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| Strategic decisions and consequences of the attack on fort st elmo during the great siege  May 2019 | Andrew DAgata  Higher National Diploma Tour Guiding |

# **Authenticity Form**

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY FOR HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA STUDENTS

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**Course:** Higher National Diploma in Tour Guiding

**Title of Long Essay:**

**Strategic decisions and consequences on the attack of Fort Saint Elmo during the Great Siege**

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

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another qualification of this or any other higher education institution.

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# **Abstract**

As the title of the dissertation states the research sets out to discover what the strategic decisions of the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John were during the attack of Fort St Elmo. Following the strategic decisions, the consequences of those decisions on both sides during the attack will be discussed. The general findings of the dissertation showed that both the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John did the things that they had planned to do but if things had been planned differently and actioned immediately, the result would have been different. In the chapters regarding the strategic decisions and the consequences include research which was carried out among local tourist guides about the tours of Fort St Elmo. The primary aim of the research was to establish which of the information mentioned in my dissertation is included during their tours.

# **Acknowledgements**

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# **Introduction**

The Great Siege of 1565 was a turning point when talking about both the history of the Knights of St John and Maltese Islands. When trying to understand the Great Siege, one has to understand that it was fought between the Knights of St John and the Ottoman Turks. One also needs to understand how the two fighting forces decided their plan of attack, throughout the progress of the Great Siege. The Siege lasted four months with the main battles taking place at Fort St Elmo, Fort St Michael, Senglea and Birgu.

The reasons behind the attack of Fort St Elmo by the Ottoman Turks was that they had anchored their fleet at the southern port of Malta of Marsascirocco (today known as Marsaxlokk). Admiral Piali Pasha, who was in charge of the fleet, wanted that Fort St Elmo be taken first so that the fleet could be anchored close by to the army and thus in case of need the latter would not need to travel far to board their ships. With that decision taken instead of the attack on the city of Mdina never materialized. Following that decision, the Ottoman Turks knew that Fort St Elmo would not last very long if attacked. To their mind, the attack on the Fort would only last 2, or 3 days at the most. For those reasons the Ottoman Turks were determined to take the fort and the peninsula due to the strategic position that they had, and which would play an important role during the remainder of the Great Siege, especially for the Ottomans.

The attack on the fort and its capture after one month cost the Ottomans very high casualties and huge losses of ammunition during the one - month siege. During the battle of Fort St Elmo, the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John both suffered consequences, which in the end led to the continuation of the Great Siege which at the end saw the knights emerging victorious. The research will be focussing on the one – month siege of Fort St Elmo. The fighting that took place between the Knights of St John, who were helped by foreign troops as well as the Maltese Militia, and the Ottoman Turks will be discussed in the coming chapters.

# **Literature Review**

The main objective in this part of the long essay is to give a general idea of what was written about the attack on St Elmo. This will be done by consulting several books and journals and thus comparing the information found and analysing what was encountered regarding the topic of this long essay.

In the book The Siege of Fort St Elmo of R.J.D Cousin (1955) we learn about what took place during the one – month siege which occurred from the 23rd of May 1565 to the 23rd of June1565. The story recounts the actions of the Siege written as a diary similar to what Francisco Balbi did following the Great Siege. In his book Cousin states (1955, title page) ‘ “A brave story can never die of age” ’. Unlike Balbi’s book, this one gives more detail of what happened every day during the siege as well as small details which Balbi did not include in his diary

Another important book about the Great Siege is The Siege of Malta by Ernle Bradford (2003) which is a translation of the original account of the Great Siege which was written by Francisco Balbi in 1568 in the form of a diary. On the back cover of the book, we read that ‘ “This is the true account of everything that happened from day to day in the Siege, as I myself saw it” ’ Bradford (2003). It is thanks to this book that one can fully understand what truly happened during the Great Siege, and we should count ourselves lucky that we have an eyewitness’ day – by – day account of the Great Siege.

According to the journal The Great Siege of Malta: from a Turkish point of view (Galea, 1965), there aren’t a lot of books about the Great Siege which are written from the Turkish point of view. This journal does exactly that. The author talks about the reason for this, explaining that usually most of the books are written from the victors’ perspective. In his journal Galea states that the Knights were considered lucky when receiving reinforcements since such reinforcements could take place without hindrance due to the lack of agreement between the Ottoman leaders about the best way to carry out the attack. In view that the information covered in this journal treats the siege from the Ottoman Turks’ point – of – view, it also helps to see how the Ottomans planned the invasion.

In the book the Great Siege of Malta: The Epic Battle between the Ottoman Empire and the Knight of St John by Bruce Ware Allen (2017), the author was able to tackle the geopolitical context, the strategies and also the tactics of the Great Siege. Allen also gives a good general perspective of the attack on Fort St Elmo and thus makes the reader understand what happened during the Great Siege. Furthermore, the author gives a good background to what happened before the attack on the Fort started. Allen (2017, back cover) describes the Great Siege of Malta as ‘ “The definitive battle in the clash of empires that has defined Europe for 500 years” ’.

Another book that was consulted was The Great Siege of Malta (1565) and the Istanbul State Archives by Arnold Cassola (1995). However, while it was expected that the book would give an account of the siege from the Turkish point of view, unfortunately the author provides little information about the attack on St Elmo. The author mentions the reasons for the lack of information, primarily due to the fact that the greater part of the information was not that easy to find as most of the information had been destroyed. The author also explains that certain information regarding the Siege of 1565 was found in the Imperial Council.

# **Methodology**

## **Chapter 1**

## **The Strategic decisions taken by the Ottoman Turks during the attack on Fort Saint Elmo.**

Throughout every siege, there are always the strategic decisions that need to be taken by the attackers as well as the besieged. In this chapter, the strategic decisions that were taken by the Ottoman Turks during the attack upon Fort St Elmo will be looked at.

Following the arrival of the Ottomans, the leader of the army and that of the fleet who were Mustapha and Piali Pasha respectively, called for a meeting of the war council to decide on how they were going to act throughout the siege of Malta. During the meeting both leaders ended up at loggerheads. In fact, Mustapha Pasha wanted to attack the northern part of Malta thus preventing any reinforcements from reaching the Knights. But on the other hand, Piali wanted to attack Fort St Elmo because he wanted to gain access to the Marsamuscetto (Marsamxett) Harbour so that the fleet would have better protection. The reason for the attack was that Piali knew that the fort protected the entrance to the main harbours of Malta. At the end of the meeting, the final decision was taken to attack Fort St Elmo instead of the northern part Malta. While they were discussing the attack on the Fort, they asked how long the attack would last, and the answer was that it would only last for a few days. Little did they know that the attack on the Fort was the biggest mistake they make throughout the siege of Malta. In fact, the attack would last much longer than was originally thought.

Following the meeting, the Ottomans started to prepare for the attack on the Fort. Prior to the attack the Ottomans had placed gun placements on the highest part of the Sceberras peninsula and also on the side which faced the Marsamuscetto Harbour. The attack on the Fort began on the 28th of May. The Ottomans had prepared themselves for the attack by scouring the Fort which was considered the best thing to do. They did this in order to find the best place/s from where they could exploit weaknesses in the Fort. The bombardment of the Fort lasted for 4 days until the arrival of Dragut.

Upon his arrival, Dragut, met with the leaders of the army to be updated about the situation, since he was not with them from the beginning of the siege. Following the meeting, Dragut decided to do what was not done by the leaders of the army and that was to set up a gun placement on the Hermitage of St Mary. Following that decision, he also ordered Mustapha to place a gun post at Gallows point. These decisions could have easily been done by the leaders but unfortunately, they were only focused on defeating the Knights and the Maltese soldiers who were in the fort. In fact, Mustapha and Piali Pasha were convinced that the fort could not hold out for long. This is possibly why they hadn’t thought of setting up the gun placements where Dragut wanted them to be.

Following the setting up of the new gun placements, which would help the Ottomans conquer the fort much quicker than it would have taken them if they continued to bombard the fort from the Sceberras Peninsula, they decided to attack the ravelin of the fort. To their amazement the ravelin was capture within a short time due to the lack of men defending it, upon which Mustapha ordered that another gun placement be set up on the ravelin. Furthermore, he ordered that the height of the ravelin be increased as Mustapha had received word that this would demoralize the defenders. In fact, the latter knew that the use of the ravelin would make it easier for the Ottomans to capture the fort. In fact this should have been done quite early during the attack. Indeed, if this had been done, one wonders what would have happened and how it would have changed the outcome of the attack. In the end, this manoeuvre helped them to establish a direct line of fire upon the knights within the fort, thus restricting the area from where the Knights could organise their defence. In turn, this gave the Ottomans the upper – hand to be able to end the attack even quicker.

To conclude the attack on the fort, the Ottomans launched a general assault during which they constantly caused false alarms which left the Knights little or no chance to rest and regain their strength. Finally, all these decisions put together helped the Ottomans in one way or another to end the attack on the Fort. Despite the continuous bombardments which resulted in the reduction of space which the Knights could use, the attack lasted a whole month. I believe that the Ottomans should have implemented at the very beginning of the attack all the measures that they took on a staggered basis. If these things had been done, the attack would have lasted only a few days, just as they had predicted.

## **Chapter 2**

## **The strategic decisions taken by the Knights to repel the Ottoman Turks.**

In the first chapter, the attack on Fort St Elmo was discussed, which focussed on how the Ottomans besieged the Knights who were stationed within the Fort. This chapter, will look at how the Knights withstood the attack and did their best to repel the Ottomans from taking the fort.

When the Grand Master found out that the decision to attack the fort had been taken, the first thing that was done was to evacuate the women, children and old people from the fort and to leave only those who were able to fight, and the necessary supplies were sent over to the fort (Bradford, 2003). The evacuation of women, children and old people was the right thing to do since otherwise there would have been more fatalities in addition to those who would be engaged in fighting.

Throughout the ongoing attack on the fort, during which the Ottomans kept on their incessant bombardment, the knights knew that if they decided to attack the enemy they would face certain death. Thus while the bombardment was going on, they took the opportunity to use the time available before another attack from the enemy troops, planning out where to position themselves during the attack and who would be in charge of troops. Most of these orders or decisions where made by the bailiff of the fort who during the attack was Luigi Broglia. This was done due to the fact that the post of Colonel Mas was the most attacked. The reason for this was that the Ottomans were able to build a bridge in the ditch in that area, thus allowing direct attacks on that part of the fort. Thus if the knights had been much more attentive they could have prevented the building of that bridge which would have given the Turks less chance of gaining access.

As already mentioned, during the first days of the attack before the addition of the gun placements at Hermitage of St Mary and Gallows Point, the fort had suffered heavy damages. So the knights decided that it was important to do the necessary repairs to the fort following the heavy bombardment that it had suffered throughout the first few days of the attack. If they had planned the necessary preparations beforehand, it would have saved them some time in getting ready in the case of an assault by the enemy. The knights lost the ravelin on the day when they were restricted in space which they could use, because if they had gone in the open area they would have been targeted and killed. This happened because the knights had not placed enough men to protect it and personally, I believe that this is what had marked the end of the attack. If the knights had been more careful this could have been prevented and they could have inflicted more damage to the enemy by prolonging the attack on the fort.

As mentioned previously, while the bombardment of the fort was going on, the knights used their time to plan out what they would have done when the fort was not being bombarded. Apart from that, when the Knights were not planning out the decisions on how they were going to attack the Ottomans, they used the period of the bombardment to rest and replenish themselves either by sleeping to regain their strength or even eating what they had available in the stores of the fort. Throughout the bombardment, several inspections were done on the fort by the knights who were sent over by the Grandmaster to see how long the Fort would be able to last. The inspection of the Fort was followed by that of the soldiers within the fort. This inspection was done to check the readiness of the knights during the attack, and this was held in the Piazza D’armi. This was to ensure that the knights and the Maltese militia were prepared for any eventuality. When the Ottomans had taken the ravelin and increased its height thus reducing the areas which the knights could use, the latter had to use the areas where the enemy could not fire upon them (Bradford, 2003).

Following the general assault which the Knights had repulsed, they still felt that the end of the fort was near. Following the assault the best the knights could do was to try to hold on to the fort but, in the end, the inevitable happened: the fort fell to the Turks. If the knights had done more to protect the fort from the heavy bombardment, avoided the fall of the ravelin and prevened the Turks from adding the two additional gun placements which bombarded the sides of the fort, the fort would have never fallen to the enemy.

## Chapter 3

## The Consequences of the attack on the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John

Throughout every siege, there are always the strategic decisions and the consequences of those decisions. In this chapter, the consequences on both the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John will be dealt with.

The attack on Fort St Elmo during the Great Siege had reasons behind it particularly since it was Piali Pasha who insisted that it should be attacked. He knew that if the fort fell, the fleet of the Ottomans would be able to anchor safely in the Marsamuscetto Harbour. Following this decision that Piali suggested one can say that the misfortunes of the Ottomans had just started.

The other mistakes that ensued after the Ottomans had started the attack of the Fort cost them dearly in terms of men and supplies, apart also the days lost in not planning the attack of the island even better. These mistakes were made in one way or another because they did not wait for Dragut Reis. While they were attacking the Fort they were only attacking it from Sceberras Peninsula. If they had waited for the arrival of Dragut he would have advised them to place more gun placements to surround the fort. On the other hand, now that Dragut was now in Malta he was not pleased with the decision that the leaders of the Ottomans had taken to attack Fort St Elmo.

The reason for his displeasure was that he believed that they should have secured the northern part of Malta before attacking the fortifications of the Knights. If they had taken the north of Malta, they would have prevented any arrival of reinforcements to aid the Knights. Effectively, the Ottomans were allowing the knights to reinforce the fort with more soldiers, without them doing anything about it. The only action that the Ottomans took in this regard , was the setting up of a gun placement on Gallows point but still that did not stop the knights from reinforcing the fort.

Even though the Knights were outnumbered during the attack of the fort, they did the best to stop the Ottoman Turks from taking it. Throughout the attack, we see that the most important section, in this case, the ravelin which protected the front part of the Fort was undermanned. If the Knights had manned the ravelin properly it wouldn’t have fallen into the hands of the Ottomans and it wouldn’t have been used against them. It has been mentioned that during the attack on the fort, both Hermitage of St Mary and Gallows point were used by the Ottomans to set up gun placements from where they bombarded the fort apart from the Sceberras peninsula. Now, this would not have happened if the knights had not left these places empty.

Throughout the duration of the attack on Fort, the knights had few commanders that were in charge of both the fort and of all the knights inside. As one reads about the Great Siege it is mentioned that the leaders of the Ottoman army were always at loggerheads with each other. So if knights had chosen a good leader the decisions that they took would have better executed and who knows, the fort might never have fallen to the Ottomans towards the end of June as in fact happened.

# **Research Analysis**

In this section of the dissertation, the answers to the questions that had been asked to the local tourist guides in connection with the tours conducted within Fort St Elmo will be analysed. The names of the tourist guides will not be shown in full respect of confidentiality. Thus, respondents will only be referred to as Guide 1, Guide 2 and Guide 3. In fact, only 3 guides out of the 29 that were asked whether they wished to answer the survey questions regarding the tours in Fort St Elmo agreed to do so.

The answers received were compared to establish what the tourist guides said during the tour as well as the level of information that they passed on to the groups during the tour. Apart from comparing the answers, one paragraph will be dedicated to each of the three questions that were put to the guides. In these paragraphs, the answers will be compared.

## **Section 1 (When giving a tour of Fort St Elmo, do you give information of the strategic role that the Fort played during the Great Siege?)**

The answers to the first question of Guide no. 1 and Guide no. 2 were similar to each other. By this, it is meant that they both mention during their tour about the history of the place and the significance of the Fort during the Siege. Furthermore, with regards to the information of the role of the Fort, Guide no.2 also mentions the importance of the role of the Fort during the Second World War during the Tour. On the other hand Guide, no.3 answered by mentioning that the background information that is given depends on the time that he/she has at their disposal. After analysing the answers that the tour guides gave they all agreed on one thing, by giving background information regarding Fort St Elmo and its role during the Great Siege.

## **Section 2 (After giving information of the strategic role of the Fort do you mention the importance of the roles of those who gave out the duties of the knights who were situated inside the Fort?)**

Guide no. 1 and Guide no. 3 answered by saying that they have never given any information regarding the roles of those who were in charge and how they had distributed the duties to the knights and Maltese militia within the fort. while on the other hand Guide, no. 2 answered by mentioning that they gave information regarding the management or leadership during the tour. It would have been ideal if the guides gave some more details even though they might not have the time or even though nobody has asked any specific type of question with regards to what happened during the one – month attack on Fort St Elmo.

## **Section 3 (When concluding the tour of Fort St Elmo, do you mention the consequences of the one month-long siege of Fort St Elmo?)**

All the guides answered by saying that they all mentioned the consequences. However, Guide no.1 did not mention the types of consequences. Guide no. 2 explained that they described the final setting of the siege on the fort, and then give information about how the siege turned to Birgu, Isla and Bormla. Guide no. 3 mentioned that they talk about the aftermath of the loss adding that due to the one-month attack there was a huge amount of deaths suffered by both sides. Guide no. 3 also answered that if he/she never mentioned the consequences of the attack on the Fort it would be for the following reasons:

1. not really enough time

2. so much to see

3. most of the groups that the guide has are not military oriented.

## **Conclusion**

As one reads the responses given by the guides who accepted to answer the questions, it is seen that relatively speaking they mentioned the same things with some different versions. In their answers, the respondents also indicated whether they did or did not mention certain details with regards the attack on Fort St Elmo. Another thing that the respondents could have done was by giving more details when answering the questions. An example could have been by mentioning more than one consequence to the attack on Fort St Elmo. Furthermore, apart from mentioning the information that they gave for the role of the Fort during the Great Siege, they could have also mentioned the main reason behind the building of the Fort and also mention the role it served after it was built.

# **Conclusion**

The aims with which were set out in the introduction of the dissertation were met and those were mentioned throughout the chapters. The chapters of the dissertation were dedicated to understanding how both the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John with the help of the Maltese made strategic decisions on how to attack each other throughout the one – month attack on the fort. The above – mentioned strategic decisions were discussed over two chapters.

These chapters were followed by the third chapter which is dedicated to the consequences of the attack by both sides. If throughout the attack of the fort both sides had taken more time to decide and plan out what they could have done one wonders what would have happened. With that in mind, the Great Siege of Malta could and would have gone completely differently to how things evolved, and it could also have been shorter too.

As part of the essay an additional section was included in respect of tours carried out by Tourist Guides while visiting Fort St Elmo. This section was included to see whether the Tourist Guides usually mention what had actually happened during the attack on the fort and how it was dealt with by both the Ottoman Turks and the Knights. It was hoped and expected that a much higher number of responses would have been received but alas, only a small number of guides accepted to answer the questions which were set to them.

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# **Appendices**

**Tour:** Fort St Elmo

**First Stop:** The Granaries outside Fort St Elmo

* At the start of the tour, background information will be given about the history of Fort St Elmo and why it was built at the tip of Mount Sceberras.
* I will then continue with an overview of the Great Siege before the attack on Fort St Elmo.
* Following the background information to Great Siege I will now slowly begin the introduction to the attack on Fort St Elmo and what where the reasons behind the attack.

**Second Stop:** Outside Porta del Soccorso

* Information about the purpose of the Porta del Soccorso will be given and also explain its use during the Great Siege.

**Third Stop:** Bastions of Fort St Elmo

* Here I will explain about the positioning of the Knights and other soldiers when fighting against the Ottoman Turks.
* Explanations will be given as to how the Knights and other soldiers repelled the advancing Ottoman Turks forces.

**Fourth Stop:** Parade Ground

* Here, explanations will describe what happened in the area when the Knights were not engaged against the Ottoman Turks and also what the area was used for during the Great Siege.

**Final Stop:** Church of St Anne

* An overview of what happened in the Church of St Anne towards the end of the one-month siege of Fort St Elmo will be given.