

# French occupation of Malta

The **French occupation of Malta** lasted from 1798 to 1800. It was established when the Order of Saint John surrendered to Napoleon Bonaparte following the French landing in June 1798. In Malta, the French have established a constitutional tradition in Maltese history (as part of the French Republic), granted free education for all, and established the freedom of press, such as with the publication of the *Journal de Malte*.<sup>[2]</sup>

The French abolished nobility, slavery, the feudal system, and the inquisition.<sup>[3]</sup> The only remaining architectural reminder of the French occupation is probably the defacement of most coat-of-arms on the façades of buildings of the knights.<sup>[4]</sup> The Maltese soon rebelled against the French and drove the French garrison into Valletta and the Grand Harbour fortifications where they were besieged for more than two years. The French surrendered Malta when their food supplies were about to run out.<sup>[5]</sup>

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## French invasion of Malta

On 19 May 1798, a French fleet sailed from Toulon, escorting an expeditionary force of over 30,000 men under General Napoleon Bonaparte. The force was destined for Egypt, Bonaparte seeking to expand French influence in Asia and force Britain to make peace in the French Revolutionary Wars, which had begun in 1792. Sailing southeast, the convoy collected additional transports from Italian ports and at 05:30 on 9 June arrived off Valletta. At this time, Malta and its neighbouring islands were ruled by the Order of Saint John, an old and influential feudal order weakened by the loss of most of their revenue during the French Revolution.

### French occupation of Malta

*Occupation française de Malte* (French)

*Occupazione francese di Malta* (Italian)

*Okkupazzjoni Franciża ta' Malta* (Maltese)

1798–1800



Flag

**Motto:** *Liberté, Égalité*  
Liberty, Equality



Map of Malta (orange) and France (green)

<b>Status</b>	Military occupation
<b>Capital</b>	Valletta
<b>Common languages</b>	French, Italian, Maltese
<b>Religion</b>	Roman Catholicism
<b>Government</b>	Military occupation
<b>Military Governor</b>	
<b>Legislature</b>	Commission of Government

The Grandmaster Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim, refused Bonaparte's demand that his entire convoy be allowed to enter Grand Harbour and take on supplies, insisting that Malta's neutrality meant that only two ships could enter at a time.

On receiving this reply, Bonaparte immediately ordered his fleet to bombard Valletta and, on 11 June, General Louis Baraguey d'Hilliers directed an amphibious operation in which several thousand soldiers landed at seven strategic sites around the island. Many of the French Knights deserted the order (although some fought for it valiantly), and the remaining Knights failed to mount a meaningful resistance. Approximately 2,000 native Maltese militia resisted for 24 hours, retreating to Valletta once the city of Mdina fell to General Claude-Henri Belgrand de Vaubois. Although Valletta was strong enough to hold out against a lengthy siege, Bonaparte negotiated a surrender with Hompesch, who agreed to turn Malta and all of its resources over to the French in exchange for estates and pensions in France for himself and his knights. Bonaparte then established a French garrison on the islands, leaving 4,000 men under Vaubois while he and the rest of the expeditionary force sailed eastwards for Alexandria on 19 June.

<b>Historical era</b>	French Revolutionary Wars
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• French invasion</li> <li>• Established</li> <li>• Maltese rebellion</li> <li>• Surrender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9 June 1798</li> <li>11 June 1798</li> <li>2 September 1798</li> <li>5 September 1800</li> </ul>
<b>Currency</b>	Maltese scudo <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>ISO 3166 code</b>	MT
<b>Preceded by</b>	<b>Succeeded by</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History of Malta under the Order of Saint John</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gozo (independent state)</li> <li>Malta Protectorate</li> </ul>

## Reforms

During Napoleon's short stay in Malta, he stayed in Palazzo Parisio in Valletta (currently used as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs). He implemented a number of reforms which were based on the principles of the French Revolution. These reforms could be divided into four main categories:

### Social

The people of Malta were granted equality before the law, and they were regarded as French citizens. The Maltese nobility was abolished, and slaves were freed. Napoleon decided to set up a government ruled by 5 Maltese people that would govern Malta. Freedom of speech and the press were granted, although the only newspaper was *Journal de Malta*, which was published by the government. Political prisoners including Mikiel Anton Vassalli and those who took part in the Rising of the Priests were released, while the Jewish population was given permission to build a synagogue.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Administrative

All of the Order's property was surrendered to the French Government. A Commission of Government was set up to rule the islands, and it was made up of the following people:<sup>[2]</sup>



Capitulation of Malta to general Bonaparte



Plaque on Palazzo Parisio referencing Napoleon's stay there.

Office	Officeholder
<b>Commission de gouvernement</b>	
Military Governor	<u>Claude-Henri Belgrand de Vaubois</u>
Commissioner	<u>Michel-Louis-Étienne Regnaud</u>
President of the Civil Commission	<u>Jean de Boisredon de Ransijat</u>
Secretary to the Commissioner	Coretterie
Member	<u>Don Francesco Saverio Caruana</u> (Canon of the Mдина Cathedral)
	Baron Jean-François Dorell (juror of the university)
	Dr. Vincenzo Caruana (secretary of the archbishop and president of the court)
	Cristoforo Frendo (notary)
	Benedetto Schembri (magistrate)
	Paolo Ciantar (merchant)
	Carlo Astor
<b>Commission des domaines</b>	
Member	Martthieu Poussielgue
	Jean-André Caruson
	Robert Roussel



The Main Gate of Birgu, which had its coats of arms defaced during the French occupation

Moreover, Malta was divided into cantons and municipalities. Each was run by a president, secretary and four members:<sup>[2]</sup>

### Malta

Office	Officeholder
<b>Canton of Malta - Western Municipality (<u>Valletta</u> and <u>Floriana</u>)</b>	
Secretary	Aimable Vella
Member	Etienne Libreri
	Nicolas Effner
	Camille Sceberras
	Philippe Torriggiani
	Xavier Portoghese
<b>Canton of Malta - Eastern Municipality (<u>Birgu</u>, <u>Senglea</u> and <u>Cospicua</u>)</b>	
Secretary	Francois Roux
Member	Joseph Maurin
	Marc'Antoine Muscat
	Jean Dalli
	Gaetano Bertis
	Gaetano Pisani

<b>Canton of <u>Mdina</u>, <u>Rabat</u> and <u>Dingli</u></b>	
President	Grégorio Bonici
Secretary	Gaetano Vitale (notary)
Member	Saverio Bernard (doctor)
	Joseph Bonnici (lawyer)
	Paul Scriberras (farmer)
	Antonio Gionanni Pietro Vitale
<b>Canton of <u>Żebbuġ</u></b>	
President	Stanislao L'Hoste
Secretary	Joseph Brignone (notary)
Member	Francesco Azzopardi (farmer)
	Gaetano Fournier (farmer)
	Luigi Briffa (farmer)
	Saverio Bonanno
<b>Canton of <u>Qormi</u> and <u>Luqa</u></b>	
President	Stanislao Gatt (pharmacist)
Secretary	Joseph Casha
Member	Luigi Saverio Grech (notary, secretary for Luqa)
	Emmanuele Micallef (doctor)
	Alberto Camilleri (farmer)
	Horace Ellul (farmer)
<b>Canton of <u>Naxxar</u>, <u>Mosta</u> and <u>Għargħur</u></b>	
President	Andrea Micallef (notary)
Secretary	Giovanni Maria Borg (lawyer)
Member	Francesco Falzon (doctor)
	Luigi Bezzina (lawyer)
	Giovanni Gafa (lawyer)
	Tommaso Chetcuti (lawyer)
<b>Canton of <u>Birkirkara</u>, <u>Lija</u>, <u>Balzan</u> and <u>Attard</u></b>	
President	Luigi Caruana (notary)
Secretary	Francesco Saverio Zarb (notary)
Member	Joseph Attard (priest)
	Gregorio Gatt (farmer)
	Pietro Cammenzuli (farmer)
	Angelo Grech (farmer)
<b>Canton of <u>Siggiewi</u>, <u>Qrendi</u> and <u>Mqabba</u></b>	
President	Michelangelo Azzopardi (doctor)
Secretary	Francesco Farrugia

Member	Carmelo Saliba (farmer)
	Simone Spiteri (farmer)
	Giuseppe Magro (farmer)
	Nicolas Camilleri
<b>Canton of <u>Żejtun</u>, <u>Żabbar</u>, <u>Għaxaq</u> and <u>Tarxien</u></b>	
President	Paolo Mallia (doctor)
Secretary	Gregorio Mifsud (notary)
Member	Alessandro Zammit (doctor)
	Antonio Busuttil (farmer)
	Angelo Castagna (farmer)
	Giuseppe Montebello (farmer)
<b>Canton of <u>Żurrieq</u>, <u>Safi</u>, <u>Kirkop</u> and <u>Gudja</u></b>	
President	Gaetano Sajdon (doctor)
Secretary	Giovanni Battista Sajdon
Member	Gaetano Dalli (farmer)
	Alessandro Damato (farmer)
	Giovanni Cassar (farmer)
	Filippo Castagna (farmer)

### **Gozo**

French Commander: Jean-Louis-Ebénézer Reynier

Office	Officeholder
<b>Municipality of the City of Gozo</b> ( <i>Rabat, <u>Għarb</u>, <u>Sannat</u> and <u>Xewkija</u></i> )	
President	<u>Saverio Cassar</u> (archpriest)
Secretary	Giovanni Cassar
Member	Saverio Busuttil
	Giuseppe Bondi
	Francesco Pace
	Saverio Pace
<b>Municipality of <u>Caccia</u></b> ( <i><u>Xagħra</u>, <u>Żebbuġ</u> and <u>Nadur</u></i> )	
President	Vincenzo Cauchi (priest)
Secretary	Benigno Cutajar
Member	Fortunato Grech (priest)
	Bartolomeo Busuttil
	Giovanni Maria Sapiano
	Francesco Attard

A National Guard was also set up, with 900 men.<sup>[6][2]</sup>

## Educational

Primary schools were to be set up in the main towns and villages, while 60 students were to be allowed to study in France. The University of Malta was to be renamed *Polytechnique*, and scientific subjects were to be taught there. However, none of these reforms were actually implemented due to the short duration of French rule.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Church-State relations

The church's extensive property on Malta was taken over by the Government, and religious orders were only allowed to keep one convent each. The Inquisition was also abolished, and the last inquisitor was expelled from the islands.<sup>[6]</sup>

Later on, French troops began to loot church property, and this was one of the main reasons of the Maltese uprising.

## Maltese uprising

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The French rapidly dismantled the institutions of the Knights of St. John, including the Roman Catholic Church, and the Maltese people were not happy about this. There were economic problems and the French government did not pay wages or pensions anymore, and began taking gold and silver from banks and palaces of the Order.

Church property was looted and seized to pay for the expedition to Egypt, an act that generated considerable anger among the deeply religious Maltese population. On 2 September, this anger erupted in a popular uprising during an auction of church property, and within days thousands of Maltese irregulars had driven the French garrison into Valletta and the Harbour area. Valletta was surrounded by approximately 10,000 irregular Maltese soldiers led by Emmanuele Vitale and Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana, but the fortress was too strong for the irregulars to assault. The Maltese built siege fortifications surrounding the harbour area to bombard French positions.<sup>[7]</sup>



The silver gate in St. John's Co-Cathedral was painted black by the Maltese so that the French troops would not realize that it was made of silver and melt it down into bullion.

Help from Britain arrived later in the year and, in 1799, Captain Alexander Ball was appointed Civil Commissioner of Malta. The French garrison in Valletta finally surrendered to the British on 5 September 1800, and were taken to Toulon aboard British ships, with Malta becoming a British Protectorate.<sup>[6][2]</sup>

## Gozo

On 28 October 1798, Ball successfully completed negotiations with the French garrison on the small island of Gozo, the 217 French soldiers there agreeing to surrender without a fight and transferring the island to the British. The British transferred the island to the locals that day, and it was administered by Archpriest Saverio Cassar on behalf of Ferdinand III of Sicily. Gozo remained independent until Cassar was removed from power by the British in 1801.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Further reading

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