

Title: Malta And Russia: From The Knights To The Present Day

Course: A dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the Higher National Diploma in Tour

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## Declaration Of Authenticity For Higher National Diploma Students

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Title of Long Essay:

**MALTA AND RUSSIA: FROM THE KNIGHTS TO THE PRESENT DAY**

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Long Essay and that it is my original work.

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## Abstract.

This dissertation seeks to explore the connection between two old European cultures - the Russian and the Maltese.

Through the analysis of primary and secondary documents, site visits and interviews with key people related to this history the author was surprised to discover that the relationship is broad and deep. Not only does the Malta-Russia relationship cover powerful themes but there exist several interesting physical and cultural artifacts that make these themes come alive.

The author believes that many are unaware of the extent of the relationship and that it is therefore underappreciated and undervalued. An understanding of this history could provide the basis for developing a specialised tourism product targeted at the Slavic consumer.

It is the objective of this essay to highlight the key themes of such a product and to suggest how these can be explored and connected to the physical place through guided tours.

## Acknowledgments.

The author would like to thank her tutor Fr Marius Zerafa OP for his patience, inspiration, insights and enthusiastic support for this work. Mr Andrey Muraviev, the director of the Russian Cultural Centre was very helpful in providing information on current-day events and an understanding on the state of the contemporary relationship between the two countries. Fr George Mifsud the parish priest of the Greek Catholic Church was generous with his time and sharing his knowledge. He also kindly allowed the author to view the invaluable icons in his care.

A word of thanks is also due to the guides at the various locations mentioned in this work. They happily opened their doors and discussed the topic with warmth and generosity supporting both the author's hypotheses at the need for such a tourism product as well as her desire to join the fraternity.

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## Literature Review.

Notwithstanding the 400-year history between Malta and Russia the study of the relationship appears to be a very recent occurrence. With the notable exception of the relatively recent and excellent *A Journey Through the Centuries. Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations*. Zolina, E. (2002), Progress Press Company Limited, Malta, 2002. the literature exploring the subject is very thin. The book itself was produced and edited by Dr Zolina who was the former Director of the Russian Cultural Centre. It contains the writings of several people alive at the time who had some influence and/or interest in the Russo-Maltese relationship. These authors included the author's own tutor Fr Marius Zerafa OP. Several other snippets of information are available in contemporary journals and papers as well as some primary material at the National Library (Bibliotheca) of Malta. These give intriguing (and sometimes difficult to access) information on the relationship. Although there is some reference to the mention of Malta in Russia, not much is known on the writings or primary literature that may be available to bona-fide researchers in Russia. There are however some tantalising glimpses into the possibility of intriguing material there. Clearly given the history of the relationship between the two countries it is the author's feeling that the state of research and written documentation on the subject is in its infancy.

## Research Methodology.

This work commenced with the author's hypothesis that the relationship between Malta and Russia was immeasurably deeper and more interesting than is currently generally known or appreciated. This hypothesis had been formed over a 18year period of living on the island which became her home. During this time the absence of written information or basic general knowledge on Russia was apparent. It seemed to the author that the 'Iron Curtain' hadn't yet quite lifted on the knowledge of History, Culture and the Arts between the two countries.

So, whilst the hypothesis was formed from personal observation and anecdotal evidence this work gave the author the opportunity to explore the subject methodically.

It commenced with a series of discussions with Maltese and Russian friends (which confirmed the hypothesis) then led to a series of discussions with highly knowledgeable and interested individuals in the field. Chief amongst these was Fr Marius Zerafa OP who was the founder of the Maltese-Soviet friendship society which he formed way back in 1974 in the dark days of secular Soviet Union when it was almost inconceivable that a Catholic priest would lead the charge to break down barriers between the two nations. Fr Zerafa was instrumental in pointing the author in the direction of literature and people of interest to this area of study. The most important amongst these were Mr Muraviev and Fr Mifsud (mentioned in the acknowledgements). These discussions not only supported the hypothesis but seemed to generate support and enthusiasm for this work by very willing and able individuals.

Following a period of intense discussions with Fr Zerafa a literature review was undertaken. As mentioned, the literature in this area proved to be, sadly, relatively light. Some interesting articles appeared, unsurprisingly during the eventful Bush-Gorbachev summit of 1989. That period generated much press some of which covered not only the political aspects of the period. These provided some interesting leads and suggestions which eventually made their

way into this work. However, sadly, that period was just a ‘quick shake of the carpet’. The dust soon settled after the event and the interest in things Malta-Russo was all but forgotten.

Naturally this work is limited in both its scope and endeavour. Not only was it limited by time, but the author was acutely aware of the one-sided nature of the research. Except for a brief review and discussion with guides on a personal visit to the Hermitage in St Petersburg work was undertaken by the author only in Malta. It would have been fascinating to have done a parallel substantive study in Russia.

However, the author can say with some certainty that even this limited work has revealed that her hypothesis is correct. The Maltese-Russo history has surprising depth and interest. There is much material that is relatively unknown and that could provide great interest to the student of Maltese-Russo relationship.

This work has barely scratched the surface. It is hoped that, apart from inspiring the author to further this work, it may prove a small source of inspiration to others interested in this area.



## Introduction: In The Beginning.

It is easy to think that the relationship between Malta and Russia is a recent phenomena. In post-cold war Europe and with the recent economic success of both Russia and Malta we are now becoming used to hearing Russian spoken on our streets. Yet the relationship between the two countries goes back almost 400 years. Though separated by distance, language and quite distinct cultural traditions the connection between both countries is surprisingly vibrant and yet it is not well known.

The dissertation explores the following themes: *Power, Politics & the Arts and Refugees, Royalty & Religion*. It seeks to contextualise them in a half day tour in Valletta. As will be apparent, San Anton Palace in Attard may also be a good candidate location for a secondary tour.

This work follows the connections between Russia and Malta based on the accounts of historians and researchers whose work is available in Malta (primarily) and Russia. To mention a few of these physical locations: *The National Library of Malta*; *The National Archives of Malta (Santo Spirito, Rabat)*; *The Hermitage State Museum (St Petersburg)*; *The Russian Cultural Centre* in Valletta and private collections in Malta.

The relationship between Russia, one of the largest and most populous countries in the world, and Malta one of the smallest, is dynamic and yet, despite the millennia of history of both cultures, surprisingly young. The first reference in Malta on Russia was relatively recent - less than 400 years ago. It happened in 1543, when Grand Master Juan de Homedes issued a safe-conduct for the repatriation to his native land of a Russian (*John of Russia*) who was rescued from Turkish slavery. This would be followed by correspondence between the leaders of both countries. Yet it would be another 150 years however before the first official contact took place. This happened in May 1698 when Peter the Great sent a letter to Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful in an attempt to establish formal relations with the Knights.<sup>i</sup>

Since that time the connections between the two countries have waxed and waned in large part in response to the power dynamics of Europe. The historical links between the two

countries involved scores of individuals, institutions and places. Russia, with its size and power was an important driver of European history. Malta, thanks mostly to its strategic location and to its powerful European/Global occupying powers (the Knights/the British) became, more often than not, an important but perhaps unwitting player in European power politics.

## Politics, Power And The Arts.

One of the first attempts at alliance between Russia and Malta occurred, perhaps unsurprisingly, under Peter the Great in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Known as *The Great Reformer* by some (and *The Destroyer of Traditions* by others for his transformation of Russian society which he had considered lagging behind western countries) he invited the Knights of Malta to join a military alliance against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>ii</sup> Russia was a land-locked country and was forever attempting to gain access to the sea to project its influence. This was perhaps the reason why contact between Malta, so far south in the Mediterranean, took so long to happen. The Russian Czar wanted to be able to sail to the south from the Black Sea. The Grandmaster, Ramon Perellos y Roccaful was constrained by a policy of neutrality (except for fighting the infidels) and did not accede to his request for alliance against the Ottomans. This resulted in relations remaining somewhat strained for another half a century when an exchange of congratulations and official information between the Russian Emperors and the Grand Masters occurred.

Relationships picked up dramatically in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian fleet in the Mediterranean won an important victory at the battle of Chesme in 1770. Soon after, the Crimea was conquered under Catherine the Great in 1783-84. Malta then acquired its first ever official representative from Russia, George Cavalcabo (Marquis). These events were to have dramatic changes to Malta-Russo relations. Soon Russian ships of the Mediterranean fleet began to be repaired in Malta, Russian Naval Officers began to be trained in Malta and Maltese Naval officers were being recruited to serve in the Russian Navy. In 1789 Catherine the Great requested assistance and a Knight of Malta, Giulio de Litta was sent to St Petersburg to help the Russian fleet to sail around the continent of Europe and into the Mediterranean. Litta so excelled that at the age of only 26 he was awarded a general's rank. This made him the youngest general in the history of the Russian Empire.

Malta has a beautiful artistic momento as a reminder of this happy early period of Russo-Maltese relations: a lovely portrait of the Russian Empress, Catherine the Great that had been sent to Grand Master De Rohan in 1789 directly by Catherine herself.<sup>iii</sup> It was painted by the famous Russian artist Dimitry Levitsky and hangs today in the President's palace in Valletta.

Grand Master de Rohan's letter of grateful acceptance to her Majesty gives an indication of the warmth of relations between them:

*"Je ne parlerai pas à Votre Majesté de l'empressement avec lequel tous mes chevaliers sont venus admirer cette image auguste d'une Souveraine dont le nom sera toujours cher à mon ordre; mais j'oserai vous assurer, Madame, que cette faveur est pour moi un monument trop précieux de votre estime, pour que je ne me fasse pas un devoir d'en conserver à jamais la mémoire."*<sup>iv</sup>

Since its arrival in Malta, the portrait has left the palace only twice. In the spring of 1935, it was sent to London for the Exhibition of Russian Art. The second time was during the second world war, when Malta was being mercilessly bombed and some of the most valuable paintings, including Levitsky's portrait of Catherine were moved for safe-keeping from the Valletta palace to the *Inquisitor's Palace at Girgenti*.<sup>v</sup>

A somewhat entertaining episode in relation to the painting's history occurred soon after the momentously-historic Bush-Gorbachev summit of 1989 in Malta. In 1991 the portrait was diligently and laboriously packed for a friendship-cementing trip to Russia. It was taken to the airport and had to be returned, soon after, to the palace after it was discovered, to much dismay, that it could not fit through the door of the aircraft assigned to take it over.

Following Paul I's accession in 1796 the Order gained an exceptionally favoured position at the Russian court. Dramatic events were to mark this period in Russo-Maltese relations – most notably the rise of Napoleon and the French Revolution. These were to result in a Russian 'Grandmaster' (who was controversial and never officially recognised).

In 1798, following the capitulation of Malta to the French under Bonaparte, Paul I became the *de facto* Grand Master of the Order of Malta. This happened when, on 18 June 1798 Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch left Malta for Trieste, effectively abandoning the islands to the French. Following the protests of the Russian priory, Paul I accepted the Order under his 'supreme direction' and he was forthwith declared Grandmaster by them.

A person of particular interest stands out from this period. Guglielmo Lorenzi was a Corsair and a Russian officer who lived in Malta for almost 50 years. He made the defence of the faith his life mission. Lorenzi had become wealthy enough to build and commission a 54 gun ship. His name instilled fear in his Turkish enemies and inspiration amongst his men. Lorenzi also became a Maltese patriot. He lost his life to the French in the Maltese uprising of 1799. He was captured and shot alongside one of Malta's most famous patriots Dun Mikiel Xerri. At the Malta Maritime Museum Lorenzi's name is kept alive through information panels, documentation and discussions.

The departure of Grandmaster Hompesch had a negative effect on an aspect of Maltese heritage. Bonaparte allowed him to depart with the most important relics of the Order. This resulted in the permanent loss to Malta of some important works of art including the Byzantine icon Our Lady of Philermos, the right hand of John the Baptist and a fragment of the True Cross.<sup>vi</sup>

Unfortunately, Paul's Grand-Mastership did not last long and upon his death his son and heir, Alexander 1, was not as interested in the Order as his father. He gave up the title of 'Protector' in 1803 and by 1817 the Order was officially no longer in existence in the Russian empire. But Alexander 1 did keep the relics! Right up until 1923 and the Bolshevik revolution these icons were on exhibit at the *Winter Palace Cathedral* in St Petersburg. The Icon Our Lady of Philermos vanished and turned up as recently as 1993 in Montenegro where it is still located.<sup>vii</sup>

Today one can see a memento from this period. In the *National Library of Malta*, amongst the portraits of prominent figures, hangs a portrait of Emperor Paul I by Mastny.<sup>viii</sup> The emperor is dressed in a Preobrazhensky regiment uniform. He wears a Maltese Cross as well as the blue sash and insignia of the Order of St Andrew. Evidence of the blossoming of the relationship was not only to be found in Malta. The ancient Cross of La Valette would later form part of the crown treasury of the Russian Empire. The precious cross, one of the relics of the Order, had belonged to Grand Master Jean Parisot de La Valette (1557-68), the founder of the new city of Valletta.

During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russo-Maltese relations took a back seat to the super-power rivalry as Soviet Russia (and its allies) and the United States (and its allies) vied for

supremacy. Relations between the two countries were indeed out in the cold during this ‘*Cold War*’ period. The freeze was punctuated by small steps to thaw the relationship.

One of the most notable and probably most unlikely was the setting up of the *Maltese-Soviet Friendship Society* in 1974 by, amongst others, a Maltese Dominican Friar Marius Zerafa OP. Fr Zerafa’s PhD thesis in Rome several years earlier had been on Karl Marx.<sup>ix</sup> As a friar sworn to a life of poverty, he could perhaps relate to Marx’s philosophies better than most.

In 1974 Fr Zerafa was one of the first western priests to be allowed to say Mass in Soviet Russia. The local papers carried the startling heading: “*Maltese Priest says Mass in Moscow Undisturbed!*”.<sup>x</sup>

Fr Zerafa went on to become the Director of Museums of Malta - a position he retained for over 20 years. During this time, he did much to advance the artistic and cultural relations between the two countries. His interest has not waned. Following a meeting with Mrs Gorbachev in 1989 at the historic Bush-Gorbachev he was successful in bringing to Malta an important work of art *Interior of St John’s* by French artist Antoine Favray that was kept in *The Hermitage*. It was exhibited at the *Russian Centre* and the *National Museum of Fine Arts* in Valletta.

Fr Zerafa has very recently been successful on a project that he has been working on for about 30 years: the agreement by the Russian authorities to bring to Malta an exhibition of another French artist *Jean-Pierre Houel*. His watercolours are also kept at *The Hermitage* and have never been to Malta before. *Houel’s* work is exceptional in that it documents views of Maltese life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in great detail and in particular around famous Maltese monuments such as the ancient temples.

On the south side of the entrance to Valletta overlooking the magnificent *Grand Harbour* is the colonnaded *Upper Barrakka Gardens* laid out on part of the original bastions of Valletta. On 2 February 2016 Prime Minister Dr. Joseph Muscat unveiled a plaque at the Gardens. The plaque commemorates arguably the two most significant events in the Russo-Maltese relations of the Modern Era and that was to have global impact: the *Yalta Conference of 1945* and the *Malta Summit of 1989*.

The first foreshadowed the start of the *Cold War* and the second its decisive end.

The historic Bush-Gorbachev meeting of December 2-3, 1989 took place on a Soviet military vessel in Maltese waters. Malta was selected for the summit because of its historic role as a melting pot of north and south, its geographic location and the fact that, at the time, it was non-aligned.<sup>xi</sup> The historic announcements associated with this momentous event were made at the historic *Mediterranean Conference Centre* – the Knight's *Sagra Infermeria* once the longest room in Europe that once housed the most advanced hospital of the period. The group accompanying President Gorbachev and his wife, included his entourage of some 200 security and journalist personnel. They stayed aboard the tourist Soviet liner *Maxim Gorky* in Marsaxlokk harbour.

In Malta, President Gorbachev said that

*“Malta is reminding the world of its role as a crossroads of languages and culture, a point of contact for nations and civilisations..... may the meeting of the USSR and the USA near the shores of Malta, and with the help of Malta, give an impetus to forward movement in the direction of peace.”*<sup>xii</sup>

This wish became a reality early in the afternoon of the second day of the summit meeting. The Kremlin spokesman, Mr Gerasimov, told reporters that the *Cold War* officially ended at 12.45 p.m. when Mr Bush and Mr Gorbachev ended their second day of talks.

The year after this momentous event, in 1990, the *Russian Centre for Science and Culture* was opened in Valletta. Today this centre has the primary responsibility for bringing Russian Culture and Arts to Malta and facilitating exchanges of Maltese Arts to Russia. The building in which it is located has an intriguing history.

It belonged to a senior knight of the Order of St John who had acquired some fame during the period of the Great Siege of 1565: Sir Oliver Starkey. Sir Oliver's story takes us back to 1558 during a period when the Order in England had been suppressed. Queen Elizabeth I's unsuccessful attempts at rejuvenating the Order resulted in the British Langue of the order dwindling to only two knights by 1565: Sir Oliver Starkey and James Shelley. Both of these left England and moved to Malta where Grand Master Jean de Valette took Starkey as his

secretary and confidante. The English knight played a very important part in the Great Siege of 1565 and lived to serve with distinction under three other grandmasters after de Valette, i.e. Pietro del Monte, Jean l'Eveque de la Cassière and Hugues de Verdalle known as Verdala. It is not surprising then that when Valletta was built Starkey had a house of his own constructed in the city. It still stands today in Merchants street. Starkey died in 1588 at the age of 63, and because of the part he played in the Order he is said to have been buried in the crypt of St John's co-cathedral, a stone's throw away from his house.

Starkey's house had been long-derelict by 1987 when it was acquired by the Russian government who restored and refurbished it. What happened next made the Maltese press as reported in the Times of Malta.<sup>xiii</sup> The house occupied by the Russian Cultural Institute appeared to have another tenant. One who would not let the new occupiers sleep: the ghost of Sir Oliver Starkey. The reputed presence of this spirit was so powerful that Dr Zolina, the Director of the Centre went to great lengths and some expense to calm him.



## Refugees, Royal Births And Religion.

The greatest connection between Maltese and Russian cultural exchanges arguably happened in the performing Arts.

The most memorable in terms of Russian contribution to Maltese arts was the role of a Russian princess. *Princess Putyatin* was the daughter of a Russian Prince from the Romanov family (the rulers of all Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) who found herself in Malta as a 13-year-old refugee fleeing from the Russian Bolshevik Revolution. She became famous in Malta for introducing Russian Classical Ballet and much of her exposition was in one of Malta's most notable buildings: the *Royal Opera House* in Valletta. There is a bust of her in the Fine Arts Museum in Valletta.

The *Royal Opera House* was designed by a renowned English architect, Edward Middleton Barry (who had also designed the *London Houses of Parliament*) but who never set foot on Malta. It quickly became appreciated as one of Valletta's most beautiful and iconic buildings. It also became one of its most infamous for its ability to generate political debate – not so much for its aesthetic qualities but as a bomb site. The building was built in 1866, suffered a major fire but restored in 1877, and almost completely demolished by aerial bombardment in 1942. It remained a bomb-site for 71 years until 2013 – almost as long a period as it was a functioning theatre!

Princess Putyatin first appeared at the *Royal Opera House* on June 02, 1929 in a celebratory concert for the birthday of King George V. She married a Maltese, Edgar Tabone, who came from a distinguished Maltese family and opened a ballet school in Sliema where a street there to this day bears her name. A little-known fact is that Malta's immediate past president, *Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca*, is indirectly related to Russian royalty. Her great-grandfather married Edgar Tabone's aunt.<sup>xiv</sup> Making her a distant cousin by marriage of the Romanovs.

Whilst Princess Putyatin was arguably the most famous Russian refugee she was by no means the first or the last one. In fact, Malta hosted many Russian refugees some of which left their mark in the Arts and Culture.

Probably one of the first and largest groups of refugees occurred in 1919 when 700 arrived on our shores. As it turned out many were representatives of the Nobility and of the Russian Imperial Army. Amongst them, apart from Princess Putyatin, were well-known Russian artists, like Nikolay Krasnov (a famous architect and designer), Boris Edwards (a well-known sculptor) and Dmitry Tolstoy (a writer). Konstantin Voyensky a famous Russian military historian left an interesting historical account of his time which is now preserved in the *National Library of Malta* in Valletta. Voyensky can be considered a real polyglot, mastering French, German, English, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian and Japanese, as well as Latin and Classical Greek, though his main passion was history.

An important contributor to Maltese-Russo understanding was *Vasily Rudanovsky* a Russian who had been in the employ of the British services since at least 1918 in Alexandria. In 1920 he was proposed by the British to ‘take charge’ of the Russian Refugees in Malta a position he took up on November 18, 1920. *Rudanovsky* is of particular interest as he was also a linguist who published at least two books on the history and grammar of the Maltese language.<sup>xv</sup> By his own account the books were meant to ‘stimulate his Maltese friends to the study of Maltese grammar’.<sup>xvi</sup>

During their stay the Russian community was split up: some refugees were housed at the former St Ignatius College (a building which still stands today at the back of St Ignatius Chapel in Old College Street, Sliema). Others were housed at Verdala. This group left their mark in more ways than one. They would meet on the foreshore in Sliema in a place that is now very popular with swimmers and whose name now bears witness to their experience: *Exiles*.<sup>xvii</sup>

In Valletta, one can find a rich source of evidence of this period in the *National Library* housed in the historic *Bibliotheca* building on Republic Street. Here, apart from the manuscripts of the memoirs of Princess Putyatin one can find the diaries of Voyensky (four volumes covering three almost uninterrupted years), official correspondence petitions and others.

A notable cultural exchange between Malta and Russia was held soon after the heady-days of the Bush-Gorbachev summit. In 1991 the committee of the newly-founded *Russian Centre*,

organized a full-scale visit to Russia. Participating in the visit was a group of actors and chess players. It also included an exhibition of contemporary art, a photographic exhibition, and a collection of handicrafts as well as a number of manuscripts from the *National Library of Malta* related to contacts between the Order of St John and Russia.

Another place with strong links to Russian Culture and nobility is the aptly named '*Russian Chapel*' located in the private residence of the President of Malta at *San Anton Palace* in Attard.<sup>xviii</sup> The chapel is a beautiful space with a dome supported by four columns. The Russian connection with San Anton palace dates back to the 19th century. The palace was then the official residence of the Duke of Edinburgh (the second son of Queen Victoria) who was related to Russian Royalty by marriage. The Duke's wife, the Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna, was the daughter of Emperor Alexander II of Russia. They lived at San Anton in the mid-1870s when the Duke was serving as a captain in the Mediterranean Fleet and again from 1886-89 when he was commander-in-chief.

*San Anton Palace* became famous for giving birth to Russian Royalty. In 1876 Princess Victoria Melita was born to the Grand Duchess. The young royal came to be known in Malta affectionately as *Princess Melita*. Interestingly she was a descendent of Peter the Great and became the "Tsarina-in-exile".

Maria Alexandrovna would have used the chapel at San Anton Palace as a place of worship in the Orthodox faith. Maria Alexandrovna was a devoted Orthodox Christian the main faith in Russia at the time. The place continued to be called the "*Russian Chapel*" long after Russian Royalty had left the Palace. In fact, it is still unofficially known by this name today (even though on the official plan of San Anton palace and gardens it is merely shown as "Protestant")

In April 1919 the Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna of Russia, sister-in-law of Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna fled to Malta from the Bolshevik revolution, she lived for a short period in San Anton Palace when the chapel was once again used as briefly as a Russian Orthodox Chapel. Her son, Emperor Nicholas II and his family were assassinated in the Russia.

In the Chapel is a beautiful icon of St George. It was given to President Doctor Mifsud Bonnici in December 1995 by *General Valentina Tereshkova*. *Tereshkova* was famous as the first woman pilot-cosmonaut. On July 16, 2000, the icon of St George was taken to Gozo for the first time and carried in solemn procession during the celebration of the Feast of St George one of the two principal Saints venerated in Gozo's capital, Rabat.

Another church of great significance to Russians in Malta is the *Church of our Lady of Damascus* in Archbishop Street Valletta (the so-called *Greek Church*). Named after what is arguably one of the most significant religious icons in Malta, the icon of our *Lady of Damascus*. The icon is reputed to be over 1,100 years old and of a type which goes back to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century in a style known as '*Eleousa*'. This icon was reputedly an object of special devotion and veneration by La Valette himself. He is said to have prayed in front of the icon before the Great Siege of 1565 and that he and his knights offered their gratitude to the icon for that great victory. The icon was subject of conservation works in the 1930s in Malta and in the 1960s in Rome. Conservation works were carried out as recently as 2019.

The *Church of our Lady of Damascus* serves as the principal religious centre for Russian Orthodox Christians in Malta. Homage to the Icon is given by four large Iconostasis within the church painted by Russian artist *Grigory Maltzeff* (1881-1953).

The history of the icon of *Our Lady of Damascus* is an interesting and significant one that is intimately bound with that of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. It was brought by the Order at the request of Greeks who accompanied the Knights from Rhodes to Malta when, overcome by the Turks, the Order had to leave Rhodes in 1523. Between 1523 and 1530 the icon travelled with the Knights to Candia, Messina, Civitavecchia, Rome and Viterbo. It was brought to Malta in 1530 with the other treasures of the Order. Grand Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam placed it in the church of St. Catherine in *Borgo del Castello*, in present day Vittoriosa. It remained there till 1587 when it was solemnly transported, in the most sumptuous galley of the Order, across the Grand Harbour to the new capital city of Valletta, where it was placed, for the veneration of the faithful, in the newly-built Greek Church dedicated to Our Lady of Damascus.

Surprisingly, it is one of the few important relics that the Knights did not take with them when they left the island in 1798.

The Church of Our Lady of Damascus is a Greek Catholic Church, but it serves various religions from all over the world and especially the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Catholic Church (also known as the Eastern Catholic Church) is the second-largest Christian Church and one of the oldest religious institutions in the world. Although Orthodox it receives Catholics of different denominations. It is recognised by the Roman Catholic Church as a legitimate Catholic branch.

## Russia And Malta Today.

The Russian Maltese relationship has developed far and fast. Almost 400 years ago the countries had their first encounter. Barely 30 years ago Malta was the location for arguably the most important meeting of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century between the two most powerful men in the world: the presidents of Russia and the USA.

In between there has been much exchange: sometimes quietly, sometimes with more fanfare but almost always on the back of Art and Culture.

Today Malta has opened itself to the world in a way that was inconceivable only just 30 years ago. It's joining of the European Union in 2004, the advent of the internet and cheap travel has broken down much of the isolation that Malta has historically experienced. The collapse of the Soviet Union, that prevented much of the movement of Russian peoples outside the 'Iron Curtain', allowed Russians to discover Malta in the last 30 years.

Today Slavic peoples make their way to Maltese shores not just as tourists but to learn English, study at our university and even to work and settle here. Some open their own businesses and increasing numbers are purchasing property. In Malta one can now find Russian supermarkets, listen to Russian spoken on the street, learn Russian and fly directly between Malta and several destinations in Russia on multiple airlines. There two Russian boarding schools in Malta for Russian students.

Russian culture and Russian interactions with Malta and the Maltese has never been stronger and the interest between the two cultures is at an all-time high. Notwithstanding this, there is not much by way of tourism product that is dedicated specifically at highlighting the historic, cultural and artistic relations between the two cultures.

It is hoped that this essay is a first step at highlighting the multi-dimensional and rich traditions that exist between the two peoples and how this may be presented in a practical manner in one or a series of dedicated tours.

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### *Personal Interviews*

Fr Marius Zerafa. Personal Interviews on 20 September 2018, 16 November 2018, 20 January 2019, 15 February 2019 and 8 March 2019.

Fr George Mifsud, Parish Priest, Greek Catholic Church. 15 May 2018, 25 September 2018.

Mr Andrey Muraviev, Director of the Russian Cultural Centre. 9 May 2018, 21 Dec 2018.



## Appendix.

- i. Giovanni Bonello, *“Early Russo Maltese Connections: from ‘Joanne de Rusia’ to Boyar Sheremetev”* as quoted in *“Malta and Russia. Journey through the Centuries. Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations.”* Compiled and Edited by Ekizaveta Zolina. P3.
- ii. There was the historical Russia of ancient Muscovy, which had been very different from the West, before Peter the Great forced it to conform to European ways in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Russians were uncertain about their place in Europe (they still are), and that ambivalence is a vital key to their cultural history and identity. Living on the margins of the continent, they have never been quite sure if their destiny is there. Are they of the West or of the East? Peter made his people face the West and imitate its ways. From that moment on the nation’s progress was meant to be measured by a foreign principle; all its moral and aesthetic norms, its tastes and social manners, were defined by it.
- iii. In this iconographic heritage, Catherine’s portrait by Dimitry Levitsky which today decorates the Ambassadors’ Hall in the President’s Palace in Valletta, has a special importance. This allegoric portrait was well-known in art literature. However, no direct study of the portrait was ever carried out by Russian experts because of geographical distance and political conditions. Yet even in the 19th century Russian art critics and historians knew about the existence of the portrait.

On the occasion of the holding of the exhibition dedicated to 300 years of Russo-Maltese historical connections in Valletta (November 1998), the present author had the privilege to visit Malta and to study the portrait in detail, thus filling the gap existing so far.

Dimitry Grigoryevich Levitsky decided to paint an allegorical full-length portrait of the Empress. This picture included a tent lying in the shadow of an olive tree in the background. The Russian Empress is shown wearing an antique costume with a fringed tunic on top of a purple mantel, with ermine trailing behind her. Catherine is wearing sandals and her head is decorated with a laurel garland. Her military armour is sparse and purely decorative: a light cuirass emphasises the imperial dignity while a splendid plumed is just visible behind her back.

A black and brown sash comes over her right shoulder and the diamond-shaped star of the Order of St George, the highest distinction of Russia, decorates her chest. She is wearing the golden chain of the Order of "St Andrew the First-Called" around her neck. Catherine is holding a sheeted sword decorated with Laurel leaves. An inscription on the shield in the lower part of the portrait reads "And thy sword, entwined with laurels, and sheathed, halted the war."

- iv. *"I do not need to tell Your Majesty how much the knights were enthusiastic to come and admire this august image of a Sovereign whose name will be always dear to my Order, but I would dare to assure you, Madame that this favour for me is too precious a monument of your esteem, which makes me commit myself to preserve this memory forever."* Zolina Op Cit. Pg.12
- v. Girgenti Palace is a small modest country house near Siggiewi. It was built in 1625 as the summer residence of Malta's inquisitor, and is therefore also known as the Inquisitor's Palace. It is now an official residence of the Prime Minister of Malta. In World War II, some of the collections of the Palace Armoury were stored at Girgenti Palace for safekeeping.
- vi. The icon was considered by the knights as the Protectress of the Order. It got its name from Mount Philermos in Rhodes. In Malta the icon was placed first in the church of St Lawrence at Birgu, then in the church of Our Lady of Victories, and finally in the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta.

The main depositary for the Maltese relics was the Grand Cathedral of the Winter Palace. The inventory of the Winter Palace Cathedral provides a detailed description of the relics and their precious decorations that were made at the order of Emperor Paul I. They include the following: The icon of the Mother of God called of *Philermos*, painted by St Luke the Evangelist. The oklad is made of gold as is the frame itself with four cast cherubs' heads at the corners. The face is covered with polished glass fixed by a cast golden string. The halo is made of gold, decorated with two rows of diamonds, and with the Maltese cross in the background. On the halo there are nine red rubies with diamond tops; between them there are sixteen large and small diamond flower patterns with two large diamonds at the ends. The neck is decorated with two rows of diamonds; in the middle there are four diamond-studded sapphires and three large diamonds. Below them hang seven sapphires with diamond heads;

from the chin to the frame there are two strings of diamonds. Everything is intact. The value is 24, 930 roubles.

Fragment of the True Cross of the Lord. Held in square golden shrine, In the lid there is polished glass fixed with a golden string with lock and golden key. On the frame in the corners there are four diamond flowers and between them in the upper section there is a Maltese cross in enamel. On the frame sides there are three rubies in golden settings studded with diamonds. The sides of the shrine are decorated with golden embossed garlands. The value is 6,740 roubles.

The right hand of St John the Precursor. Held in a square oblong golden shrine. The lid incorporates polished glass fixed with a golden string with a lock golden key. On the frame in the corner there are four diamond stars. On the top there are two cast angels holding the enamel Maltese cross. At the sides of the frame there are eight sapphires in golden settings surrounded with diamonds. In between there is a golden embossed ornament. The sides of the shrine are straightened by a golden embossed garland. The value is 14,600 roubles.

vii.     *"Maltese Relics in Russia"*. Yury Pyatnitsky. *"Malta and Russia. Journey through the Centuries. Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations."* Compiled and Edited by Ekizaveta Zolina. Pg. 303

viii.    The National Library of Malta, often known as the Bibliotheca, was founded by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc. It has been a legal deposit library since 1925, and it has the largest collection of Melitensia along with that of the University of Malta. The library also contains the archives of the Order of St. John, the Università of Mdina and the Università of Valletta.

The origins of the National Library of Malta go back to 1555, when Grand Master Claude de la Sengle decreed that all books belonging to deceased members of the Order of St. John were to be passed to the Order's treasury.

The library is housed in a late 18th-century neoclassical building in the city centre, close to the Grandmaster's Palace.

The Polish-born Italian architect Stefano Ittar was commissioned to design a new library building in 1786. It was completed in 1796, but it remained empty for some years due to the French invasion of 1798. It was eventually inaugurated on 4 June 1812, and it became known as the Malta Public Library.

- ix. Fr Marius J. Zerafa, OP, S. Th.L., & Lic., Dr.Sc.Soc., BA Hons. (London). Associate of the Royal Historical Society. Former curator and Director of Museums (Malta). Was co-founder of the Soviet-Maltese Friendship Society. Presently chairman of the Archdiocesan Commission for Sacred Art. Lectures at the University of Malta as well as abroad. Has written on Developments in the doctrine of private property (1954), The genesis of Marx's realist interpretation of History (1962), etc. Invested Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France).
- x. The local paper was Union Press. Marius Zerafa "*Cultural exchanges between Russia and Malta: personal reflections.*" "*Malta and Russia. Journey through the Centuries. Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations.*" Compiled and Edited by Elizaveta Zolina. Pg. 419
- xi. From the Constitution of Malta: "*Malta is a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance.*"
- xii. Paul Naudi. *The Bush-Gorbachev Summit (1989): another milestone in Russo-Maltese Relations.* "*Malta and Russia. Journey through the Centuries. Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations.*" Compiled and Edited by Elizaveta Zolina. Pg. 430
- xiii. "*We were told that it was at the beginning of 1993 that Dr Elizavetta Zolina, the centre's director and her husband began hearing strange noises during the night. Those where noises of a crowd of people talking and walking against the background of the handling of glasses and cutlery if it was all coming from a dinner party. At first this might not have been that frightening. It became so when the centre's director accosted her only neighbour to ask him about the late parties he was holding which were so noisy. To her amazement the neighbour replied that he was not holding any*

*parties and that he too was hearing the same noises which he thought were coming from the Centre. It was then that Dr Zolina began to Attribute those noises to ghostly manifestations in which he did not believe until then. But had there been any doubts in her belief, those were dispelled when they began to materialize mysterious gusts of wind and banging of doors, with the barking of her dog which followed the pattern already shown of dogs always sensing the presence of ghosts. Both Dr Zolina and her husband were now frightened and no one would have blamed them had they abandoned those promises once and for all. But their fear was overcome by a stronger determination to find a solution to their situation. By now they believed the house had been haunted by its original owner Sir Oliver Starkey so they tried to learn all they could about him. They said they had traced his will where it was found out that he has left money's to Masses to be said for the repose of his soul, which probably enough were either never said or discontinued during the 400 years since his death. So the centre's director and her husband paid their own money to have Masses said regularly, and according to them, the manifestations calmed down. So much so that there is no more fear in the house, and the occupants say they consider the ghost that haunts it as a member of the family.*

*Both occupants are to be complimented for having dealt with this matter in the way they did. May the ghost haunting their premises be eventually subdued altogether. But until it is, it will feature as another ghost of Malta that may still be manifesting itself even now."*

- xiv. <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20140404/local/New-President-has-link-to-Russia-s-royal-family.513486>
- xv. *Quelques Particularites du Dialecte Arabe de Malte* (Beyrouth 1909) which he had sent to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and *Maltese Pocket Grammar* (published in Malta in 1910).
- xvi. Elizaveta Zolina Konstantin Voyensky – a friend of Malta and fervent admirer of its glorious past.

- xvii. Michela Spiteri. "*The Russian Exiles of St Ignatius*". Times of Malta. December 10, 2017.

<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20171210/opinion/The-Russian-exiles-of-St-Ignatius-Michela-Spiteri.665283>

- xviii. The Russian Chapel in a private garden at the residence of the President of Malta at San Anton palace is one of the major attractions and treasures in the Palace. It is a fine space with a dome cupola supported by four columns. San Anton Palace was originally the private country house of the *provençal* knight of the Order of St John, Antoine de Paule, who became Grand Master in 1623.