Whitworth and the Conspiracy Against Paul I," Slavic Review, XXXVI (1977), 208.

18 Provisional Convention between Great Britain and Russia, 18 December 1798 (ratified 23 April, 1799), Consolidated Treaty Series, (ed.) Clive Parry, (New York, 1969-), LIV, 379-88. No mention of Malta is made in this treaty, but Grenville's correspondence and that of the tsar reveal both believed the island's disposition was at the basis of the accord (cf. footnotes 19 and 20). Ball received a copy of the secret provision concerning Malta from Whitworth: Hardman, 209. I can only conclude that this may have formed part of the unauthorized promises that Whitworth was making to Paul, and the former was playing safe by not including it in the formal convention.

19 Paul I to Vorontsov, 19 December 1798, Dropmore, IV, 419.

20 Grenville to the Admiralty, 9 May and 9 July 1799, Memoirs of Nelson, I, 313-8.

21 Ball to Nelson, 9 February 1799, Hardman, 185.

22 Ball to Nelson, 12 April 1799, ibid., 210.

23 Spencer to St.Vincent, 29 June 1799, and Spencer to Nelson, 18 August 1799, Spencer Papers, IV, 54-5; 98.

24 Ingram, Commitment to Empire, 61-3.

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28 Mahan, 560.

29 Ball, Report on Malta, c. December 1800, Stowe 918, f. 12v.

30 Ibid., 11-12.

31 Standing Orders to St.Vincent, 30 October 1798, Spencer Papers, III, xi-xii.

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37 Wood to Pitt and Dundas, 14 November 1796, The Importance of Malta, 5-9.

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42 Grenville to Dundas, 17 April 1800, Add. MSS 40101, ff. 79-80.

43 Dundas to Grenville, 20 April 1800, Dropmore, VI, 199.

44 Keith to Ushakov, 6 February 1800, The Keith Papers: selected from the letters and papers of Admiral the Viscount Keith, (ed.) W.G. Perrin and C. Lloyd, (Navy Records Society: London, 1927-55), II, 60.

45 Elgin to Nelson, 15 January 1800, Spencer Papers, IV, 107.

46 Mackesy, War Without Victory, 95-6;
cf. Dundas to Grenville, 25 April 1800, Dropmore, VI, 207-8.

47 Mackesy, War Without Victory, 122-3.

48 Ragsdale, 114 and fn.20, 147.

49 Dundas to Abercromby, 1 August 1800, Keith Papers, II, 135-8.

50 Harvey Bowman, Preliminary Stages of the Peace of Amiens: the diplomatic relations of Great Britain and France from the fall of the Directory to the death of Emperor Paul of Russia, November 1799 - March 1801 (University of Toronto Studies, History, 2nd Series, vol. I: Toronto, 1897), 48-9.

51 Ball to Nelson, 27 September 1800, Memoirs of Nelson, I, 395.

52 Abercromby to Dundas, 9 December 1800, Lord Dunfermline, Lieutenant-General Sir Ralph Abercromby K.B., 1793-1801: a memoir by his son (London, 1861), 316-21.

53 Ball to Nelson, 24 January 1801, NMM, CRK/1. Gen/B/.

54 Grenville to Paget, 17 October 1800, The Paget Papers: diplomatic and other correspondence of Sir Arthur Paget, 1794-1807, (ed.) Sir A.B. Paget, (London, 1896), I, 274-5.

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57 Windham to Spencer, 11 October 1800, Spencer Papers, IV, 131-2.

58 Dundas to George III, 9 October 1800, The Later Correspondence of George III, (ed.) A. Aspinal, (Cambridge, 1967), no.2259, III, 425-6.

59 Dundas to Chatham, 21 November 1800, Add. MSS 40102, ff. 92-3.

60 Ball, Report on Malta, c. December 1800, ff. 8v-11.

61 Sir John Moore, The Diary of Sir John Moore, (ed.) Major-General Sir J.F. Maurice, (London, 1904), I, 383-4.

62 Abercromby to Dundas, 9 December 1800, Dunfermline, 316.

63 Ibid., 256-60.

64 Moore, I, 399; and Hallowell to Keith, 31 October 1800, Keith Papers, II, 247.

65 This assertion is based on the many similarities between the information in the report, and Abercromby's statements in his letter to Dundas (cf.footnote 52). Part of Ball's report is printed in Hardman, 346-9. The Stowe MS was used, however, because it was complete, and conveniently available. Other versions with slight variations are found at the Public Record Office in CO 158/1, 11-25; and in Ball's Diary, the Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

CHAPTER THREE

Malta and the Peace of Amiens, 1801-1803

> And all this for Malta! Malta! Plain bare naked Malta, unconnected with any other interest. What a point of honour can the retention of Malta be to you? Something of that nature may be felt by France, but to you I aver, it is as a point of honour nothing.
>
> - Charles James Fox [1]

Britain's fortunes in the war reached their lowest ebb in the winter of 1801. The Second Coalition had collapsed, and once again she faced France alone. At home, the people were feeling the pinch of the government's austerity measures, and social unrest threatened to become revolution. A peace settlement had become a political and economic necessity, and in the ensuing negotiations, the question of Malta was to play a central role. A new administration in England agreed to restore it to the Order, but only under a set of rigorous conditions that sought to safeguard its neutrality. The treaty proved to be unworkable because the government quickly realized that the provisions designed to keep the French out of Malta would not do so. In the summer of 1802, Britain began to regard her occupation of the island as a form of compensation for France's continued aggression on the Continent. By October, she had decided to keep it, despite the possible consequences. Negotiations were to continue for another six months, and a number of compromises concerning Malta were put forward; however, Britain knew that most of them would be unacceptable to France. Her tactic was aimed chiefly at convincing Russia that her objectives were reasonable. By so doing, she was successful in preventing a Franco-Russian entente, though the tsar remained displeased with her for keeping Malta.

I

In the weeks that followed Britain's decision to send an expedition to

Egypt, the squabbles between Grenville and Dundas took their toll. The administration became more divided than ever, and the Prime Minister's physical and mental condition rapidly deteriorated. In March 1801, Henry Addington, the Speaker of the House of Commons, was invited to form a new government. He was Pitt's own choice as a successor, but neither Grenville nor Dundas could stomach serving under an individual who had been openly characterized as "a piece of Pitt's posterior which had stuck to the Treasury bench".[2] Conditions could not have been worse for any administration, and even more so for one that was generally regarded as weak and incompetent. There had been six bad harvests in succession compounded by the stoppage of the Baltic grain trade. Taxes, prices and war casualties were constantly rising. The continuance of an ideological war against revolution under these conditions now threatened to provoke at home the very thing it was trying to contain abroad. Scarcely a week after coming to power Addington made his first peace overture, but at that time, the French had no incentive to negotiate because the international situation in which Britain found herelf was as critical as her domestic malaise. Austria had just signed a separate treaty at Lunéville; Naples had declared her neutrality; Portugal was threatened with an attack from Spain; and Prussia was on the point of overrunning Hanover. Worst of all, Russia was considering an overland invasion of India.[3]

Britain had been effectively isolated, and her defeat seemed imminent when Paul was assassinated in a praetorian coup on 23 March. His successor, Alexander I, did not feel the same personal pique at Britain's occupation of Malta. Simon Vorontsov was sent back to London as ambassador, and the plan to invade India was dropped. John Holland Rose, and more recently Ian Christie have contended that Paul's murder, followed

by Nelson's victory at Copenhagen resulted in the destruction of the Second Armed Neutrality.[4] This conclusion is a misreading of Russia's reaction to these events. The first did result in a shift in policy that was beneficial to Britain, but the second almost negated the benefit. Nelson's bullying only served to implant in the tsar a basic suspicion that lingered long after the event. Indeed, Alexander did not lift the embargo until after Britain had signed a convention, much to Vorontsov's astonishment, recognizing the rights of neutral shipping on the Baltic.[5] The dire situation in which Britain found herself had left her little choice, a point conveniently overlooked by Rose and Christie who are more concerned with stressing Addington's spinelessness.

Alexander was interested in Malta only in so far as he wanted to see Britain give it back to the Knights, about whom he had mixed feelings. He genuinely esteemed their values, but was uneasy about their presence at his court. They were something of an embarrassment because they reminded people of Paul, and of the possible involvement of Alexander in his murder.[6] Four days after his father's death, Alexander issued a proclamation asserting that he would remain the Order's protector, but refusing to be its head. Russian aristocrats continued to accept high positions in it, and one of the tsar's officers was appointed to serve as its vicar until such time as a general chapter could be convened to elect a new Grandmaster.[7] Lord St.Helens, Britain's ambassador at St. Petersburg, believed that the expense of maintaining the Knights at his court was the main reason for the tsar's attempt to disentangle himself from their affairs. He reported that the best way for the tsar to get rid of them honourably was to re-establish them at Malta.[8] In April, Vorontsov was sent a list of Alexander's foreign policy objectives which

reaffirmed that he wanted neither the Magistracy of the Order nor possession of the island, but also stressed that he did not wish Britain to keep it either.[9] Like his father, he regarded the continued occupation with suspicion, and Britain's willingness to evacuate as the test of her trustworthiness.

After nearly a decade of war, France was also reaching her breaking point. Bonaparte knew that he needed time to let the country rest in order to consolidate his power. After Paul's assassination, he could no longer count on the friendship of Russia, and therefore, he would have to negotiate a truce with Britain. Louis Otto, France's quasi-representative in Britain, was authorized in May 1801 to discuss terms for a preliminary agreement. The ensuing talks were conducted in great secrecy throughout the summer. Britain offered to hand back her recently captured territories to their former rulers, most important of which were the Cape of Good Hope and Malta, in exchange for a French roll back on the Continent that included the evacuation of Holland.[10] The sticking point was Malta. Initially, both sides agreed that it should be returned to the Order, but Britain wanted some guarantee that it would not again fall so easily to the French. Bonaparte proposed that the fortifications be razed, thereby rendering it militarily useless. St.Vincent, the First Lord of the Admiralty, objected to the proposal because he believed that the enemy could quickly re-erect the fortifications, given the ease with which Malta stone could be worked.[11] Britain therefore suggested that a third power be named as the Order's guarantor. Otto was told to resist this demand, but if it should be insisted upon, Naples was to be designated because of her vulnerability to French coercion.[12] Addington felt that only Russia was strong enough to

act as guarantor, and he wanted her to be explicitly named in the treaty. Otto argued that there was no real need to name her since the Order had its headquarters at St.Petersburg, and already regarded the tsar as its protector. Thus, waiting for a formal confirmation from him would only delay the settlement needlessly.[13] French tactics throughout the negotiations were characterized by many such verbal assurances that were later denied or evaded.

The main concession that France was willing to make was the evacuation of Egypt. Britain had heard no news of the fate of her expeditionary force, and Bonaparte learned of its victory before she did. Rather than lose his trump card, he issued an ultimatum on 17 September that Britain agree to the preliminary terms as they stood within ten days, or the negotiations would be broken off.[14] Addington decided that it was best to acquiesce in an ambiguous agreement, leaving the hard bargaining over the exact wording until later. He therefore consented to Malta's guarantors remaining unnamed until a definitive settlement had been reached. Britain also agreed to give up the Cape of Good Hope and a number of other captured territories, but kept Ceylon and Trinidad.

The Preliminaries of Peace were signed in London on 1 October 1801. The negotiations had been pervaded by an optimistic mood, and Addington felt the French were beginning to act more reasonably. Their control of Holland had always been a British nightmare, but in the recent Treaty of Lunéville in February, they had agreed to its independence. Furthermore, the Hague Convention, signed in August, had stipulated that French troops were to be evacuated from it at the conclusion of a definitive settlement.

The only person in whom Addington had confided was Pitt. However,

he consulted the former Prime Minister only after he had the terms in hand. The two met for an all night session in late September, and concurred that the terms as they stood were not dishonourable, and that economic conditions made peace imperative.[15] Pitt was probably relieved that the responsbility was Addington's, not his. Shortly after the meeting, he wrote to several people, including Grenville, to elicit their support for the government. Although he said that he deeply regretted the loss of the Cape, he did not mention Malta. For him a colony with no commercial value was useless, and now that the French had been removed from it, there was no reason to keep it.[16]

Addington's feeling about the value of Malta remains unclear. Sir Mark Wood reported that he had discussed this topic with him when the latter was still Speaker, and claimed that Addington had agreed with him on Malta's importance.[17] St.Vincent had also advised him not give it up.[18] It appears the Prime Minister wanted peace so much that he allowed himself to be convinced that Britain's strategic position in the Mediterranean was sufficiently safeguarded by keeping Malta out of French hands, which he believed had been achieved in Article IV of the Preliminaries. The latter read as follows:

> The island of Malta and its dependencies shall be evacuated by the troops of His Britannic Majesty, and restored to the Order of St.John of Jerusalem. For the purpose of rendering this Island completely independent of either of the two contracting powers, it shall be placed under the guarantee and protection of a third Power, to be agreed upon in a definitive treaty.[19]

Addington presented the Preliminaries as a fait accompli. There was general rejoicing among the population, but the new parliamentary opposition led by Grenville was incensed. When the news of the French surrender in Egypt arrived on the following day, Grenville charged that the government had conceded too much for a benefit that had already been

won. He also claimed that he had revised his earlier opinion about the importance of Malta. Windham had been instrumental in bringing this about, as were the Earl of Carysfort in Berlin, and William Wickham in Vienna, all of whom had urged him to resist giving it up.[20] Shortly after he learned of the treaty's provisions, he wrote to Dundas looking for support.[21] The latter replied that he too had been shocked by the treaty:

> By giving up the Cape, we have given up one of the essential points of security to India; and we have done even worse by giving up Malta, for we have abandoned the proud pre-eminence we had obtained in the Mediterranean. If we had stationed ten thousand of our troops in Malta, and preserved it as an exclusive naval station, such a force joined to our naval superiority would have given a real guarantee to the states of the Mediterranean and Levant.[22]

Unlike Grenville, Dundas said that he would not air his views publicly because of his personal regard for Pitt, who was supporting the treaty. Even so, he was so disgusted that he planned to retire from parliament for a time.

At the beginning of November, a motion of confidence in the government was debated in both Houses of Parliament. Dundas, true to his word, did not attend. Windham led the attack for the Grenvillites in the Commons. He charged that the loss of Malta was the worst of the treaty's provisions. Handing the island back to the Order was tantamount to ceding it to Bonaparte, since the Knights were almost wholly dependant upon revenues that came from states now dominated by him. By giving it up, Britain would again abandon the Mediterranean as she had done in 1796, and such a course of action would have a devastating effect on her allies in the region. The possession of Malta might not be able to check a French invasion of Egypt in a literal sense, but symbolically it demonstrated Britain's determination not to allow this to happen.[23]

The government led the defence of the treaty with an address by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Hawkesbury. His speech contrasted sharply with Windham's emotional rhetoric. He claimed that the peace would give Britain a respite of seven to ten years, allowing the country to become more fully prepared for war than it was at present.[24] The old Whig opposition, led by Charles James Fox, had always decried the war, and now that peace was at hand they could hardly not support it. Nevertheless, Fox had reservations about the Malta provision because he believed that Malta and Minorca were infinitely more important than Trinidad and Ceylon.[25] Pitt's defence of the government in parliament made public the break with his former colleagues. His comments emphasized the economic aspects of the agreement, and he claimed that Malta could safely be given up because trade with the Mediterranean states was a secondary consideration compared to that with the Indies.[26]

In the Lords, Grenville voiced the most impassioned opposition. He declared that Malta, "was a most important military station" which could never be safeguarded adequately by a third power.[27] Windham had been consistently saying this since 1796, but the sincerity of Grenville's volte-face must be doubted. He still believed in a Continental, as opposed to a maritime strategy, and in such a strategy, pawns like Malta would always be expendable. Nelson made a rare appearance in the Lords to defend the government's position by arguing that Malta was of little positive strategic importance. Once it was out of French hands, and protected by a third power, he asserted, "it became immaterial to us".[28] He now publicly claimed that it was unsuitable as a base from which to blockade Toulon. In this, he was stating his honest opinion; however, in regard to the treaty itself, a number of private letters to Lady Hamilton

show that he was disgusted both with it and with Addington. He was supporting the government mainly to obtain preferment for himself and his brother.[29] Lords Mulgrave and St.Vincent also supported the government. The former demonstrated his ignorance of the topography of Malta and Minorca, while the latter was suspiciously silent on the importance of either.[30] These speeches show that Britain's leaders were still hazy about Malta's value, and they argued for or against keeping it as a matter of political expedience. In the Lords, the Grenville faction received only the votes of ten out of the 114 peers assembled, while in the Commons, Windham did not even bother to call for a division. This was a great victory for the government. Addington's popularity had never been as high, nor would it be again.

II

On 3 November, the same day the Preliminaries were being debated, Britain's plenipotentiary, Lord Cornwallis, was setting off for France to negotiate a definitive settlement. He had a long and distinguished career as a soldier and administrator which had included a term as Governor-General of India, and more recently as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Unfortunately, he knew little about diplomacy, and has been accused, most recently by Mackesy, of mishandling the negotiations.[31] Such a view is inaccurate since the treaty he was able to secure represented a strengthening of Britain's position vis-a-vis the vague provisions of the Preliminaries on almost every point, and its detailed article on Malta can be seen as a particularly good example of this contention.

Cornwallis's strength lay in recognizing his own limitations, and in delegating responsibility to those who did possess the needed

expertise. In these talks, he was assigned a career diplomat named Anthony Merry to act as his aide. Merry had nothing but contempt for him, but Cornwallis esteemed Merry, and encouraged him to construct the rigorous provisions that would safeguard Britain's interests. Even so, Addington kept a close personal watch on the proceedings, and allowed his negotiators little room for personal initiative. Merry wrote: "We are plainly told that nothing whatever extraneous to the Preliminaries can be admitted."[32] In his instructions, Cornwallis was informed that Britain's main concession would be the substitution of Neapolitan for Russian troops in the proposed garrison of Malta. This change was to be presented as a great concession that would entail an equally large quid pro quo from France. In reality, Britain had little choice. Shortly after Cornwallis had set out, Vorontsov informed Hawkesbury that the tsar would not agree to send troops to Malta, but would consider guaranteeing an arrangement whereby a force from Naples would be used.[33] Cornwallis's instructions also stated that Britain would not give up Malta unless substantial changes were made to the constitution of the Order. These changes, which included the admission of Maltese for the first time and prohibited British and French subjects from membership, were intended to prevent either of the signatories from gaining a predominant influence over the Knights.[34]

Cornwallis arrived in Paris on 7 November, and managed to arrange a private interview with Bonaparte on the 28th. Both men agreed that Malta was the main question that needed to be settled. The First Consul objected to having Russia guarantee its independence. He claimed that keeping Russia out of the Mediterranean was a matter of mutual self-interest, and Britain, possessing the superior navy, would benefit

most from it. He also argued that Malta would remain the object of rivalry until the fortifications had been destroyed, but Cornwallis replied that dismantling them would leave the island prey to attacks from the Barbary corsairs. He left the meeting overly satisfied that Bonaparte had thought him a hard bargainer.[35]

The official talks which began in December were held at Amiens, and Bonaparte's elder brother, Joseph, acted as the main French spokesman. Cornwallis was confident that a treaty would soon be ratified. He believed that the difficult bargaining had already been completed at the Preliminaries, and that it would be a simple matter to incorporate the various verbal understandings into a final written agreement. As the talks dragged on, however, he became increasingly pessimistic. He doubted whether a Neapolitan garrison would be able to defend Malta effectively, and in a private letter to Addington, he warned that it might be impossible to eliminate French influence among the Knights. Talleyrand had been pressing Joseph to get a British commitment to destroy the fortifications, and Cornwallis began to wonder whether this might not be a bad idea.[36] The Prime Minister was adamant, however, that the fortifications not be demolished. He claimed that such a course of action would be rejected by Russia, and might be forcibly resisted by the Maltese. Furthermore, even if the demolition were accomplished, the Knights would probably refuse to take over a defenceless island.[37]

What the British did not know was that Bonaparte's priorities were changing, and Malta was no longer as important to him as it formerly had been. On 12 December, Joseph was authorized to make concessions concerning it as long as these brought about a British evacuation, and did not result in a Russian presence.[38] Peace, however short, had now

become imperative. Firstly, Bonaparte, having sent off a large flotilla to St.Domingo to quell a slave revolt, was keenly aware that the bulk of his navy was at risk if a definitive settlement were not signed. He also needed time to bring about the domestic reforms he had planned, and to consolidate his European conquests by turning them into French satellites. Under these circumstances, he believed it best to acquiesce in Britain's demands concerning Malta.[39] However, Joseph was still expected to make the English struggle for every concession.

By the end of 1801, Cornwallis had become disillusioned with the sincerity of the French. Not only were they denying all of the verbal understandings made during the Preliminaries, they were also rejecting, daily, that which had been agreed upon the day before.[40] Merry could not decide whether he was more upset with them or with Cornwallis, whom he believed fit for nothing more than "a nap after dinner".[41] In a private letter to Francis Jackson, Britain's minister in Paris, he wrote:

> I cannot describe to you how shuffling, evasive and contradictory Bonaparte's language and conduct have been throughout the two conferences, and still less the excess of cunning and chicane which he has employed on the one hand to establish a system of delay in the negotiations, and on the other to throw the odium of it upon us ... [Cornwallis] has known little of what was going on till the battle was over, and if at any time he did interfere, [he] rather contradicted through ignorance of the subject than assisted toward my defence.[42]

Some allowance must be made for Merry's dislike of Cornwallis, since the former was privately a Grenvillite and had opposed making peace from the beginning. Cornwallis also found the negotiations onerous, but unlike his aide, he thought them necessary, and had felt this way even before Addington had chosen him to be Britain's chief negotiator.[43] In this, he had a more realistic sense of the limits of Britain's power than did Merry. He was an extremely moral man, and his responsibility for the

possible failure of the talks, leading to a resumption of war, weighed heavily on him.

Although the aim of the French strategy was to wear down the English, it only served to make them more intransigent. On 31 December, Cornwallis included in his despatch to Hawkesbury a project outlining in thirteen points the conditions under which Britain would evacuate Malta. These had been largely drafted by Merry, and were based on a compilation of the guidelines found in the Foreign Secretary's despatches to Cornwallis. Herein were contained the loopholes that Britain would ultimately use to justify her retention of Malta. After the project had been sanctioned by his government, Cornwallis did not deviate from its stipulations. Although the definitive treaty would not be signed for another three months, and countless projects and counter-projects would be submitted and rejected, the French would eventually agree to all of the stipulations contained in this original protocol.[44]

The French continued to dissemble throughout January, and at the beginning of February, they rejected the previously agreed idea of a Neapolitan garrison, arguing that the Order must be able to stand on its own. If it needed a foreign force to defend its territory, this proved that it could not.[45] Such a reversal was more than the British could accept. In a confidential despatch to Cornwallis, on 12 February, Hawkesbury stated that the negotiations would be broken off if the French attempted to alter Article IV of the Preliminaries. According to Hawkesbury, two issues were yet to be settled: the conditions under which the Order would be reconstituted, and the power that would be named as Malta's guarantor. If the French opposed a garrison supplied by Naples, another power must provide one. Without some outside force to defend

Malta, Britain would not relinquish her control.[46]

One month later, a draft treaty was sent to Cornwallis. It included a new provision that prevented Hompesch, now France's pensioner, from resuming the Magistracy of the Order. The French were to accept this treaty within eight days, or Cornwallis would be recalled.[47] The ultimatum was backed up by extensive naval preparations in all of the ports of England. Cornwallis, alarmed by his government's stridency, was loath to present the ultimatum. Fortunately, his fears were groundless. Bonaparte was worried about losing his St.Domingo squadron, and when he realized that the talks might be broken off, Joseph was told to yield to the British demands.[48] This was another about-turn for the First Consul, since only three days before, he insisted that he had no fear of a resumption of hostilities.[49] After a few last minute compromises over wording, the Treaty of Amiens was finally signed on 27 March 1802.

Article X dealt with Malta. It was considerably more detailed than its counterpart in the Preliminaries, and, as has been mentioned above, it closely paralleled a British project of the previous December. Even its wording was substantially the same. In every respect, the final article was a strengthening of Britain's position in relation to the more ambiguous article found in the Preliminaries. Article X specified that Malta was to be returned to the Order, but only under a set of stringent conditions. Henceforth, and in perpetuity, the island would be neutral. Its harbour and lazaretto would be open to the commercial vessels of all nations, except those of the Barbary states. Both French and English subjects were prohibited from becoming members of the Order, and the Maltese were to have their own subgroup, or langue, within it. Unlike the other Knights, they would not have to show any special proof of nobility,

and thereafter one half of Malta's garrison was to be composed of levies drawn from the local inhabitants. Britain agreed to evacuate the island within three months of signing the treaty, provided that a representative of the Order's executive and a Neapolitan force of two thousand men had arrived there. Instead of a single guarantor, a concert of six powers, consisting of Great Britain, France, Austria, Russia, Prussia and Spain, were invited to guarantee the settlement.[50]

Given her avowed aims in the Preliminaries, Article X must be seen as a British success, and this was generally so with the other provisions as well. Where the treaty could be criticized was in the areas upon which she had received only verbal assurances from the French. The treaty's main defect was the lack of a provision that would have renewed or made her a party to previous treaties of peace. This was especially true in regard to the Treaty of Lunéville. Addington expected Bonaparte to honour its provisions, and evacuate his troops from Holland. He connected this action with the evacuation of Malta, but Bonaparte could correctly reply that nothing had been mentioned about Holland in the Treaty of Amiens, and Britain had not been a party to the Treaty of Lunéville.[51] However, posterity has censured Addington too harshly. He had little choice but to hope the French would respect their other treaties. The treasury was almost bankrupt, and a vociferous public opinion was clamouring for peace on almost any terms. In such extreme circumstances, he probably obtained the best terms he could have.[52] In the months that followed the conclusion of the treaty, many people came to agree with Sheridan who wrote: "It is a peace which all men are glad of, but no man is proud of."[53]

III

There was less popular enthusiasm in Britain for the Definitive Treaty than there had been for the Preliminaries. On 27 April, the King of Spain, who had been a party to it, confiscated the property of the Order's three langues in his domain. In parliament, the Grenvillites claimed that Bonaparte had instigated these confiscations as a means of further weakening the Knights, and put forward a motion, on 13 May, condemning the government for having signed the treaty. Windham claimed that both the Order and Naples were now so much under the influence of France that Malta's neutrality was a sham. He set forth the syllogism: "If Malta is in the hands of Naples; and Naples is in the hands of France; then Malta is also in the hands of France."[54] Grenville, whose speech ran along similar lines, claimed that the provisions concerning Malta were absurd. The six power guarantee was worthless since no real consensus could ever be worked out among such rivals. Moreover, the Order was now impoverished, and local revenues were insufficient to pay for Malta's defence.[55] At the end of the debate, however, the government still had the backing of a large majority in both houses, and the motion of condemnation was soundly defeated.

The government's ease in defeating the opposition contrasted sharply with the difficulty it experienced in getting Russia to co-operate. Even before the treaty had been signed, Alexander was making his objections to the rumoured provisions about Malta. He wished to see the Knights restored to the island in an honourable fashion, and at the least possible expense to his treasury. St.Helens had been informed, at the beginning of 1802, that the Knights had objected to the indiscriminate

admission of Maltese natives to their Order. They would be willing to compromise by considering for membership Maltese able to provide the proofs of nobility prescribed by the Order's statutes.[56] This was an empty concession, since it would bar the entrance of all but a few of the island's inhabitants. Article X's provisions infuriated Alexander. He felt that he would be involved too deeply in Malta's affairs. As far as he was concerned, Naples was its suzerain, and should be considered its principal guarantor. Furthermore, he did not understand that Britain regarded the participation of the Maltese in the Order's government as a means of counteracting its francophile bias. Rather, he interpreted this provision as a personal snub.[57] St.Helens thought his government was being insensitive to the tsar's feelings, and warned that the Russian Priory might establish itself as a separate entity, thereby denying the Order of nine-tenths of its revenues. If this were to happen, the remnant would never be able to defend Malta effectively.[58]

After the Definitive Treaty had been signed, Hawkesbury tried to convince Alexander that the arrangement for Malta was only slightly at variance with the Russian position. He explained that Britain would gladly recognize a Grandmaster elected under the tsar's auspices, but also stressed that Malta would not be evacuated without a prior guarantee from Russia.[59] However, Hawkesbury found it difficult to deal with the Russian ambassador, who soon became alienated from him. Thereafter, Vorontsov preferred to be in the company of Grenvillites, and in June, he withdrew from England to show his dissatisfaction.[60] In November, the tsar's chancellor addressed a letter to the British Cabinet that set forth the precise terms under which Russia would agree to become a guarantor of the Malta settlement. Britain must allow the Order full sovereignty over

its affairs. Maltese would be admitted, but only under conditions established by the Knights themselves. Malta was to be defended by Neapolitan troops for as long as necessary, and the contracting powers were to accept the costs of this force. These conditions were to be subjoined to the Treaty of Amiens, and considered an integral part of it.[61] Alexander's conditions were intended both to rid himself of the Order, and to evade his international responsibilities. Saul is correct in asserting that he, thereby, has to share the blame for the eventual failure of the peace settlement.[62]

Seven and a half months of uneasy peace had shifted the general mood in England. Events had occurred during this short interval that destroyed the spirit of the treaty. Bonaparte had refused to sign a trade pact with Britain, annexed Savoy and Piedmont, and had himself elected president of the new Italian Republic. Such actions led to a hardening of Britain's attitude in September 1802, exacerbated by the French re-occupation of Switzerland in October.[63] Thereafter, Britain insisted that the Treaty of Amiens was directly linked with those signed at Lunéville and the Hague, and demanded that Holland be evacuated. If France refused, handing back the Cape to the Dutch would be tantamount to giving France the keys to India's front door. Giving up Malta would have added the keys to the back door as well. Britain was especially concerned about the latter as she had recently learned that Bonaparte considered "the new arrangement for Malta a romance which could not be executed".[64] The two countries would not be at war for another six months, but given such events and attitudes, the wonder is that the resumption of hostilities took so long.

The causes of the breakdown of the peace have been the subject of

much scholarly analysis. Two articles, written at the turn of the century by Waldemar Ekedahl and Conrad Gill serve to illustrate the received ways in which the breakdown has been treated.[65] Both writers think Britain was sincere about implementing the treaty's conditions, and that she only abandoned this position in reaction to Bonaparte's aggrandisement on the Continent. They also argue that she did not openly admit her decision to keep Malta because the Addington administration was weak and irresolute. In coming to such a facile conclusion, both authors ignore the importance of Russia. Keeping Malta appeared to be the best way Britain could get compensation for France's recent behaviour, but by keeping it she ran the risk of alienating Russia. The war could not be resumed, however, before she gained the latter's support; otherwise, the land-sea stalemate would continue indefinitely.

A further concern emerged when Merry, now chargé d'affaires in Paris, reported an unsubstantiated rumour that the tsar's ambassador had been bribed by Talleyrand.[66] The possibility of an entente between France and Russia could not be lightly dismissed especially since Alexander had been so equivocal on Malta. If it materialized, Britain could not afford to give up the island, as this would mean abandoning both the Mediterranean Sea and the Ottoman Empire. An order bearing the words "most secret" was sent on 17 October 1802 instructing the British authorities at Malta not to evacuate. If pressed by the French Minister there, the Civil Commissioner was to use Russia's non compliance with the guarantee as the official pretext. Furthermore, The military commander was told to retain as many troops as could be accommodated from those returning from Egypt.[67] The tenor of both letters made it clear that Malta would remain British for some time to come. In the same month,

similar instructions were sent to the Governor-General of India.[68] It was not weakness that prevented Addington from openly declaring his hand, rather it was the prudence of statesmanship. The longer he waited before admitting that Britain would retain Malta, the better chance he had of convincing the tsar that the island was a just compensation for Bonaparte's duplicity.

In the autumn of 1802, Britain and France exchanged ambassadors for the first time in over a decade. The British minister was Lord Whitworth, a long-time ambassador to Russia who had been expelled by Tsar Paul. Whitworth was a flamboyant and haughty aristocrat who had acquired a reputation for acting independently of his instructions. Malta was not mentioned in his official instructions, but in a confidential despatch given him on 14 November, the government's revised attitude towards it was the main theme. In this document, Hawkesbury asserted that Britain had a right to some compensation "as an equipoise to the acquisitions of France since the conclusion of the Definitive Treaty".[69] However, Whitworth was to avoid bringing up the subject of Malta, and if the French did so, was to reply that Article X had not yet been complied with. More important, he was not to commit Britain to any course of action, even if the terms of the treaty were fulfilled.

Whitworth arrived in Paris on 15 November, where he quickly developed an antipathy toward Bonaparte whose autocratic whims he compared with those of Tsar Paul. In one of his first despatches, he claimed that Britain's retention of Malta, although a major impediment restraining Napoleon from launching a new invasion of Egypt, was not an insurmountable one. He could safely launch his expedition from Ancona, if he first obtained the co-operation of Russia's squadron at Corfu, which controlled

the narrows leading to and from the Adriatic.[70] Whitworth agreed with Merry in not trusting Count Markov, the Russian ambassador at Paris, and on 9 December, he advised Hawkesbury not to accept a Russian guarantee of Malta, even if one were forthcoming. Nevertheless, he cautioned that Britain needed to find a better pretext for keeping the island than she currently had.[71]

Surprisingly, Talleyrand had not mentioned Malta up to this point, though Whitworth was sounded out by the Spanish ambassador at the beginning of 1803. He cautiously replied that his government's policy had not changed, but he personally believed that Malta could not be given up while France was expanding her power and influence on the Continent.[72] Talleyrand forcefully brought up the subject for the first time on 27 January. He claimed that most of the terms of Article X had been complied with, and Britain's refusal to evacuate Malta was now based on the slimmest of pretexts. Whitworth answered evasively, but to Hawkesbury, he had to admit that Talleyrand's logic was correct.[73]

Britain needed to find a more substantial reason for not evacuating Malta; at the end of January 1803, Bonaparte provided her with one. The semi-official journal Moniteur published the report of Colonel Sebastiani, a young French officer who had just come back from a mission to the Middle East and Egypt. In it, he stated that Egypt was longing for the return of French rule, and enthusiastically claimed: "Six milles Français suffiraient aujourd'hui pour conquerir l'Égypte."[74] The British government reacted sharply to this report, Hawkesbury asserting that its publication was "utterly inconsistent with the spirit and letter of the Treaty".[75] There would be no more discussion of evacuating Malta until satisfaction had been received on this complaint. Hawkesbury's

anger was more studied than real, however, because the contents of Sebastiani's report did not take him by surprise. Merry had warned him about Sebastiani's activities as early as the previous September.[76] Furthermore, Bonaparte would not have so naively given up the element of surprise, if he had really been considering a reconquest of Egypt.

It appears that Bonaparte tried to use the report to bully the British Cabinet into evacuating Malta, but that the tactic backfired. He was quick to retreat, claiming that the article expressed a personal opinion rather than French policy, and Sebastiani was made to apologize. The Egyptian historian, Shafiq Ghorbal, argues that Britain used the report as the "occasion" publicly to announce her intention to keep Malta, rather than the report's being the "cause" of this change of policy. Unfortunately, Ghorbal falls back on the worn-out idea that the "cause" was the weakness of the Addington administration.[77] In reality, Britain had timed her indignation for its effect on the tsar. Whitworth set to work almost immediately to convince Markov that Bonaparte's ambition in the Near East was equally dangerous to both Britain and Russia. It was therefore in Russia's best interest for Britain to keep Malta.[78] Although Markov did not agree with the latter point, he was concerned about the French sounding him out on the fate of the Ottoman Empire. His despatches to St.Petersburg, when put in the context of others reporting the activities of French agents in the Near East, greatly alarmed his government.[79]

Throughout the month of March, Whitworth diligently tried to work out a settlement that would leave Britain in possession of Malta. At first he attempted to bribe Talleyrand and Lucien Bonaparte with an offer of money. He then suggested a temporary occupation of not less than eight

years. In yet another attempt, he proposed that Britain remain in control of the fortifications while the Knights would be put in charge of the civil administration.[80] In the middle of the month, he was subjected to a violent outburst from Bonaparte in front of the whole diplomatic community. Although he claimed that the First Consul's bluster had not intimidated him, thereafter he nursed a grudge, and for him, the issue became "Malta or war".[81] On 13 April, Hawkesbury sent him the government's final proposals. Bonaparte was to choose between two scenarios. Either Britain would control Malta's garrison with the Knights regaining civil power, or she would keep Malta for ten years, after which it would be given over to its inhabitants. In addition, Britain would have the right to the island of Lampedusa as a permanent Mediterranean base.[82] Superficially this offer appeared to be a concession, but in reality it was a hardening of Britain's position because it was made on condition that France evacuate Holland. Pierre Coquelle and J.R. Gwynne-Timothy, suggest that the issue of Malta was a red herring because they claim that Britain's real concern was the independence of Holland.[83] There is no doubt that she aspired to this aim, but given the military deadlock, it was unrealistic to think that France could be induced to comply. Probably, the British government had already decided that there was no other way to keep Malta but war, and the negotiations were continued merely to demonstrate to Russia that she was still acting in a reasonable manner. Alexander had not been consistent in his attitude towards Malta. Indeed, Bonaparte's overtures concerning Turkey had so upset him, at the beginning of 1803, that he had then advised Britain to keep Malta as a way of checking France's eastern designs.[84]

Bonaparte's correspondence with Talleyrand shows that he did not

want to see a resumption of war, and both Alfred Mahan, and the editor of Whitworth's despatches, Oscar Browning, feel that it still could have been avoided.[85] One cannot help wondering whether Cornwallis's amiability in comparison to Whitworth's acerbity might have been better able to find a solution. Joseph made several attempts at reconciliation that might have resulted in Britain keeping Malta, had not the British government in the last stages of the negotiations demanded that France respect the terms of the Treaty of Lunéville. On 20 April, Whitworth reported that the French were stalling for time in replying to the British proposal, and suggested that they were waiting for Russia's formal disapproval of it. In the meantime, Markov was urging Britain to accept Lampedusa in exchange for Malta, but this idea was rejected as unfeasible. It would have required considerable time and money before Lampedusa could be transformed into a suitable base, and even then it would not have equalled Malta. Whitworth therefore asked his government for an ultimatum which he presented to Talleyrand on the 27th. The terms of Britain's ultimatum were not new; they were consistent with those found in the project of December 1802, and Mackesy is incorrect in asserting that the ultimatum was hastily thought out and obscure.[86] Talleyrand's reaction to it was to stall while Joseph tried to mediate with his brother. Bonaparte's final offer was to have Malta handed over to Russia, but Whitworth felt that neither the tsar nor his own government would accept such a compromise.[87] He left Paris on 12 May, and on the 18th parliament declared war.

The government asserted that its rationale was France's violation of the Treaty of Amiens's most basic principle: the expectation that the territorial possessions of the adversaries should not be substantially altered. The government claimed that Bonaparte's continued aggrandisement

gave Britain the legitimate right to seek compensation. Even had this principle not been violated, Britain would still have had the right to keep Malta because the conditions specified in Article X had not been met. Russia and Prussia had refused to act as guarantors, and Austria's acceptance was conditional on the compliance of the others. Furthermore, the Order had been so weakened financially at French instigation that it was no longer able to function as an independent body.[88] In the debate that followed on 24 May, Malta's value was declared to be both substantive and symbolic. Thomas Maitland, who was later to become its first governor, claimed the island was "absolutely necessary ... to carry on offensive operations in the Mediterranean".[89] George Canning argued for its symbolic importance by declaring that its retention was "that point upon which the honour of this country is committed .... being that last point upon which, after a series of violences, insults and aggressions ... left us no alternative than instant submission or open war".[90] Only Fox's small group opposed the war. Earlier Fox had acknowledged Malta's importance, but now he believed peace to be worth "a thousand Maltas".[91] Ironically, after he became Foreign Secretary in 1806, he would again change his mind.

Although Addington had taken a strong stand in the months since the treaty's ratification, he had received little credit for it, nor was the declaration of war greeted in any better fashion. His own ministers were worried that Britain was unprepared, and the opposition charged that the government had allowed the navy to become run-down. A motion in parliament to censure it was defeated, but cracks in Addington's support were beginning to show. Grenville's group was growing noticeably larger, and Pitt was trying to distance himself from the Prime Minister.

Addington had gambled that he could keep Malta and not alienate the tsar. He was in some degree successful, but the cost of his policy would be the defeat of his administration in 1804, partly because Alexander would no longer deal with it.

CHAPTER THREE - NOTES

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Role of Sir Alexander Ball, 1801-1805

> Everything lends to prove that this island must be possessed either by us or by the French. If we cede it, we shall be execrated by the Maltese, and our character in consequence degraded in the opinion of all Europe ... [Malta] is considered by all here so strong by nature and art that no nation will ever attempt an attack upon it. So long as the Maltese are attached to us, it can never be taken by a coup de main, and can only be reduced by a blockade which from its peculiar situation makes it so difficult that all Europe combined could not effect it ... All our provisions are within the fortifications, and an enemy must bring all its own supplies. This place leaves the naval Commander-in-Chief unshackled. He has no dread of it being attacked during his absence.
>
> - Sir Alexander Ball [1]

Captain Alexander Ball has already been mentioned as the British naval officer who set up and directed the blockade and siege of Valletta from 1798 to 1800. In the years that followed, he was to become Britain's main representative at Malta. From the outset, he was a strong advocate of keeping the island, who not only recognized its negative value - the necessity of keeping other powers out - but also believed that Malta possessed an intrinsic importance that could be used to Britain's advantage. Historians have neglected Ball, and the few pages that have been written about him, mainly by Maltese authors, were based almost exclusively on official documents. Ball was either praised as a benign and paternalistic figure who had the best interests of the inhabitants at heart, or else execrated for being a corrupt tyrant who had convinced his government that the Maltese should have no say in the running of their affairs. The former opinion is more prevalent, however, and Maltese historians like Albert Laferla take their lead from Ball's friend and admirer, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who characterized him as a "man above his age".[2] In reality, Ball was very much a man of his age. His character typified that blend of altruism and ambition which multiplied a

thousandfold succeeded in greatly expanding the British Empire during this formative period.

I

In January 1801, Ball was relieved of his duties as Civil Commissioner at the instigation of the British army and sent to Gibraltar as a Naval Commissioner. One senses that the unfairness of this treatment did much to vitiate the basic altruism of his character. In May, the government belatedly rewarded him with a baronetcy, but he did not receive his rightful share of the Valletta prize money until several years later.[3] At age forty-four, Ball felt that his naval career had come to a dead end, and despite his abrupt dismissal from Malta, he now fancied himself something of an administrator cum diplomat. He saw an opportunity to improve his situation, in January 1802, when a delegation of Maltese notables stopped at Gibraltar en route to London. News of the Preliminary peace agreement had reached Malta three months earlier, and had stunned the inhabitants. Charles Cameron, Ball's replacement as Civil Commissioner, wrote to Lord Hobart: "The people here are alarmed beyond description at the idea of the restoration of the Order, and I really believe they will never submit to it."[4] Although the Maltese were upset by what they regarded as Britain's betrayal, they still preferred her rule to that of any other power. Therefore, a delegation had been sent to plead their case. In deciding to accompany them, Ball hoped to establish contacts in the government that he could use to advance his personal ambitions.

Ball arrived in London with the delegation on 5 February. The Maltese had with them a petition that stressed their desire to remain under British rule. This document had originally been written in Italian,

but Ball had it amended and translated into French by William Miles.[5] Miles was a political writer and one of Pitt's advisors and just the sort of acquaintance Ball needed to advance his career. Unfortunately, Ball's timing was off. The government was in the middle of negotiating peace with France, and the presence of the Maltese in London was an embarrassment. Bonaparte protested that they had been put up to it to provide an excuse for Britain to keep Malta. Of their petition, he wrote: "it has the colour, style and tone of a revolutionary Englishman ... such freedom is not African".[6] As a result, Hobart refused at first to meet the delegates, and when he did speak to them privately, it was only to reject their petition. The Maltese then resorted to the expedient of confronting the King with their petition as he was leaving church one morning.[7] George III was sympathetic, but however much he may have deplored the peace, he had given his word to the government not to criticize it publicly.[8] Ball had not been behind this unorthodox tactic, but Hobart, who believed he had been, told him to persuade the Maltese to leave England as soon as possible. At the end of April, they were ignominiously put aboard a ship bound for Malta. Miles was disgusted with their treatment, and remarked that the French would not have been so short sighted as to offend the amour-propre of a potential ally.[9]

Ball stayed in London, and continued to look for like-minded associates who would help him advance both the Maltese cause and his own career. Through Miles, he met Grenville Penn, an Under-Secretary to Lord Hobart. Like Ball, Penn came from an old and distinguished family that was currently down on its luck. The two men shared an admiration for Pitt, and both had serious reservations about the current administration. Penn was regarded by Ball as both a friend and a channel through which he

could present his views to the government. For the historian, Penn is important because he preserved a selection of Ball's private letters, and these, along with the latter's correspondence with Nelson, are the two main sources of private material extant.[10] Each collection stands in contrast to the other. Ball's correspondence with Nelson is somewhat servile, on the one hand, and rather patronizing on the other. He admired Nelson's naval skill, but did not think much of his political acumen. In contrast, Ball could be as expansive with his ideas as he liked in his letters to Penn, and these letters exhibit a degree of political intrigue that is lacking in those to Nelson.

Despite his desire to make influential contacts in London, Ball was careful to distance himself from the parliamentary opposition. He knew that Grenville underestimated the importance of Malta, and he blamed Dundas for his removal from there because he had opposed the ex-minister's wish to turn the island into a personal fief. His caution was vindicated when Windham, learning of the details of the Maltese delegation's treatment, had them published in Cobbett's Political Register.[11] This caused an extreme embarrassment to the government, and had Ball been involved in it, he would have lost all chance of being considered for a new appointment by the Addington administration.

At the end of May 1802, Ball was asked to become Britain's Minister Plenipotentiary to the Order of Saint John.[12] The choice had not been a foregone conclusion since many others, including Sir Mark Wood, had wanted the appointment. Ball was chosen because of his popularity with the Maltese and his reputation for conciliatory behaviour. It is also likely that both Penn and Miles recommended him for the position. Ball was made responsible for seeing that the provisions regarding Malta

in the Treaty of Amiens were fulfilled before authorizing the evacuation of British troops there. From a career point of view, it was not a very promising appointment as it was expected to last only a few months. Furthermore, Ball felt he would lose the affection of the Maltese by implementing a treaty he and they overwhelmingly despised. It appeared to be another situation like the siege from which he could expect much grief and little credit. Ball accepted the appointment with a heavy heart. He told Miles that he had done so because he was in need of money. However, he also believed that the peace could not last long, and speculated that once at Malta, he would be the logical choice to govern the island should war again break out.[13]

Ball was convinced from the outset that the treaty's provisions would not keep the French out of Malta. In any case, he felt Hobart's instructions to be contradictory, and consequently impossible to implement. He was enjoined to co-operate with the French ambassador while at the same time limiting French influence on the island and maintaining the goodwill of the Maltese. How was it possible to co-operate with an individual who would be trying to subvert Britain's goodwill and establish French influence over the islanders? Similarly, Britain's forces were to evacuate Malta as soon as the 3,000 strong Neapolitan garrison and the new Grandmaster's representative had arrived, but not before Russia and the other great powers had guaranteed Malta's neutrality.[14] In other words, Ball could do nothing until he had been informed that the latter condition had been met. Ball had serious doubts about the wisdom of this condition. He feared that, as Russia would ally with France as soon as Malta and Alexandria were evacuated, Britain ought to continue to occupy both of them and he himself ought to stall for time and try to limit French

influence at Malta.[15] In an age before telephone or telegraph, a local official could do much to slow down the implementation of a treaty. The Marquess Wellesley was doing just this in India at the time, and Ball felt he could get away with the same deception at Malta, albeit in a more modest fashion.[16]

Ball arrived at Malta on 10 July. A little over a month later the French Plenipotentiary, General Vial also arrived. Ball took an immediate dislike to him, and despite instructions to the contrary, resolved not to co-operate with him. In a letter to Penn, Ball justified this course of action by claiming that Vial had assumed powers to which he was not entitled. He had not only launched a propaganda campaign against the British, but had also attempted to interfere with the operation of the local courts. Such presumption on the part of a foreign diplomat, Ball sarcastically noted, was "only allowed at Constantinople".[17] Ball remained confident, however, that the majority of the Maltese still distrusted France, despite Vial's efforts, because the latter had said nothing about the repayment of the many debts left behind by Bonaparte. Nevertheless, Ball's letters are full of his activities designed to check French influence on the island. He recognized the value of propaganda and established an Italian language press to wage "a paper war against the French Minister."[18] Penn provided him with current anti-French articles from Britain and the Continent which he then had translated for local publication. His efforts, in this respect, proved so successful that by December, Ball feared that the pro-French Maltese who had recently returned to the island might try to assassinate him. The essence of his administration was that type of paternalism practised by enlightened despots, and Ball freely admitted that the goodwill of the people could be

easily lost without "constant vigilance and management".[19]

Ball's dissembling course of action was vindicated in October 1802 when Hobart sent him the despatch, headed "most secret", instructing him to postpone the evacuation of Malta until further notification. Significantly, Hobart now referred to him as Britain's Civil Commissioner. Ball was instructed to do nothing that would lessen either his authority at Malta, or the affection of the Maltese for Britain. Hobart's despatch proves that Britain had no immediate intention of giving up Malta. On the contrary, she was making provision for its efficient administration. Nevertheless, Ball was not to divulge the contents of this despatch to anyone, and if the French ambassador protested that he was stalling, he was to reply that neither Prussia nor Russia had yet agreed to guarantee Malta's neutrality.[20]

At the end of January 1803, the government asked for Ball's opinion on the proposed changes Russia was requesting to Article X. These involved the weakening of the Maltese langue that was to be established prior to the Order's return to power. Ball was adamant in urging his government not to accept changes, which would destroy Britain's credibility with the Maltese. He reasoned that the pro-British inhabitants would soon go over to the French party, if Britain evacuated the island without fully implementing the provisions of the treaty. Since the French were now in control of every other important port in the Mediterranean, Britain's evacuation of Malta would only facilitate a second invasion of Egypt.[21] In the private counterpart to this official despatch, Ball went even further in advising the course of action Britain should take. He claimed that France was behind Russia's attempt to change the treaty. The tsar's objections to it would evaporate in direct

proportion to the apprehensions he was made to feel over French aggression in the Balkans. To facilitate this, Ball had secretly written to Britain's ambassador at St. Petersburg urging him to warn the Russians of Sebastiani's dangerous activities at Zante.[22] Ball knew that the Ionian Islands were more important to Russia than was Malta, and he urged Penn to suggest a pact whereby Russia would recognize Britain's right to Malta in exchange for similar recognition of Russia's right to Corfu. Such an agreement, he felt, might even form the basis of a rapprochement between these two powers.[23]

Ball saw the greatest threat to Malta's independence coming from the very powers that were supposed to safeguard it - Naples and the Order. The Neapolitan consul was openly pro-French, as was the bishop of Malta, who had been appointed by Naples. Ball took steps to neutralize the consul by summarily stripping him of the sinecures that had given him so much influence on the island.[24] In contrast, the bishop was popular among the Maltese and had to be conciliated. As for the Order, Ball, believing that France had influenced the outcome of the magisterial election, refused the new Grandmaster permission to enter Malta.[25] The Order was still despised there, except by those who were its unpaid creditors. Ball claimed that its supporters had failed to "seduce the minds of the people" with their promises of lower bread prices because his import and price stabilization programme had already led to prices far below those in Sicily.[26]

Both the French ambassador and the Order's representative protested that refusing to allow the Grandmaster entry was a gross violation of the treaty. Vial warned Ball that his stubborness would put the odium of breaking a solemn treaty on Britain's head. Ball countered

by saying that the international guarantees had not yet been given. In justifying his action to Hobart, however, he explained that it had been done to prevent an insurrection among the Maltese.[27]

By the late spring of 1803, Ball knew that war was very near. He received confirmation of this from the British Minister at the Court of Naples who informed him that the negotiations in Paris were breaking down.[28] Ball also learned from the same source that the Grandmaster was being influenced by Vial to take the initiative and sail to Malta uninvited. As a result, he informed Vial that he would not now evacuate Malta without explicit orders from his government.[29] On 16 May, Hobart wrote to instruct Ball to prepare for war, but by the time his letter arrived, on 26 July, Ball had already anticipated its contents by expelling Vial and all of the Neapolitan troops.[30] Ball's foresight and tenacity in not giving up Malta had finally been vindicated. Unlike the Cape of Good Hope, which had been relinquished too eagerly, Malta remained in British hands.

II

Britain declared war in May 1803 and, in June, Nelson was sent back to the Mediterranean. Most of Ball's private letters to him relate to the period thereafter. These letters establish that the two men remained close until Nelson's death in October 1805, despite being seriously at odds over the question of Malta's importance. Nelson had formed a poor opinion of the island's value during his previous tour of duty in the Mediterranean in 1798, and had subsequently reiterated this opinion in the House of Lords in November 1801. Basically, he believed that Malta's importance was negative. The French had to be kept out, but aside from this, Malta was of no intrinsic value to Britain. By 1803, Nelson had realized that

neither Russia, Naples nor the Order would prevent the French from returning. He therefore conceded that Britain would have to keep the island herself, though as a naval base, it remained useless.[31] Upon returning to the Mediterranean, Malta was Nelson's first port of call. He arrived on 1 July, and left a mere thirty-six hours later. While there, he was feted both by a jubilant populace and by his friend Ball. The two men did not go into their differences, but each noticed a change for the worse in the other. Ball now thought of himself more as a diplomat than a naval officer, while Nelson felt his friend had become too pretentious, and was particularly annoyed when Ball refused to explain the presence of a Mameluke emissary, remarking that his current negotiations were too sensitive even for Nelson's ears. Nelson left the island feeling that Ball had found a too comfortable niche wherein he could enjoy "the privileges of the beatified".[32] Ball thought that his friend had become more stubborn and narrow minded than ever. He felt Nelson would never be able to grasp the wider political issues at stake, and that it was useless to try to explain them to him.

Nelson's sojourn in Malta unsettled him, and on the three-week voyage to the blockading station off Toulon, he decided to set out his opinion of the island in a letter to Addington. He admitted the Maltese were in high spirits and would probably remain loyal to Britain, though General Villettes, the military commander, had been pessimistic about holding the island if the garrison were removed to defend Sicily. Ball had disagreed, and had claimed that it could be held by the Maltese themselves. Nelson concluded that the truth probably lay somewhere between the two opinions. He then reiterated his objection to using Malta as a base from which to blockade Toulon: —

> The fleet can never go there if I can find any other corner to put them in, but having said this I now declare that I consider Malta as the most important outwork to India; that it will ever give us great influence in the Levant, and indeed all the southern part of Italy. In this view I hope we shall never give it up.[33]

Significantly, Nelson now begrudgingly accepted that Malta did have some positive value in that its retention by Britain was symbolically important to her allies in the region. He had probably been influenced by Ball who had argued that its possession was necessary to prove to the allies that Britain was serious about checking France's expansion.[34]

Foremost among the allies who were worried that Britain would give up Malta was the Porte. When the Preliminaries had announced Britain's intention of doing so, the Turks responded, in November 1801, with a memorial urging her to reconsider. This, Ball later remarked, was "as strong a measure as that cautious government ever adopted".[35] In February 1803, Ball enlisted the support of Britain's ambassador at Constantinople, Lord Elgin, who was in quarantine at Malta while on his way back to England. He was asked to draft a report to the Foreign Secretary, arguing that the Turks were terrified at the thought of Britain giving up Malta. "The Porte does estimate the duration of its independence", Elgin asserted, "by the period of our continuance in possession of this Island."[36] He then claimed that the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating and in danger of being partitioned by the great powers. If Britain were to give up Malta, she would lose the ability to modify or counteract such events, except by measures that would be ruinously expensive, but by keeping Malta, the other powers would probably not attempt to change the status quo, and Britain would be able "to remain a passive observer of the affairs in the Levant".[37] This comment was the first mention of Malta's symbolic importance, though Elgin equally

acknowledged that it had given "incalculable" advantage to Britain's expedition to Egypt in 1800. One cannot help wondering, however, if he actually wrote the report. When compared with Ball's numerous political essays, the stylistic similarities are too great to be ignored.

Ball, too, had been upset by Nelson's visit to Malta, and it gave him the incentive to set out formally his own ideas on Malta's worth. He informed Nelson, in November, that he was writing a paper on the subject, but the latter seems to have taken no notice of the remark.[38] Ball then submitted his essay, "The Importance of Malta to a Fleet Cruising before Toulon" to Hobart.[39] He also sent a copy to Penn to have duplicated and distributed to as many people as the latter saw fit. In a rather pompous comment, he claimed to have a duty above friendship in "exposing fallacious opinions which if accredited might mislead the government".[40] In his essay, Ball argued that Malta's disadvantageous distance from Toulon could be obviated by establishing a system of transports, organized and provisioned at Malta, which would be sent to supply the blockading squadron at designated rendezvous.

In the same essay, Ball argued that Malta was not only important in a negative and symbolic way, but that it also possessed a great intrinsic value. He first listed its obvious advantages, such as its central position, safe harbour and strong fortifications, and then went on to make a case for its commercial potential. Although the latter argument was the standard disguise for acquiring colonies, Ball genuinely believed that it was true in Malta's case. He argued that the island could become an important commercial depot that would "enable Great Britain to extend her trade to the interior of Europe by a communication with the Danube [and] the Dniester".[41] He claimed that corn and naval stores could be

transported from the Black Sea more quickly and cheaply than from the Baltic. The increased revenues generated by this trade combined with those obtained from the internal economic innovations he was planning would ensure that Malta would never be a drain on the British exchequer. Ball was particularly sensitive to this, and it accounts for his lifelong opposition to using Malta as a source of patronage for unemployed placemen.[42] Ball's optimism about Malta's economic potential was only partially vindicated. In the years after Napoleon established the Continental System in 1806, many of the goods smuggled into Europe were trans-shipped through Malta, but this trade did not last beyond the end of the war.

When Nelson treated Ball's essay as an act of disloyalty, Ball tried to defend himself, somewhat disingenuously, by claiming that the paper had specifically left out any comment on current naval strategy so as not to be misconstrued as criticism of the Commander-in-Chief.[43] During the arduous blockade of Toulon in the winter of 1803-4, Nelson often complained that it took too long for supplies to arrive from Malta. Ball countered by claiming that the ships Nelson had sent there had only taken ten days to arrive, and no more than a fortnight to return. However, Nelson was not always at the designated rendezvous, and the returning ships had to waste time searching for him.[44] Nelson discounted Ball's explanation, and regarded his supply problem as a confirmation of Malta's inadequacy as a base. Indeed, he began to advocate Sardinia as an alternative, the capture of which became something of an obsession with him.[45] Ball, however, wrote warning the government not to pay any attention. It would take a huge army to capture an island the size of Sardinia, and afterwards there would be the even more

difficult task of keeping it. Moreover, Sardinia had few fortifications, many of the coastal areas were unhealthy, and the inhabitants were as untrustworthy as the Corsicans.[46] Despite these objections, Nelson continued to press the government. The idea, never taken seriously in London, is significant as a reflection of Nelson's myopic view of naval strategy. Although the quarrel between the two men was often acrimonious, it did not impair their friendship. Indeed, in one of Nelson's last letters, before the battle of Trafalgar, he again stressed the great affection he felt for Ball.[47]

By 1804, Ball was beginning to have second thoughts about the wisdom of closely blockading Toulon. The strategy had not been particularly effective in the past, and he speculated that a couple of fast frigates stationed there would monitor the French just as effectively. Whenever the enemy left port, the main British fleet lying at or near Malta, having been advised of its destination by one of these frigates, would follow in pursuit. The advantage of this distant blockade lay in the ability of the naval squadron at Malta to protect both the western and eastern basins of the Mediterranean at the same time.[48] Such a strategy would also serve to prevent the type of embarrassment that Nelson had suffered in 1798, not knowing where the French fleet was headed.

After Nelson's death, his successor, Admiral Collingwood, did pull back the fleet and open the blockade.[49] Two stormy winters off Toulon in 1806-7 convinced him that it was impossible to prevent the French from leaving whenever they wished. He lamented, "seldom a fortnight will pass without an opportunity offering them to escape even the most vigilant watch particularly in winter".[50] He therefore decided, in February

1807, to withdraw the fleet to Sicily, leaving only two frigates off Toulon. Due to contrary winter winds, this was not as effective as he had hoped, and in the following year he moved the fleet to the sheltered waters off Catalonia. From this station, re-supplying and re-fitting his ships at Malta was difficult, and although Collingwood remained enthusiatic about it as a base, he often complained of its shortcomings.[51] Ultimately, Nelson had been correct about Malta's usefulness in blockading Toulon. However, he had limited himself to this single objective at a time when Britain's strategic needs in the Mediterranean were greatly expanding. The next section will show how Ball tried to address some of these needs, using means that were sometimes hazardous to his own career.

III

Ball's private letters reveal him to be something of a schemer. In this respect, he is a fascinating example of an early "Empire Builder" whose quest for promotion led him to advocate the annexation of ever increasing territory. His justification for such action was always the need to prevent the enemy from pre-empting Britain in these areas. Ball was particularly worried about Sicily and Egypt. Unfortunately, some of the steps he took in these areas on his own initiative were regarded by his government as unauthorized meddling. Malcolm Yapp argued that local administrators like Ball had a great influence on Britain's foreign policy in the early nineteenth century. These "Politicals" had a monopoly of local information, and because communication with Britain took so long, they had to make important decisions on their own initiative which the government had little choice but to sanction.[52] Communication with Malta was not as bad as that with the places in India and Central Asia

which Yapp had in mind. Even so, it still took a letter from one to three months to get from Malta to England, and a local administrator did not always have the luxury of waiting for a reply before he acted.[53]

After the resumption of war in the summer of 1803, Sicily was in imminent danger of a French invasion. Ball, who was continuously gathering intelligence on the situation there, was afraid the Neapolitan Court would wait too long before it summoned aid from Britain. This was a delicate matter because any precipitate action by Britain would supply France with a handy pretext to invade. Ball was worried that he might be made the scapegoat, because it was his ultimate responsibility to send the garrison of Malta to defend Messina.[54] If he acted too soon, he would give the French their excuse, but if he waited too long, Sicily would be lost.

Ball's private views on Sicily are expressed in a letter written in August 1804 to G.F. Leckie, the British Consul at Syracuse. In it, he frankly asserted that he would like to see Sicily become a permanent British possession. The king of Naples was fool enough to be convinced, Ball argued, that such an arrangement would be for his own benefit. This may have been true, but the Russians would not have been so easily fooled. Sometimes Ball's expansionist dreams got the better of him and began to impair his judgement. Although he conceded that Russia was a necessary ally, he totally disregarded the devastating effect that a British takeover of Sicily would have on relations with her. This letter also explains why there are so few of Ball's private letters still in existence. He knew that such frankness was dangerous to his career, and instructed Leckie to destroy his letters as soon as they had been read. Fortunately for the historian, this one was overlooked. Ball disliked

having to moderate his views in order to submit them through public channels, and he complained to Leckie, "I have not the abilities and influence equal to my inclinations".[55] Nevertheless, Ball was correct about the danger to Sicily. His persistent warnings alerted Britain to it, and in February 1806, her forces were able to forestall the planned French invasion.

In May 1804, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge arrived in Malta, and his sojurn there provides another insight into Ball's character. Coleridge, who went there to improve his health and shake off an addiction to opium, spent seventeen months employed by Ball, first as his private secretary and, then from January 1805 as the acting Public Secretary. His flatteringly uncritical assessment of Ball, written several years after the latter's death, was responsible for establishing the popular image of Ball as a stern but loving patriarch idolized by the Maltese. Even so, Coleridge's claim that Ball's portrait hung next to that of the Madonna in every peasant hut is impossible to believe.[56] There is more of a ring of authenticity, however, to his description of the way the two men worked together preparing political essays. Ball would set a theme, and each would go off and write a paper on it. Ball would then collate the two papers in Coleridge's presence, and allow the latter to polish the final version.[57] Coleridge had been employed because he was a professional writer. Ball's previous papers had been largely ignored by the government, and he hoped Coleridge would be able to make his ideas more persuasive.

When Coleridge arrived at Malta, the security of Egypt was uppermost on Ball's mind. In July 1804, he sent Nelson an essay outlining the goals of the French in the Mediterranean.[58] In this sketch, he

developed the idea that France had abandoned her possessions in the West Indies, and was seeking compensation in the Mediterranean. Egypt was of utmost importance to her because its agricultural abundance could eventually supplant Britain's West Indian exports to Europe. He based this contention, as did Coleridge, on H.P. Brougham's book, An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers. Unfortunately, Brougham got his facts wrong in two important areas - the extent of Egypt's arable land and the number of harvests per year.[59] Thus, Ball based his overly optimistic assessement of Egypt's economic potential on incorrect data, and concluded that a new French invasion of Egypt was imminent.

The key to defending Egypt was Alexandria, and in his "Plan for the Security of Alexandria", Ball advocated British control of it.[60] Sounding like Sebastiani, he asserted that "4,000 men with a good proclamation and a little money will put us in possession of this charming spot."[61] Egypt was in a state of chaos, and if Britain did not step in, the French would. Ball had no use for the Turks and he wanted the government to come to an arrangement with the Mamelukes.[60] He was treading on dangerous ground, however, since this plan, though not original, was a direct contradiction of government policy. He also suggested an alternative plan, if Britain did not wish to seize Alexandria openly. The same result could be accomplished by sending a British agent there with a lot of money. He would bribe the town's officials and establish a force of foreign mercenaries who would effectively control the town in Britain's interest. Ball even suggested that Penn would make a good governor there if he were interested in the job.

Ball submitted his ideas to Penn in order to have them communicated to Hobart. He realized that Penn would have to be the final

judge of when and how this would be done, and he encouraged his friend to make changes at his discretion. Ball knew that the fate of Alexandria was more the concern of the Foreign Secretary, but he had little use for Hawkesbury and no acquaintance in his department. He trusted that Penn was the ideal person to convey the thrust of his ideas to the government because the latter had recently published an article in Gentleman's Magazine showing that French designs on Egypt stretched back to the days of the Louis XIV.[63] Ball tried to send Penn as much current information on Egypt as possible. Of particular interest was an eyewitness account of the chaos there by an "Anonymous American Gentleman" who suggested a plan very similar to that proposed by Ball, and who is revealed in the notes kept by Coleridge as the American Naval Agent to the Barbary States, William Eaton.[64]

In November 1803, Ball asked Penn to submit his paper on Alexandria to Hobart, who in turn presented it to the Cabinet.[65] He had also urged the British ambassador at Constantinople to convince the Porte to accept it. By the time he learned that both governments had rejected it, he had already, on his own initiative, sent off an agent, Vincenzo Taberna, to Egypt. This Piedmontese soldier of fortune exceeded his instructions and began to make unauthorized promises to the Mamelukes.[66] Taberna was aided in this by Major Missett, Britain's representative in Egypt who was also overstepping his authority.[67] Ball feared that he would be reproached for their actions, and many of his letters to Penn in 1804 are concerned with exculpating himself by shifting the blame onto Missett and other British officials in Egypt. He even attempted to qualify his Alexandria plan by claiming that he had always intended both Russia and the Porte to be parties to it.[68] It is difficult to

ascertain how angry the government was with him: probably not very. Despite the official policy of maintaining the Ottoman Empire intact, the government was unofficially attempting to steer a neutral course in Egypt, waiting to see which faction triumphed there.[69] In 1807, Britain launched an expedition to Egypt with the aim of seizing Alexandria, very much along the lines suggested by Ball. The expedition failed because it tried to go beyond this limited objective.[70] Significantly, Ball's original plan had contained a warning about the danger of doing so.

By 1805, the accepted view of Malta's importance was that the island served as a barrier to protect Egypt. However, the island's effectiveness as a barrier was mainly symbolic. Britain's retention of Malta signalled her determination not to let any great power establish itself in the Levant or Egypt. Unlike most observers, Ball felt that Malta also had an intrinsic value, but he too doubted whether the Malta squadron would be able stop an actual invasion of Egypt. To achieve this end, he therefore suggested the annexation of Alexandria. He also felt that a British presence in Sicily would act as additional insurance. Ball schemed with like-minded imperialists to implement these designs without giving much thought to the grave political risk that such a forward policy could give credence to the apprehensions already felt by Britain's allies of her insatiable appetite for more colonies.

CHAPTER FOUR - NOTES

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9 Miles to Ball, 24 April 1802, Miles Correspondence, III, 327-9.

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16 Ingram, Commitment to Empire, 117-8.

17 Ball to Penn, 14 September 1802, Add. MSS 37268.

18 Ball to Miles, 10 December 1802, Miles Correspondence, III, 330-2.

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29 Ball to Vial, 18 May 1803, ibid, 490-1.

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61 Ball to Penn, 1 November 1803, NMM, CRK/1.Gen/B/.

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63 Penn, "A Summary Account of the Leibnitz Memoir", Gentleman's Magazine, II (1803), 943-48. This article was published anonymously, but Ball's letters to Penn reveal the latter as the author. Ghorbal, 215, mentions the significance of this article, but seems to be unaware who wrote it.

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69 Ghorbal, 219.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Third Coalition and the Continental System, 1804-1809

> [Malta is] the object for which the war had commenced, and on which our consequence in Turkey, and our influence in the Mediterranean, and the security of our Indian Empire so obviously depend .. I must change my opinions very radically before I shall be the person to sign a Treaty of Peace by which Malta is placed in the Hands of any other Power.
>
> - Lord Mulgrave [1]

Neither Britain nor Russia understood each other's concerns about Malta, and this mutual misunderstanding strained and prolonged the negotiations for a new coalition in 1804-5. The tsar had always been equivocal about Malta, and when he demanded its evacuation in the interests of peace, Britain was suspicious because she feared that he might have designs on the Ottoman Empire no less worrisome than those of France. As a result, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Mulgrave, would not budge on the issue of Malta, and the coalition negotiations almost collapsed. It was eventually formed because the tsar's fear of France transcended his annoyance with Britain. Although her possession of Malta still irritated him, he chose to remain silent on the issue, and in 1806, Britain's occupation of Sicily replaced the retention of Malta as the main obstacle to a settlement. In January 1807, Russia suggested a plan for the deployment of naval forces in the Mediterranean that tacitly acknowledged Britain's right to Malta, but the latter no longer trusted Russia, and refused to consider it. Russia came to terms with France at Tilsit in July because she felt abandoned and abused by her ally, though Britain's possession of Malta did not influence this decision directly. After Malta ceased to be a major diplomatic issue, it assumed a new economic dimension with its trade flourishing in defiance of the Continental System. Ball's last years were spent promoting this trade at the cost of a political rivalry that wore

him out. When he died in 1809, he believed that Malta had proved its commercial value. However, the economic upsurge was soon shown to have been largely illusory. This was because it had been too dependent upon the artificial political conditions that had created it.

I

As the Peace of Amiens was collapsing, Count Simon Vorontsov, the Russian ambassador in London, offered to mediate with Bonaparte on Britain's behalf, but Lord Hawkesbury peremptorily brushed off the offer. Viscount Castlereagh, the President of the Board of Control, cautioned the Cabinet, on 19 August, not to reject these proposals. He stressed the importance of preserving Russia's goodwill since the alternative would lead to diplomatic isolation. In order to prevent this, Britain needed to make a strong case for her resumption of hostilities. Claiming that the issue of war or peace had hung on the retention of Malta would not suffice. His solution was to offer a compromise that, if accepted, would have improved Britain's position on the Continent, but, if rejected, would have allowed her to keep Malta while saving face with Russia. Castlereagh's suggestion entailed the demand for an equivalent base in the Mediterranean as the price for giving up Malta; but since every other island was inferior to it as a base, Britain would be justified in also expecting a better territorial arrangement on the Continent. He had no illusions that the French would accept such a compromise. He told the Foreign Secretary that it was "so unlikely to be conceded by the French as to be brought forward as to cover our real design of retaining Malta".[2] The true purpose of such an offer was to maintain the goodwill of Russia, and those other countries with which Britain wished to form an alliance. Although disregarded at the time, his proposal would re-surface two years later, to

act as the catalyst that would help to overcome Russia's misgivings.

By May 1804, the Addington administration had lost the confidence of the majority in parliament and was replaced by a new government headed by Pitt. Addington's opponents put much of the blame for his defeat on the inability of his government to come to terms with Russia, and they cited the improved relations after Pitt had resumed office to substantiate this contention. In truth, Britain's rapprochement with the Court of St. Petersburg had more to do with the deteriorating relations between France and Russia than it did with the success of any new initiative launched by Pitt. The tsar was receiving a number of alarming reports on the activities of Frenchmen in the Ottoman Empire. France also continued to act aggressively on the Continent, exemplified by the seizure of the Due d'Enghien, on neutral territory, and his subsequent execution.[3] Alexander therefore decided to shelve his differences with Britain who unwisely interpreted his gesture to mean that such differences had never been important. Indeed, the proposals made by Britain in June 1804 set out conditions that could not help but re-kindle the tsar's suspicions. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Harrowby, asserted that if a new coalition were formed, no pecuniary subsidies would be forthcoming before the allies had first initiated some positive military action, and he compounded his error by not making any mention of a British force to be used in conjunction with the Russians in southern Europe, a point upon which the tsar was particularly sensitive.[4] To Alexander, these conditions sounded as if the British were trying to shift the burden of the fighting on to their allies as they had done during the war of the Second Coalition. Moreover, Britain's ambassador at St.Petersburg blithely re-affirmed "the impolicy and impossibility of giving up Malta".[5]

Clearly, the new administration was following in the footsteps of the old, and doing very little to alleviate the suspicions that Russia had nursed since the breakdown of the Treaty of Amiens.

One of the greatest sources of misunderstanding between Russia and Britain during the Third Coalition negotiations was the mission to London, in the latter part of 1804, of a Russian emissary, Nicholas Novosiltsev. The task his government had set was daunting, as he was expected to establish not only the common war aims of the allies, but also their agreement on the eventual re-settlement of Europe. Because his mandate was unrealistic, he had been instructed to be vague, and to avoid openly discussing the differences that existed between the two states.[6] He professed that they had a common purpose in protecting the Ottoman Empire. However, after listening to him, the British ministers were unsure of his sincerity, since he repeatedly gave the impression that it might be better to dismember this empire rather than to bolster it. Despite his denials, the innuendos underlying his words continued to cast a shadow on Russia's credibility.

In the midst of the talks, Harrowby suffered a bad fall during an epileptic seizure, and had to be replaced by Lord Mulgrave. Pitt chose Mulgrave because he felt the latter could be easily manipulated, and most of the new Foreign Secretary's colleagues took it for granted that he was not really up to the job. Edward Ingram, however, suggests that Mulgrave was a better Foreign Secretary than has been acknowledged, especially when it came to stiffening the Prime Minister's resolve during the negotiations with Russia.[7] Mulgrave followed in Dundas's footsteps by advocating a maritime rather than a Continental approach to the war. Generally he put little faith in Continental allies, and was particularly suspicious of

Russia. In keeping with such an approach, he believed that giving up Malta was too high a price to pay, either for an unstable peace with France, or for a new alliance with Russia. In a cabinet meeting on 14 December, the Prime Minister asked his colleagues for their comments on the organization and aims of a new coalition in order to prepare a policy statement that would be presented to Novosiltsev. Mulgrave submitted a detailed report on the following day which contained his very definite views about Malta. In assessing its value as an "object of negotiation", he asserted:

> Perhaps Malta might by some be brought under the second Head, as facilitating the offensive operations of a British fleet in the Mediterranean. I am disposed rather to think it essentially, only defensive with us, as covering Egypt and through Egypt the East Indies; held by France it is in every point of view an offensive Post.[8]

It was a logical corollary to this view of the basically defensive nature of Britain's possession of Malta that such possession could not therefore be regarded as a legitimate cause for alarm by either France or Russia.

On January 19, Mulgrave sent the Russian ambassador a proposal for the formation of a new coalition. The views expressed in this document closely paralleled those found in his earlier letter to Pitt with one notable exception - nowhere is there any mention of Malta.[9] Novosiltsev had not once brought up this thorny subject during his discussions with the British, and Mulgrave, no doubt restrained by Pitt, had decided that it was best to leave well enough alone, and not mention it himself. After reading the British proposal, both Vorontsov and Novosiltsev accepted it as being entirely consistent with the intentions of the tsar, and the latter returned to St.Petersburg shortly thereafter, feeling, as did the British ministers, that his mission had been a success. Unfortunately, neither the tsar nor the Russian government agreed with him; the Russian

Foreign Minister, Prince Adam Czartoryski, claimed that the mission had failed because of the haughty refusal of Britain to evacuate Malta.[10] It seems that in his eagerness to come to terms with the British, Novosiltsev had not discussed the one point upon which there was substantial disagreement. He was not entirely to blame, however, as his instructions had specifically cautioned him to only hint at this subject until the British themselves first brought it up. Given such a vague injunction and his inexperience, he could easily have assumed that Malta was of minor importance to his government, and since the British had not themselves mentioned it, he probably also assumed that they too would not make trouble over it. The tsar had been receiving reports from London that the new government was no more firmly based than the old; Pitt would therefore have great difficulty in defying the parliamentary opposition by refusing to make peace on reasonable terms.[11] Alexander preferred a negotiated settlement to a protracted war in which Russia would have to do most of the fighting, and the tsar's negative reaction to Novosiltsev's report was less an attempt to bring pressure than it was a way of persuading the British to accept this preference, even if the price of such a negotiated settlement were the evacuation of Malta.[12]

When the Third Coalition documents were published in 1904, their editor, John Holland Rose, omitted most of the despatches concerning Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean while retaining those that dealt with Malta.[13] As a result, the role of Malta in the negotiations stands out in the published version far more than it does when the original documents are considered as a whole. From this observation, Ghorbal, who closely studied the omitted letters, concludes that Malta's role in the formation of the coalition was minor compared with that of the Ottoman Empire.[14]

It cannot be denied that Turkey was the more important concern, but this does not necessarily mean that Malta's role was minimal. Indeed, Britain's continued occupation of Malta served notice to all that a partition of Ottoman territory would not be tolerated. On the other hand, Russia regarded Malta as a measure of Britain's sincerity, and worried that she might attempt to grab even more territory in the Mediterranean. Apprehension of the collapse of Turkey may have been the main cause of the mistrust that existed between the two states, but Britain's possession of Malta was the potent symbol of this mistrust.

The British government remained ignorant of the misgivings felt by Russia. On 21 January, believing that Novosiltsev's mission had been successful, Mulgrave submitted to the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg, Lord Granville Leveson Gower, a draft treaty that he expected Russia to ratify with only minor alterations. His confidence in this respect can be deduced from the fact that Gower was given full discretionary power to conclude the treaty.[15] Since Malta was not mentioned, either in the covering letter, or in the draft proposal itself, it can be assumed that Novosiltsev's reticence had left Mulgrave with the impression that Russia would now tacitly concede possession of it to Britain. Indeed, he did not become aware of Russia's displeasure until the beginning of March, when Gower informed him that the draft treaty had been received in a "cold manner", and he learned why the Russians were upset only when the Queen of Naples provided him with a copy of a despatch written by her ambassador at St. Petersburg in which Russia's suspicions were laid out in full detail.[16] The Neapolitan ambassador had written that the tsar was worried that Britain wanted to involve the Continental powers in a war in order to have a free hand in the Mediterranean.

Alexander suspected that Malta would be used as a spring board from which to seize Sicily under the pretext of protecting Malta itself. With these two islands in her possession, Britain would then be able to control all the shipping in the Mediterranean. Mulgrave was astonished by this revelation, especially since he was then in the process of oganizing a small force under General Craig to be sent to Malta to act in conjunction with the Russians at Corfu. He tried to repair the damage by changing Craig's orders such that a seizure of Sicily was made contingent upon Russia's prior consent, but his belated alterations did little to assuage the tsar's basic suspicions.[17]

Russia finally broached the subject of Malta in March. Gower was informed that the tsar expected Britain to give up the island if this would help to bring about a negotiated peace. Even more incredibly, Russia also wanted Britain to revise her Maritime Code, and subordinate her Mediterranean force to a Russian commander. Gower naively believed that, where the very formation of the coalition was at stake, these issues were but "points of minor importance" and, on 11 April, he exercised the discretionary power given him by the Cabinet to conclude a treaty with Russia.[18] Although he did manage to get Russia to drop the two latter demands, Article X of this treaty pledged Britain to evacuate Malta, if Bonaparte made this condition a sine qua non of peace. If this proved to be the case, Russia would garrison the island and guarantee its security. Russia wanted this arrangement to lead to a settlement jointly agreed by the Sicilian king and the Order of St. John, but Gower insisted that nothing be done that was not amenable to the island's inhabitants.[19]

Gower tried to head off criticism of his imprudent action by claiming that Article X was provisional on the Cabinet's subsequent

approval.[20] The tsar asserted, however, that his acceptance of Gower's amendments was such a major compromise that he would not ratify the treaty if the British government rejected this provision. Gower could see no reason why they would do this, and he wrote to the Prime Minister:

> Upon the question of Malta, he [Novosiltsev] assured me that you said to him, "trouvez nous le moyen de le rendre neutre et nous serons contents", and it was this assurance that induced me to agree to any mention of Malta.[21]

He went on to explain that Russia had refused to agree to a treaty that omitted the Malta provision because she claimed to have previously pledged herself to such a condition with the Court of Vienna. Apart from this exception, Gower argued, the treaty conformed to the spirit of Mulgrave's draft version, and, in his opinion, Malta was too "frivolous" an issue over which to risk the collapse of the negotiations.[22] Shortly thereafter, Gower reported that Russia was beginning to have second thoughts about the treaty. It had just received a lukewarm reaction from Austria, and Czartoryski was now claiming that, if he had known this beforehand, the Malta article would have been unconditionally insisted upon.[23]

Mulgrave was extremely angry when he learned that the treaty Gower had concluded sanctioned the evacuation of Malta.[24] For him, Malta was just too important to Britain's position in the Mediterranean to be bartered away, no matter how favourable an agreement, in other respects, had been reached. His strident tone had a profound affect on the Russian ambassador who warned his government that the coalition was being put in jeopardy by Russia's insistence on the Malta provision. To Czartoryski, he wrote:

> If Lord G.L.Gower had agreed to the evacuation of Malta, and the new Maritime Code ... his actions would certainly have not been ratified here ... The Continent will be enslaved, and this country will

> either make peace by Christmas, and keep Malta, or will continue a defensive war which will cost it little in money, and which will preserve the rock which is the cause of all existing difficulties.[25]

Vorontsov knew the weak link on the British side was not Mulgrave, but the Prime Minister, and conjectured that Pitt, influenced by Harrowby, would probably have accepted a compromise over Malta had not Mulgrave threatened to resign over the issue.[26]

Pitt wrote to Admiral Keith on 21 May asking his advice on the relative merits of other possible island bases in the Mediteranean. The admiral replied that Malta had no equal. He adduced this to its fortifications, which were impossible to invest with anything less than a force that would be too large to provision itself on the island's scant natural resources.[27] Feeling that the coalition was slipping from his grasp, Pitt took fright, and despite such advice, began to consider alternatives to Malta. Mulgrave knew that he had to do something to prevent the Prime Minister from committing himself to one of these. At the beginning of June, he suggested a solution that sounded very much like the proposal Castlereagh had made two years before in which Britain would agree to evacuate Malta and allow the Russians to garrison it under a set of precisely defined conditions. Firstly, Britain would receive Minorca as compensation, but since the latter was clearly inferior to Malta, Mulgrave insisted that Britain's evacuation should not be carried out for three years so as to have time to fortify Minorca. Some provision would also have to be made for a civil administration at Malta that was compatible with the wishes of the inhabitants. Furthermore, Britain would be justified in demanding an improvement in the status of those smaller European states currently dominated by France; before she would evacuate Malta these would have to be "placed in a situation to repel the hostile

attacks of France".[28] It was highly unlikely that Bonaparte would have accepted this last condition, but Mulgrave's compromise proposal was being made for the benefit of Russia, not France. If the latter rejected it, Britain would be justified in keeping Malta, which was Mulgrave's real intention.

On 7 June, Pitt wrote to Novosiltsev who was at Berlin awaiting instructions to proceed to Paris for exploratory peace talks. Pitt regretted that the two states had previously misunderstood each other so profoundly, and claimed it was therefore necessary to spell out Britain's terms as precisely as possible. He wrote that Malta would only be evacuated after there had been made:

> An arrangement really satisfactory on the Continent, and particularly adequate Barriers both for Italy and for Holland, and if we could obtain the only substitute for Malta which we think could at all answer the purpose [Minorca], ... but on any other ground the sacrifice is one to which We cannot feel ourselves justified to consent.[29]

In conclusion, Pitt hoped that Russia would understand why Britain had refused to ratify the Malta provision, and would be satisfied with this compromise.

The compromise proposal was greeted with little enthusiasm by Russia. Czartoryski told Gower that his government had not expected the rejection of the Malta provision; however, Russia had just learned of the annexation of Genoa and the Ligurian Republic by France, and was, in consequence, not now sending Novosiltsev to Paris. Gower argued that the implementation of Article X had depended on the prior commencement of peace talks and this development rendered it void.[30] Russia finally gave in, less because she had accepted Gower's logic, than because of her desire to check France's aggressive actions on the Continent.[31] On 28 July, she ratified the April treaty with the Malta provision omitted, but

insisted upon attaching a protocol that formally set out her grievance on this point.[32] Austria did not join the coalition until the next month. She had remained indifferent to the question of Malta throughout and had held out longer than Russia, waiting for the latter to make the first move while hoping that Britain would increase the size of the subsidy she was promising to pay.[33]

II

After the formation of the Third Coalition, Alexander did not again complain about Britain's possession of Malta; there were more pressing problems that needed to be dealt with. In November 1805, Harrowby was sent to Berlin to persuade Prussia to join the coalition. As an inducement, he pledged Britain to a post-war evacuation of all wartime acquisitions except Malta and the Cape. Both the Prussian and the Russian negotiators now accepted that these places were essential to Britain's security, and would not have to be put on the bargaining table.[34] However, the talks collapsed after Russia offered Hanover to Prussia without first consulting Britain.

Britain and Russia were also having a difficult time co-operating in the Mediterranean. After the two had linked up for a landing at Naples on 20 November, they were unable to agree on a joint strategy.[35] Bonaparte's victory at Austerlitz in December obviated the need to do so. The position of the Anglo-Russian force in southern Italy then became untenable, and it was forced to withdraw. The Russians returned to Corfu, from where they initiated a campaign to secure the Dalmatian coast, while Craig used the British contingent to seize Sicily at the beginning of February 1806, thereby confirming the tsar's deepest suspicion. Once in control of Sicily, the strategic value of Malta decreased; however,

Britain never seriously considered keeping the former as a permanent base. Firstly, she did not have a free hand there as the Neapolitan royal family had taken up residence at Palermo after fleeing their capital.[36] Any attempt by Britain to keep Sicily would have triggered a colossal international protest that would have made the row over Malta seem mild. Furthermore, the island was too large and would require a prohibitively expensive garrison. Unlike the Maltese, the Sicilians could not be counted on to defend their own island because of Britain's continued support for the despised Bourbon rulers.[37]

Pitt died on January 23, and two weeks later a new administration, dubbed the "Ministry of all the Talents", came to power with Grenville as Prime Minister and Fox as Foreign Secretary. The latter had previously led the anti-war opposition in parliament, and one of his first priorities as Foreign Secretary was to initiate a new round of peace talks. In the past, Fox had criticized the Addington government for not sacrificing Malta in the interest of peace. He found himself faced with a similar choice in the summer of 1806, only now the issue was giving up Sicily, not Malta. Indeed, Napoleon wanted the British out of the former badly enough to propose a reciprocal agreement whereby Britain's possession of Malta would be recognized in exchange for Sicily. Pierre Coquelle believes this proposal had been originally made by Britain, but his contention has been disproved by E.M. Lloyd.[38] In reality, Napoleon wanted his brother, Joseph, who recently had been made king of the truncated Neapolitan state, to regain all of the traditional territories that had constituted the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. To sweeten his offer, he asserted that, "L'Empereur des Français renounce pour lui [Joseph] à tout droit de souveraineté autre sur Malte".[39] This would have had the effect of

legally ending the ties that had existed between Malta and Sicily, but in return, he expected Britain to agree, in a secret article, to compensate the Knights with pensions.

Russia's main aim in these talks was to keep France out of the Ottoman Empire, and she was willing to let her have both Sardinia and Sicily to achieve it. In compensation, Czartoryski insisted that Russia keep Cattaro, and Britain Malta.[40] However, Fox knew he could never agree to give up Sicily, since this would have been tantamount to neutralizing Malta's effectiveness in preventing another eastern expedition by France. As a result, the peace talks were doomed from the very beginning. Fox realized he would have to make some sort of a compromise in order not to alienate Russia. He therefore offered to give up Sicily in exchange for Minorca and Sardinia in addition to Malta. With these three bases outflanking the French in Sicily, he envisaged putting into operation a plan similar to one that Ball had once submitted, whereby Malta would be used as the base for a large mobile force that could quickly be transported to any necessary trouble spot.[41] Indeed, the increasing number of troops that were stationed on the island after 1806 would indicate that this plan was put into action.[42] Fox had meant his compromise to be something of a bluff, and was not surprised when Napoleon rejected it. The latter's sincerity was also questionable, however, as he tried to use the discussions to play the Russians off against the British. In this sense, the peace talks only served to underscore the level of mistrust that had always existed between the two. The Russian negotiator, Peter d'Oubril, was so dismayed by Britain's intransigence over Sicily that he signed a separate treaty with France. Alexander immediately disavowed the treaty, but there could be no doubt that Russia and Britain

no longer trusted one another.[43] Britain feared that the tsar might still agree to a bilateral treaty if the quid pro quo were sufficiently tantalizing, while Alexander felt that Britain was acting in a duplicitous manner over Sicily, and could not help but think that she had previously used a similar technique to establish her possession of Malta.

Fox died shortly after the peace talks were terminated in the autumn of 1806, and his successor, Lord Howick, was even less accommodating to Russia. Czartoryski was replaced at about the same time by General Andrei Budberg, an individual who was also more intransigent. Elmo Roach suggests that the collapse of the Third Coalition had as much to do with the inability of Britain and Russia to co-operate in the Mediterranean as it did with Bonaparte's striking military successes.[44] In January 1807, Budberg admitted that the allies did not co-operate very effectively in the Mediterranean, and he proposed dividing up the allied command there. Russia would augment its forces at Corfu, and be responsible for the area east of the Italian peninsula while the British squadron at Malta would patrol the western basin. He also wanted the right to draw on British naval stores kept at Malta. These proposals contained his country's first official mention of Malta since the formation of the Third Coalition, and they can be interpreted as a tacit recognition by Russia of Britain's right to the island. Even so, the British rejected Budberg's suggestion in a manner that was less than polite. Howick plainly stated that Russia's naval forces were not up to fulfilling the task they proposed. In any case, he did not trust them in the eastern Mediterranean, and British naval squadrons would continue to cruise in the Levant as much to monitor the Russians as the French. Budberg's request for a share of naval stores was rejected on the grounds

that Russia had not previously made an effort to develop her own depots on the Ionian Islands.[45] Thereafter, the tsar found his treaty responsibilities to Britain increasingly more onerous because of his feeling that Britain was more concerned with furthering her self-interest than with helping her ally. Alexander's eventual loss of faith in Britain contributed as much to the conclusion of the Treaty of Tilsit with France in July 1807 as did Bonaparte's victory at Friedland. The question of Malta had not directly influenced the tsar's decision, though for him it remained a symbol of Britain's insincerity.

III

Napoleon had first declared his Continental System in November 1806, hoping to stop British goods from entering Europe. Before the Treaty of Tilsit, however, such goods had continued to enter via Russia; after it, the Continental System had a chance of becoming effective.[46] From Britain's point of view, Malta now became more important than ever as one of a series of entrepots close to the Continent from which goods could be smuggled. Thus, the years after 1807 were extremely prosperous for the island's economy. However, no one in the British government ever seriously considered that commerce alone was a good enough reason for keeping Malta. The post-Tilsit boom, while useful to Britain's war effort, did little real damage to France, and despite the existence of a strong lobby that advocated Malta's trade potential, the government continued to regard the boom as a temporary aberration that would correct itself after the war.

The attempt to improve the island's economy was the main concern of Alexander Ball during his last years at Malta. It was not a particularly satisfying time as most of his efforts in this respect got

inextricably bound up with his personal feud with William Eton. Eton had been named Superintendent of Quarantine at Malta by Ball's predecessor, Charles Cameron. Cameron was a malleable man, and Eton soon became the real power on the island. He had formerly been a trader with connections in the Black Sea and Russia, and was the author of the standard Survey of the Turkish Empire. Eton had also been employed as a spy to gather intelligence about the activities of the Order, first by Russia, then by Britain.[47] After Ball left Malta in 1801, Eton had taken his place in the affections of the Maltese by supporting their right to a representative assembly.

Both men advocated the development of Malta's commercial potential. Ball's advocacy, however, did not make him a friend of free trade. Indeed, his most valued principle of public finance was inimical to it. This was because of his overriding concern that Malta should pay for itself, a goal that could not be achieved without the revenue generated from trade duties. Similarly, he had always opposed any attempt to make Malta a repository of patronage. Except for the Civil Commissioner and the Public Secretary, the civil administration was Maltese. He claimed that this system was not only cheaper, but also had the advantage of keeping the inhabitants loyal.[48] Ball had been against making Malta a free port in 1801, and had argued that the government's decision had been overly influenced by Eton who carried on a substantial private trade there.[49] When he returned in 1803, he abolished the free trade status, thereby becoming persona non grata with the local merchants.

In February 1803, Malta's merchants complained to London in a "Memorial" translated from the Italian by Eton. They argued that, deprived of its free trade status, the island missed the opportunity of

becoming the hub "of the trade of the Levant and all of the Mediterranean".[50] These merchants envisaged Malta as a great entrepôt between the eastern and western basins. Cargoes coming from either direction would be off-loaded and stored there. The advantage of this lay in the time saved by ships being able to pick up pre-fumigated cargoes from the Levant without having to undergo quarantine. A merchant by the name of John Jackson elaborated on these ideas, in 1804, in a book entitled Reflections on the Commerce of the Mediterranean. Jackson noted that most of the trade in the area was done by small ships that carried on a coasting trade. It was totally inefficient to employ the larger Atlantic ships in such a manner because of the delays involved in getting a full cargo. Britain's Mediterranean trade balance was currently unfavourable, but, by using Malta as a storehouse where the larger ships could quickly load up, this trend could be reversed. Britain would then be able to take advantage of the coasting trade by having the smaller ships deposit their cargoes in one of Malta's many warehouses for later trans-shipment.[51]

Eton believed that Britain could improve her relations with Russia by establishing a mutually lucrative trade in the Black Sea. Indeed, he claimed to be on close terms with the Russian chancellor who had told him that such an inducement would overcome the tsar's objections to Britain keeping Malta.[52] Ball was equally enthusiastic about buying grain from southern Russia. Malta's main strategic disadvantage had always been its inability to feed itself, and Ball was convinced that the development of trade with the Black Sea would solve this problem. This trade also had the potential of adding to public revenue since Ball had not relinquished the Order's monopoly over the importation and distribution of grain. Eton

arrived in Odessa in the spring of 1804 where he found himself buying grain in competition with an agent sent by Ball. Being an experienced merchant, Eton knew what to buy while Ball's agent, who did not, purchased a large quantity of cheap soft wheat that easily rotted. Later, Eton accused Ball of incompetence, but Ball maintained that he had made a sizeable profit for the government on his imported corn.[53]

Eton was so annoyed by Ball's attempt to undercut his efforts in southern Russia that he returned directly to England at the beginning of 1805. Once there, he was more of a threat to Ball than he had been in Malta. He carried on a correspondence in cypher with his Maltese conspirators, and accumulated information which was used by Cobbett and his friends to blacken Ball's reputation. Ball was accused of being both corrupt and a tyrant. Eton claimed that Britain had promised the Maltese a popular assembly, and that Ball denied this and ruled without regard to the feelings of the inhabitants.[54] Such a charge was preposterous, as no British government would have agreed to a representative assembly at Malta. Eton sustained the attack on Ball in his book, Authentic Materials for a History of the Principality of Malta, which was published in four parts beginning in 1803. Hardman claims that the government held up the publication of this book until 1807, but is incorrect on this detail.[55] Ball defended himself against the charges of corruption in a ninety-six page letter in which he protested his innocence a little too much.[56] Ball was not a notably corrupt individual, but there was enough sloppiness in his financial statements to allow for some degree of peculation, and his resentment towards what he always regarded as ungrateful governments would have served him as a psychological justification.[57]

Malta's free-trade status was restored in 1806, but the merchants

still complained that the Civil Commissioner's imposts for the use of the harbour and the lazaretto were too high. They claimed that the island was not competitive with Gibraltar, the other British free port in the Mediterranean.[58] Ball knew that laxness at Gibraltar had often led to outbreaks of disease, but he also knew that he had few friends in government, and would have to compromise. He had been a steadfast supporter of Pitt, but the latter was dead, and Hobart, previously his main conduit to the government, was out of office.[59] Thus Ball decided to appease the merchants by abolishing the ballast duties and lowering the lazaretto charges. He did not budge, however, from the strict enforcement of the quarantine regulations.[60]

Ironically, the "Ministry of all the Talents" would probably have replaced Ball, but for the ministers not being able to decide who should be given the patronage of Malta.[61] When that short-lived government fell in March 1807, Ball found himself on firmer footing with Castlereagh, who now became Minister for War and the Colonies. His conduct was fully investigated by the minister, and in January 1808, he was exonerated of any wrong-doing.[62] Curiously, Eton was neither censured nor removed from office for the allegations which he had made, and would continue to make with impunity until finally dismissed in 1811. Castlereagh tried to purchase Ball's acceptance of this state of affairs with a hefty pay rise. He let Ball know that he was secure in his position in Malta, and that Eton's lies were not believed. However, Ball would have to be satisfied with this because Eton knew too much, and had friends who could embarrass the government.[63] Castlereagh believed it was wiser to control Eton by continuing to pay his salary as Malta's absentee Superintendent of Quarantine than it was to remove him. However, the accusations against

Ball lingered on, and the stress they produced in him probably contributed to his premature death in 1809.

In the summer of 1808, Castlereagh considered turning Messina into the main emporium of Britain's contraband trade in the Mediterranean. Ball once again found himself advocating the superior merits of Malta. He argued that Messina lacked adequate warehousing and quarantine facilities, and was not nearly as secure from attack as Malta.[64] However, he had to admit that Messina's proximity to the mainland made it more convenient and safer for small boats to carry on smuggling operations, and he suggested that this trade could be most efficiently continued by using Malta as a depot from which to supply the smugglers.[65] Castlereagh accepted Ball's reasoning, and Malta retained its status as the main British emporium. By 1809, Britain's control of Mediterranean shipping had become complete. In order to be exempt from capture, all neutral vessels were obliged to sail to Malta to obtain a licence; an Order-in-Council issued in March had made these relatively easy to obtain.[66] With them, merchants were allowed to re-export goods from Malta to any Mediterranean port that was not actually being blockaded, and no restriction was placed upon the use of non-British shipping. In the last months before his death, Ball felt that his sponsorship of the island's commercial potential had been vindicated. Trade was increasing, merchants flocked to the island, and many new commercial houses were being established there.[67] When he died on October 20, Collingwood, his old friend, wrote a eulogy that was particularly apt:

> He cannot be replaced in Malta, nor is there a man in England qualified to govern the Maltese but himself. They are all too little or too great.[68]

The years after Ball's death saw the culmination of Malta's

economic prosperity. Even Napoleon sometimes violated his own restrictions, and authorized the sale of wheat and other agricultural products from Italy to Malta.[69] Beginning in December 1807, the various American Embargo Acts contributed further to this upsurge because Britain now had to depend on substitutes from the Levant for some of the stopped American goods. According to a contemporary observer, Valletta was thronged with "a vast feverishly active multitude intent on commercial concerns and new enterprises", in which:

> The Maltese congratulated themselves on the banishment of want from the land of their birth; the foreigner benefitted by the hospitality of the island where he could trade in safety whilst the government not only derived a considerable revenue from this general activity, but prided itself upon the prosperity of the inhabitants.[70]

Malta's commercial success did not last. In May 1813, it was suddenly curtailed by an outbreak of plague. The impatience of Royal Navy commanders and the contempt of smugglers had resulted in the relaxation of the island's quarantine regulations, making the outbreak almost inevitable. At first, the medical authorities were loath to name the disease for fear it would disrupt the island's commerce. As a result, the plague did more damage than it would have, had preventative measures been taken sooner. It left the civilian treasury nearly bankrupt, and the new British governor was forced to impose special duties and higher taxes to increase the public revenue. His measures destroyed what little remained of the island's former prosperity.[71] Even so, it is unlikely that the trade boom would have outlasted the war, since British merchants would have then found it more convenient and cheaper to trade directly with their suppliers and markets. Malta was and would remain primarily a strategic asset to Great Britain, and the short-lived nature of its commercial prosperity had only served to underscore this point.

CHAPTER FIVE - NOTES

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45 Ibid., 185-8; and Shupp, 307-8.

46 Rose, Napoleon, II, 105-6; and Christie, 307-8.

47 Sultana, 4. One of the sources this author cites is a despatch of 27 June 1807 in CO 158/13. I was unable to consult this document at the Public Record Office because the page where it should have been had been removed from the file. Hardman also believes Eton was a spy, but admits he has no hard evidence, 495-502.

48 Coleridge, The Friend, IV, 568-9.

49 Ball to Penn, 13 December 1802, Add. MSS. 37268.

50 Representation of the Merchants of Malta concerning the Means of Extending its Commerce and Rendering it More Useful to Great Britain, February 1803, CO 158/7.

51 John Jackson, Reflections on the Commerce of the Mediterranean (London, 1804), 31-3 and 188-90.

52 Eton to Penn, 4 June 1803, CO 158/7.

53 Ball to Cooke, 1 February 1806, CO 158/11; and Eton to Windham, 11 October 1806, CO 158/12.

54 Eton to Windham, 13 March 1806, Co 158/12.

55 Hardman, 498. Sultana catches Hardman's mistake and notes it in footnote 3, p. 12.

56 Ball to Windham, 28 February 1807, CO 158/12.

57 Ball to Nelson, 7 November 1804, NMM, CRK/1. Gen/B.

58 The Merchants of Malta to Ball, 6 and 28 June 1806, CO 158/12.

59 Sultana, 43.

60 Ball to the Merchants of Malta, 14 July 1806, CO 158/12.

61 The correspondence between Ball and Windham in CO 158/12 and 13, in 1806-7, shows that the two disliked each other, and the contention that Ball would have been replaced can be read between the lines. The patronage issue is mentioned in: Wood to Wellesley, 24 October 1805, Dropmore, VIII, 402.

62 Ball to Cooke, 10 January 1808, CO 158/14.

63 Cooke to Ball, 5 April 1808, Hardman, 501.

64 Ball to Cooke, 30 June 1808, CO 158/13.

65 Ball to Castlereagh, 3 August 1807, CO 158/13.

66 Castlereagh to Ball, 22 March 1809, CO 158/14.

67 Ball to Castlereagh, 7 January 1809; and Ball to Cooke, 18 February 1809, CO 158/14.

68 Collingwood to Rodstock, 3 November 1809, Collingwood Memoirs, 554.

69 Bonaparte to Montaliver, 16 July 1810, Letters and Documents of Napoleon, II, 54.

70 Laferla, I, 75.

71 Hilda Lee, Malta, 1813-1914 (Malta, 1972), 21.

CONCLUSION

Magnae et invictae Britanniae
Melitensium amor et Europae vox
Has insulas confirmat, A.D. 1814
(To great and unconquered Britain, the love of the Maltese people and the voice of Europe confirmed these islands)
- Inscription, now covered, on the Main Guard portico, Palace Square, Valletta

When Ball died in 1809, Malta had become a de-facto part of the British Empire, but because of the exigencies of war, the British government had taken no official step to proclaim this. There were two main considerations in her not doing so. Firstly, while it was freely admitted that Ball's very personal, some would say idiosyncratic, regime had been a temporary expedient, the government had not yet given much thought to the form a more permanent administrative structure should take. Secondly, the war continued, and despite the defeat of the Third Coalition, Britain knew that Napoleon could be defeated only on the Continent by a broad based alliance. Any premature incorporation of captured colonies into the empire would be viewed by the potential allies as British perfidy, and be inimical to the cause of unity. Fortunately for Britain, the possession of Malta no longer raised the strong emotions it once had, and in the six years that led up to the conclusion of the war, she quietly consolidated her position there, while at the same time preparing the way for the de jure acceptance of this fact by the Continental powers.

Britain's colonial policy in the second half of the eighteenth century had experienced the dual crises of "abdication to democracy" in America, and corruption and misrule in India. In the period that followed, she sought to establish principles of colonial government that avoided both of these extremes. Practically speaking, this led to a rejection of crown colonies with flexible political structures of

"ascending gradation" and their replacement by more direct forms of rule.[1] Such thinking had an important influence on the way Britain would rule Malta. Even so, the island did not fit neatly into the imperial scheme. Although the majority of its inhabitants were regarded by the British as illiterate peasants, they were still basically European, and would have to be treated more circumspectly than the coloured peoples of the Empire. The Maltese had demonstrated the ferocity of which they were capable in 1798, after the French had violated their religion, and having themselves invited Britain to govern the island, they might prove to be equally as hot-blooded if the new rulers were too arbitrary. Moreover, a small but vocal group of Maltese noblemen led by the Marchese Testaferrata were actively lobbying in London for some sort of representative government, and their cause was used by the parliamentary opposition to embarrass the government. Despite these considerations, Malta's primary value remained as a naval base. The British government, therefore, asserted that military concerns would always have to take precedence over civilian ones, from which it followed that allowing the inhabitants any say in the running of the administration would be ill advised. The Duke of Wellington, at a somewhat later date, likened it to establishing "a free press on the foredeck of an admiral's flagship".[2] Furthermore, Malta lacked any appreciable economic resources that could have altered this situation in peacetime. Indeed, after the war, the upkeep of the island's civilian and military establishments threatened to become a drain on Britain's own exchequer.

In May 1812, Britain decided to establish a commission to make recommendations on Malta's future administrative structure.[3] Her decision was closely timed to developments on the Continent. Napoleon's

armies were in full retreat, and at Orebo, Sweden, Britain signed a treaty with Russia in July that became the basis for a new coalition. Significantly, the tsar now declared that he was no longer interested in seeing Malta restored to the Order of St.John.[4] Alexander's declaration removed the only really important foreign objection to Britain's possession of Malta, and paved the way for the island's formal annexation.

The commissioners arrived in Malta at the end of June. The Prime Minister had informed them that the Maltese were to have "as large a share of civil liberty as is consistent with the military circumstances"; however, such a concession was rather empty because the same despatch repeatedly stressed that the military authority must always supercede the civil government and be free from all restraint.[5] By August, the commissioners had finished their task. Their report was reflective of the imperial ethos of the time, and rejected the idea of a "Consiglio Popolare", or any other representative institution. In this, the commissioners were not only influenced by the military prerequisites of a naval base, but also by the administrative nightmares such an assembly had already produced in Corsica in 1794, and more recently in Sicily where Lord William Bentinck had tried, unsuccessfully, to introduce an "English Constitution".[6] The commissioners were quick to stress that such an assembly would not only weaken British authority, but would also not be in the interests of the majority of the inhabitants, since it would be controlled by venal aristocrats who would use it to oppress the people. In their self-assured paternalism, the commissioners asserted that the inhabitants of Malta wanted nothing more "than a more intimate and indissoluble union with Great Britain".[7] The only concession to democracy was the recommendation that an appointed council be established

on which handpicked Maltese would have some voice in the island's administration.

The British government objected to this suggestion, and decided that the island's government would be headed by a powerful Governor who would be the head of both military and civil establishments. He was to be the paramount authority on the island, and would be "limited only by the orders of the King".[8] The setting up of an advisory council was left to his discretion, and even then the council was not to be given the right to vote. Thereafter, Malta could be thought of as a type of crown colony since it remained subject to the prerogative of being legislated by Orders in Council. Before 1850, however, it was usually referred to as a "foreign dependancy" or "possession", and only after this date was the term crown colony sometimes used.[9] Thus, the administrative system finally decided on for Malta merely institutionalized the paternalism that Ball had originally envisaged.

After Russia's declaration that it no longer objected to Britain keeping Malta, Castlereagh, who had become Foreign Secretary, announced, in December 1813, the policy Britain would follow on the restoration of her captured colonies. The basic aim of this policy was similar to that sought during the latter stages of the negotiations at Amiens. Britain would consider her conquests as "objects of negotiation" only if a permanent settlement could be achieved. However, Malta and a few other stategic strongholds were now specifically excluded from those colonies that were negotiable.[10] When the triumphant allies met in the French capital in May 1814, Castlereagh had little difficulty in persuading them to sanction Britain's possession of Malta. Article VII of the Treaty of Paris confirmed:

> The Island of Malta and its Dependencies shall belong in full right and Sovereignty to His Britannic majesty.[11]

The brevity of this article compared to its counterpart in the Treaty of Amiens tacitly witnessed that Malta was no longer a matter of concern to any of the great powers except Britain.

At the Congress of Vienna, which followed in September, Malta's role was even more insignificant. Indeed, the island was not mentioned until the "tidying up" phase in the winter of 1815 after Castlereagh had returned to London.[12] No one now disputed Britain's right to Malta, but the Knights of St.John did try to wring some sort of compensation from her for its loss. In particular, they demanded that the Ionian Islands be handed over to them, and their case was put forward by Talleyrand at the personal request of Louis XVIII and Ferdinand IV.[13] The tsar was opposed to the suggestion, however, and his opposition was decisive in stiffening Britain's resolve not to give the Knights anything. Alexander thoroughly disliked the restored French king. He believed that Louis's sponsorship of the Order was an attempt to revive the special relationship between it and France, but as long as the Knights could not add to the strategic power of France, then Louis was welcome to them. Alexander's patronage of the Order had never been enthusiastic, and the presence of so many dispossessed foreigners at his capital had been somewhat embarrassing. His own nobility had since appointed themselves to the higher offices in the Russian Priory, and most of the foreign Knights had then gravitated back to Europe.[14] Thus, the Ionian Islands were denied to the Knights, and ultimately Britain assumed a protectorate over them. What is significant here is that she so downgraded her interest in the Mediterranean after the war that both these islands and Malta came to be administered by the same governor residing alternately in Valletta and

Corfu.

One of the most enthusiastic assertions of Malta's value to Britain was made by the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, in July 1813. After stating that, "The circumstances of the present war have occasioned a material change in the actual value of Malta, as well as in regard to the importance of our holding a permanent station in Malta", he went on to recite what had become the accepted litany of the island's importance as a fortified watchtower, a naval arsenal and a commercial emporium.[15] Inherent in his comments, however, was a certain irony that was not apparent at the time. With the war winding down, Malta's value to Britain was diminishing not increasing. Indeed, the ephemeral commercial boom had already been curtailed, and Britain had yet to assess her peacetime use for a naval base in the Mediterranean.

After the Congress of Vienna, Castlereagh was convinced that the balance of power in the Mediterranean could be maintained merely by keeping a small British presence at Malta.[16] Thus, Britain once again denied that the island had an intrinsic value, and claimed to be keeping it for negative and symbolic reasons; negative in that her possession kept others out, and symbolic as a way of showing that Britain would tolerate neither political interference in the Levant, nor any obstruction of the land routes to India. Russia would come to replace France as the main threat, but this anticipates events by more than a decade, and in the meantime Britain did little to maintain Malta as a credible military deterrent. The island's defences were allowed to deteriorate, and its garrison, naval stores and dockyard to run down. What had once been highly valuable in war time now became a financial embarrassement in time of peace. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Malta would again

assume an imperial prominence, but in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, it was a colony whose optimistic promise had not been fulfilled. This conclusion underscores the basic significance of Malta's strategic importance which had always depended upon the particular political and military circumstances of the time. This underlying principle was often ignored by those who extolled Malta's advantages, and to a lesser degree even by those who pointed out its shortcomings. Alexander Ball was correct in asserting that Malta was the place best suited for a British base in the Mediterranean, but the urgency of the immediate situation in which he operated left him oblivious to the long term reality that Britain's need for such a base would fluctuate greatly depending on the web of geo-political circumstances in which she found herself at any moment.

CONCLUSION - NOTES

1 Vincent Harlow, "The New Imperial System, 1785-1815," The Cambridge History of the British Empire (Cambridge, 1940), II, 129.

2 Charles Dimont, "Malta and the British Connexion," History Today. V (August, 1975), 549.

3 Liverpool to Oakes, 5 May 1812, Hardman, 517.

4 Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsky, Russia and Europe, 1789-1825 (Durham, N.C., 1947), 207-8; and Hardman, 525.

5 Lord Liverpool to the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Affairs of Malta, 1 May 1812, British Colonial Developments, 1774-1834: Select Documents, (ed.) V Harlow and F Madden, (Oxford, 1953), 127-30.

6 John Rosselli, Lord William Bentinck, the making of a Liberal Imperialist, 1774-1839 (London, 1974), 155-67; and Harlow, 176.

7 Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 30 August, Harlow 178.

8 Bathurst to Maitland, 28 July 1813, Hardman, 527.

9 Lee, 31.

10 C.K Webster, The Congress of Vienna, 1814-1815 (London,1919), 33-4.

11 Article VII, The Treaty of Paris, 30 May 1814, Consolidated Treaty Series, LXIII, 181.

12 Harold Nicolson, The Congress of Vienna (New York, 1946), 193-4.

13 Michel de Pierredon, Histoire Politique de L'Ordre Souverain de Saint Jean (Paris, 1956), 98.

14 Harrison Smith, "The Order of St.John of Jerusalem, Pope Pius VII, Czar Alexander and the Restoration of the Grand Master of the Order of Malta", Scientia, XXIV, 4 (1960), 164-176.

15 Bathurst to Maitland, 28 July 1813, Hardman, 526-9.

16 Lee, 66-7.

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