

# Malta Besieged & Black-market Intrigues

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Malta, just off the coast of Sicily in the middle of the Mediterranean, has always been of enormous strategic importance. As a result it has been claimed, and fought over, by empire after empire. Each time it was vulnerable to a blockade of essential food supplies because the tiny island — Malta is only 27 kilometres long — cannot possibly feed itself. Despite this history, going into World War II neither the British colonial government nor the Maltese people were prepared for the inevitable blockade. When rationing was imposed, however, the authorities deliberately turned a blind eye to those who were finding ways to evade the restrictions of the black market.

**Noel:** The island has, because of its geostrategic position, lying only a couple of kilometres away from Sicily, literally located centrally in the Mediterranean, to the extent that its history is by and large dominated by this ongoing occupation by the Romans, the Byzantines, the Phoenicians, the Aragonese, the Angevins, the Normans, the Knights of Saint John, and eventually, for over two centuries, part of the British Empire.

Evidence that dates back to 600, 700 years ago is already indicating that the island could not provide enough food to actually feed its entire population. In fact, in the early 16th century, we have a document that clearly states that if it wasn't for Sicily, Malta would never exist.

Even the official literature, which is primarily sponsored by the British government, so official reports, and among other things, report after report, they keep on echoing the same statement that unfortunately, not the necessary preparations were made for Malta to deal with the event of a blockade. But also the Maltese themselves seem to have this lack of understanding, seem to have failed to really understand, you know, the nature of rationing, the nature of being careful how much one should consume. Between 1938 and 1940, the agricultural output in Malta dropped by 50%. Now, you know, we

already started saying that this is an island that couldn't even produce enough food for at least three months out of an entire year for the whole population. And yet, on top of that, in time of war, the agricultural output continued to decrease.

**Jeremy:** So farmers were decreasing their productivity even with war on the way. What did the general public make of that?

**Noel:** Well, Jeremy, you have to keep in mind here that we're talking about a society which is increasingly becoming distant from the local supply and increasingly becoming dependent on importation. This had been happening for a good 400, 500 years. There is already this understanding that somehow or some way the British would still manage to sustain the island. Now, whether that decision or whether that knowledge was informed enough, that's a totally different argument. But clearly ... Like, for instance, one famous author that was writing about his youth during the war was flabbergasted to see many Maltese still consuming ice cream in the summer of 1941. The behavior or the consumer, or the consumption patterns still practiced by the Maltese does not reflect a responsible way of how to deal with the event of a total war.

**Jeremy:** So when did it become apparent that the the blockade, by which British supply ships were not getting through, when did it become apparent that this was a real problem? And how did how did the Maltese authorities respond to that?

**Noel:** The first indicators of a potential problem with supplies emerges in 1941, and by January 1941, we start to see for the very first time possibilities of rationing. So, sugar was rationed, coffee was rationed, soap and matches were rationed. So, technically speaking, I know that maybe people might say, you know, what's that? That's really nothing big. But coffee was the second most consumed drink in Malta. It is also very filling, and so especially for the poor people, to drink coffee was in some cases a substitute to solid foods. So rationing coffee was an immediate indicator that dark clouds are over the horizon.

However, in March, two convoys in March 1941, two convoys reached the island. And again, the supplies to a certain extent are restored for another seven months. So technically speaking, every time that the Maltese were about to be tested, it seems like somehow or some way, resources did reach the island. And so they kept the Maltese

afloat. So each time that the British government said, you know, let's be cautious about our consumption patterns, let's watch out on wasting products, the Maltese couldn't really understand what the government was talking about because even though things were not necessarily that happy — simply because, among other things, you know, the island is being bombed — So let's not forget that there's the psychological factor of fear, you know, the fear of dying tomorrow, just because the enemy is every other day bombing strategic locations on the island.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, but dying, dying tomorrow as a result of a bomb is very different from dying of starvation.

**Noel:** Exactly. I mean, it's a very slow death that that eventually, you know, it will definitely kill not your just your morale, but also it will definitely kill your body. So one side of it is actually this. However, by the end of 1941, by December 1941, it becomes increasingly apparent that things are not looking good. It was becoming increasingly difficult for ships to get to the island. The Luftwaffe is transferred to Sicily, so the German air force is now only a couple of miles away. And so the allies were struggling in trying to keep Malta fed. By the end of 1941 we also see for the first time the colonial government that actually introduces potato mash as part of the mixture to make bread. And now all of a sudden, the color of bread changed from white to brown, which was something that the Maltese have been dreaming of moving away from. So December 1941, the color changed, and that's when people started to wonder whether now the local government, the local British government, has actually lost control of the situation.

By March 1942, Malta is literally in a state of panic. It is very, very clear. The colonial government starts to pin down a number of quick decisions on how to negotiate supplies, makes a number of mistakes, creates a lot of anxiety among the populace. Yeah. It became, you know, by February 1942, it became really evident that things did go south.

**Jeremy:** So focusing on bread, what did the colonial government, what did they do to ration and control bread?

**Noel:** In the case of Malta, the supply of bread is imperative because we're talking about 60% of the spending for each and every family would go straight into buying bread. So the Maltese literally had a diet that depended exclusively on significant intakes of bread. In Malta the

colonial government knew that the last thing that needs to be rationed is actually is actually bread. So it is only in April 1942 that we start to see this significant drive in reducing the availability of bread supplies. To be precise, the calorific intake would drop literally by 50%. So one could imagine straight away how hunger would start to become a reality that the Maltese had to deal with.

The other element is the number of decisions that were taken to regulate not only bread production but also bread distribution. So bakers, for instance, all licensed bakers — and there were 123 licensed bakers on the island. ... It's good that we keep in mind that here we don't have an industrial bakery. Technically speaking these bakeries became almost state owned for the simple reason that the government would regulate every single thing. It would regulate the amount of paraffin being given to light up fires. There was a central depot from where wood could be collected. So there were a lot of things that have regulated the functioning of the baker. Every consumer had to register with a bakery. Every family member had to be registered with a specific bakery, meaning you had to buy bread from that bakery itself. The baker, based on the number of people registered with his bakery, would be given also a specific amount of grain, and this normally was a mixture of maize being imported from abroad, local grain and local barley. There was this significant shift that it took the Maltese a couple of weeks to get accustomed to. But at the same time, we will see that by April, May 1942, not only the supplies would become very limited, but also the way of how bread was being purchased would start to take a shape and form which from a legal point of view, should not have been happening. And here I'm referring to, you know, to the black market.

**Jeremy:** Well now, you talk about black market intrigues, this purchasing. That should not have been happening. How did people, consumers and bakers, how did they get around the regulations?

**Noel:** This is a very small island. There is a very strong sense of patron client relationships, you know, friends of friends. It's not how much you know, that matters, it's who you know that really matters. And at the end of the day, the sense of community has always been very strong when faced with such adversity. The Maltese would, especially for those with money in their pocket ... And I have to say this, there are many people who had money in their pocket for a simple reason that there was full employment during the war, but

very little to spend it on. I mean, so they couldn't buy shoes or clothes or whatever because there was none of it. Right? People were willing to negotiate ways of how to pay a higher price for the same product. And, you know, it's either that or hunger. You have bakers that would even use anything that is available to them, any seeds that is available to them to actually increase the output and sell bread of a poorer quality to anyone who was willing to pay the money.

You have farmers who, according to regulations, had to declare the amount the tonnage of grain produced, and instead would cheat and they would hide sacks of grain. Now, I hear you. It's illegal. If you were caught, you were ... You would end up having to pay a fine for it. But, you know, many gambled with this. And so what they did was they they actually negotiated ways of how to present the local government with an amount that was not truly a true reflection of the output.

People, especially from the harbour area, would would walk to the rural parts of the island and they would, by paying a significant amount of money, sometimes exchanged for gold, gold necklaces, gold rings, gold earrings, just to acquire that little amount of food that could get you through the day. So there was this element of under the counter kind of business happening and in many cases it was very clear, it was just like kind of in your face kind of business arrangements. And some would report this to ... Especially for those who failed to maybe strike a good business transaction, they would report to members of parliament. And then the members of parliament, we get to know about this because members of parliament would actually comment about it in council meetings. And they would clearly state that the government is doing nothing about this, that the government is poorly and continued to poorly deal with the issue of food supply. And yet in spite of all of that, what would you do? Would you report someone for asking twice the price of a loaf of bread? No you won't. Why? Because tomorrow you're going to go back to that same person, and you are going to pay the same amount of money. And you know what? You will not be suffering hunger by the end of the day, or else you would for a part of the day, you would not be thinking about your stomach.

**Jeremy:** But you make the point that it's not so much that the government wasn't doing anything as that they actually maybe decided not to do anything because they recognized that maybe these black

market intrigues, as you call them, maybe that was the best way to ensure that people were being fed.

**Noel:** By April 1942, things are looking really grim on so many different levels. To start with, in April, we also have the colonial government that for the first time would mention the phrase “target date,” meaning that the situation is so bad that the colonial government is already contemplating possibilities of surrendering the island. So forget a little bit about bread, and forget a little bit about the amount of grain and the black market. The situation is that in the absence of ammunition, in the absence of fuel, and finally in the absence of food, if one of these ... Try to imagine this being a tripod. If one of the legs gives in, the whole system was going to collapse. The target date is crucial because in the in the absence of fuel, in the absence of ammunition, and last but not least, the absence of food, the British colonial government was ready to give up the island to the fascists and the Nazis. It was as simple as that.

So literally, they lived day by day. So the situation in particular with food, it gets to a point where anyone who had some food reserves hidden somewhere, it made a lot more sense for the colonial government to close an eye and allow that food to come out from these hidden stores and to be sold to the general public at a price that the same general public was willing to pay. Frankly, what would you expect a government to do when you know that there are some reserves which are hidden, you don't know where they are hidden. You don't know who's negotiating all of this. Are you going to spend time investigating and finding out the culprit, or are you going to allow your people to continue to supply food for themselves?

And this was not just the government here we're talking about, but we're also talking about the courts of law, we're also talking about the police. We're also talking about the church. I mean, part of the research talks about these two girls that stole a loaf of bread, a family of seven. And then, the following day they went to ... These two girls went to the priest to confess. And they asked him whether he would like to have a piece of bread. And he said, how can I take bread from your mother with a family of seven? And then she said, well, I stole the bread. And instead of getting cross with her, the priest looked somewhere else. I mean, he turned his face. It's like, you know, it's like, what you do in face of these dire circumstances, what would you do? You do whatever it takes to actually survive. So at all levels in society,

at all levels in society, there was these number of months, four months, all the way until November 1942, when the government would try to negotiate the seriousness of whoever was negotiating in the black market. This was not an attempt to play down the government's concern about the black market. On the contrary, the government was significantly concerned about it, but also tried to use it to the advantage of the general public and the defence of the island.

**Jeremy:** You make the point that quite a large convoy arrived, and that after that there seemed to be a greater readiness to punish people who were reported for various black market activities. So does that reflect a kind of change in the circumstances that now maybe the target date had gone far enough away that people were beginning to relax a little.

**Noel:** While the island had an amount of fuel and an amount of ammunition to keep its chin above the water again, grain becomes becomes a problem. So now it is very clear that if by the 9th of September, if nothing is going to happen, then definitely the one big challenge that they were going to have is actually food. The person that actually saves Malta as far as food is concerned is the Bishop of Gozo. Because Gozo, we've mentioned Gozo only in the beginning of this interview, but Gozo plays a very important part in supplying food to Malta, even though the numbers were relatively meager. But here we have almost 6000 tons of grain that was being stored in Gozo by independent farmers. So they had more than enough to feed themselves. And what happened was that the bishop, Bishop Gonzi, who eventually was elevated to a sir as a result of his contribution in convincing many Gozitan farmers to let go of their grain supplies so that they could feed Malta.

There was this likelihood that Malta could again start to stand on both feet. The colonial government was no longer going to take this nonsense of abusing the system to fatten one's pocket at the expense of the Maltese consumers. So after November 1942, we will start to see this renewal of taking significant action against anyone who was abusing from the system. And here again, therefore, we see the role of the police being involved. We see the role of the courts of justice being involved, actively involved in intercepting and punishing anyone who was taking advantage of the black market situation. And so we see this wave propagating, the need to report anyone who is taking advantage of black market. And then again, the restoration of vigilance

and the courts of justice. Very interesting court cases, court decisions taken against people who ... even stealing four or five tins of condensed milk from the colonial government supply stores was also treated as a major crime.

**Jeremy:** To see it in context, it seems that what's going on is that instead of being governed by the legality or illegality of what's going on, people seem to take a more of a kind of moral immoral judgment. And that while there really isn't much food it's a question of being ... of morally allowing people to do what they can, and then it becomes illegal to do exactly the same things when there's enough food.

**Noel:** Exactly. In my research, I do discuss the issue of guilt. Would one feel guilty of selling at exorbitant prices? And on the other hand, would one feel guilty of spending hard-earned money to acquire food? If you see black market, uh, arrangements happening in front of you, what would you do? Would you report that person? Would you report the person that clearly is stealing from others? And the answer to that was no, Many felt that that this was, you know, the right thing to do. This is not a question of reporting people to the authorities for abuse. However, the mindset changes significantly by the end of 1942, but primarily in 1943, when the same people that at one point or time in another ... in 1942 would look somewhere else, would turn a blind eye for such illegality, in 1943 were among the leading exponents in reporting individuals that were taking full advantage of the situation. So even behaviourally, these friends of friends kind of mindset would go through these spaces of recognising what's moral and what's immoral. And again, I believe that this is also the feeling that the colonial government had for particular situations which eventually were considered to be outright illegal.

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