

British Imperial Defence in the Mediterranean during the Second World War: Focusing on the Battle of Crete and the Siege of Malta*

ITO Nobuyoshi**

Abstract

This article reconsiders the battles of the Mediterranean Theatre during the Second World War from the perspective of British imperial defence, especially focusing on the Battle of Crete and the Siege of Malta. Historically, Britain had regarded the Mediterranean as a strategic position where formal colonies and informal spheres of influence overlapped. Battles in the Mediterranean during the Second World War were critically significant, having direct linkage to imperial defence in the region. On Crete, which was considered a part of the British “informal empire”, Britain could not establish sufficient defence arrangements due to the balance with other campaigns and eventually lost the battle on the island. On the other hand, as a crown colony and the most important naval base in the Mediterranean, the defence of Malta was thought to be vital to the maintenance of the British Empire, prompting Britain to sustain enormous efforts to survive the siege by the Axis powers. However, exhausted by the war, Britain was unable to retain its imperial presence within the post-war international order. In that sense, the Second World War triggered the dismantling of the British Empire, and the battles in the Mediterranean were events that epitomised this tendency.

Introduction

The Second World War marked a watershed in the history of the modern world. The unprecedented war, which was fought over six years mainly in Europe and the Asia-Pacific and claimed tens of millions of lives, was literally a total war for the participating countries.¹ Furthermore, ideology-war linkages gave rise to extreme situations in battlefields.² At the same time, the Second World War was a war of empires for European nations with colonies around the world. The battles over Europe, Asia, and Africa were deeply interconnected, and empires strengthened ties with their colonies, including recruiting soldiers from them. Conversely, however, the war severely exhausted European nations, which in turn precipitated the post-war decolonisation movement. In this sense,

* Originally published in Japanese in *Anzenhoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security & Strategy], vol. 2, no. 1 (November 2021). Some parts have been updated.

** Research Fellow, International Conflict Division, Center for Military History, NIDS

¹ As for a major work that emphasises this point, see Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Volume III, Total War: Economy, Society and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² For example, Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).

the Second World War was also epoch-making in the history of modern colonial empires.³

In particular, Britain, which had established the largest empire in the modern world, collected resources and manpower from its colonies and spheres of influence to fight the war. From the outbreak of the war to its termination, Britain remained a key actor on the European front lines as well as in Asia, including battles with Japan over Asian colonies. Despite emerging as a victorious nation, however, Britain was drained of its vast national power and ultimately witnessed post-war decolonisation and dismantlement of the empire.

Taking the above context into account, this article focuses on Britain's actions in the Mediterranean Theatre during the Second World War. Not only did the fate of the European front rest on the Mediterranean Theatre, it also had a vital importance for British imperial defence. Throughout its history as an empire, Britain regarded the Mediterranean as a strategic position on the "Empire Route" that connected to India, its largest colony.⁴ With the Axis powers increasingly posing as a challenge, what impact did the battles in the Mediterranean Theatre have on British imperial policy in the region? This article attempts to show some explanation of the question and shed light on the aspects of British imperial defence in the Mediterranean, focusing especially on the Battle of Crete and the Siege of Malta.

The Second World War is a subject of extensive literature, and the Mediterranean Theatre is no exception.⁵ Battles in the Mediterranean are often discussed in regard to maritime power and naval hegemony in the region, as well as in regard to aerial warfare.⁶ Individual events, such as the battles on Crete and Malta, have also been richly documented from a variety of angles.⁷ In contrast, relatively few studies seem to focus on the relationship between the British Empire and

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), would be one of the major contributions that underscore the significance of the end of imperialism as well as survey the history of the 20th century.

⁴ H.C.G. Matthew, "The Liberal Age (1851–1914)," in *The Oxford History of Britain*, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 563; Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century: A Study of Empire and Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 174–182.

⁵ Recent literature includes Simon Ball, "The Mediterranean and North Africa, 1940–1944," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Volume I: Fighting the War*, eds. John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 358–388; Craig L. Symonds, *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), chaps. 5, 14; Richard Hammond, *Strangling the Axis: The Fight for Control of the Mediterranean during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁶ Phillips Payson O'Brien, *How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷ Douglas Austin, *Malta and British Strategic Policy 1925–43* (London: Frank Cass, 2004); Greg Kennedy, "Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy: The Royal Navy and the role of Malta, 1939–1943," in *The Royal Navy and Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ian Speller (London: Frank Cass, 2005), pp. 50–66; Stephen Prince, "Air power and evacuations: Crete 1941," in *The Royal Navy and Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 67–87; David Stubbs, "Reappraising the Royal Air Force Contribution to the Defense of Crete, 1941," *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 84, no. 2 (April 2020), pp. 459–486.

the Mediterranean during the Second World War.⁸ This article therefore reconsiders the battles on Crete and Malta from the perspective of British imperial defence during the war, and examines the interrelationships between the battles in the Mediterranean and the British imperial policy. Through this analysis, it also aims to reveal the impact of the war experience on the British Empire and its historical significance.

1. The Historical Dimensions of the British Empire and the Mediterranean

(1) Britain's Naval Hegemony in the Mediterranean

In the 19th century, the British Empire reached its climatic period known as “Pax Britannica” and enjoyed hegemony over the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy's role in supporting imperial interests needs no further detailed explanation.⁹ After the Suez Canal opened in 1869, the Empire Route was established to India, the British Empire's largest and most important colony. The route gave the Mediterranean an even greater strategic importance and connected bases such as Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus, laying the foundation for Britain's military interests.¹⁰

In addition to crown colonies, the British political and economic control extended to other areas of the world, forming the “informal empire” under which Britain exercised its influence.¹¹ In the Mediterranean, Greece was a good example: starting with the British intervention in the Greek War of Independence and their continued close ties after independence, in the 19th century Greece became a hinterland for Britain to maintain its interests across a wide area. Although both countries were sovereign states outwardly, their relationship included many imperial elements, as was apparent from the issue of the attribution of Crete. Their generally strong political ties foreshadowed Britain's deep involvement in the defence of Greece.¹²

As already mentioned, Britain's overwhelming naval power was decisive to its naval hegemony in the Mediterranean. The commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, who

⁸ For example, Michael Simpson, “Superhighway to the World Wide Web: The Mediterranean in British Imperial Strategy, 1900–45,” in *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean: Past, Present and Future*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 51–76; Douglas E. Delaney, “Churchill and the Mediterranean Strategy: December 1941 to January 1943,” *Defence Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 1–26; Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), chap. 7. Regarding developments in Britain and the British Empire during the Second World War, see David French, “British Military Strategy,” in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Volume I*, pp. 28–50; Ashley Jackson, “The British Empire, 1939–1945,” in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Volume II: Politics and Ideology*, eds. Richard Bosworth and Joseph Maiolo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 558–580.

⁹ As a masterpiece that discusses British naval hegemony, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 2017). See also Jeremy Black, *The British Seaborne Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Paul Caruana-Galizia, “Strategic colonies and economic development: real wages in Cyprus, Gibraltar, and Malta, 1836–1913,” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2015), pp. 1250–1276.

¹¹ Regarding this point, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series, vol. 6, no. 1 (1953), pp. 1–15; Andrew Porter ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Part I; P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688–2015*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹² As for the complex relationship between Britain and Greece, Robert Holland and Diana Markides, *The British and the Hellenes: Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean 1850–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Anastasia Yiangou, George Kazamias and Robert Holland eds., *The Greeks and the British in the Levant, 1800–1960s: Between Empires and Nations* (London: Routledge, 2016).

assumed this heavy responsibility, was a particularly prestigious post in the Royal Navy.¹³ Among the various naval bases, the naval arsenal on Malta epitomised the British military presence as the base of the Mediterranean Fleet.¹⁴ It was in this historical context that the island gained further importance for the British Empire.

(2) Britain and the International Relations in the Mediterranean

Britain also remained a central actor in the international politics of modern Europe.¹⁵ In the Mediterranean, the historic rivalry unfolded with Britain's long-time opponent, France. Additionally, political and military tensions with Russia arose frequently, and the growth of emerging powers such as Germany and Italy could not be overlooked. Even as its national power gradually declined in the 20th century, Britain continued to view the Mediterranean as a key area on the Empire Route.

Meanwhile, the First World War left Britain with less military leeway to deal with both Europe and the empire. The trading system centred on the British Commonwealth and the Sterling Bloc was still strong, and economic interdependence within the empire had direct implications for wartime mobilisation. In this regard, compliance with the pledge to defend the empire had vital significance for the defence of Britain itself.¹⁶ For this reason, especially in the 1920s, successive British governments pursued active European diplomacy and sought effective continental commitment.¹⁷

In the 1930s, however, the European international order was shaken by the rise of German dictator Adolf Hitler, and inter-state disputes over colonies also intensified, forcing Britain to take difficult decisions. In the Mediterranean, the expansionist policies of Fascist Italy led by Benito Mussolini were directed not only at North Africa but also at Britain's strategic positions such as Malta and Cyprus.¹⁸ Furthermore, while the ambitions of Hitler may have been targeted primarily at Eastern Europe, Germany would ultimately clash with Britain whose interests spanned globally. In this regard, the Second World War became critical for the British Empire, as well as in the Mediterranean, a key area on the Empire Route.

¹³ Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, p. 334.

¹⁴ Carmel Vassallo, "Servants of Empire: The Maltese in the Royal Navy," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1-2 (2006), pp. 273–289.

¹⁵ In respect to European international affairs and British diplomacy in the 19th century, see A.W. Ward and G.P. Gooch eds., *The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy 1783–1919*, Three Volumes (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

¹⁶ Regarding the British imperial policy in the interwar period, especially the 1920s and 1930s, for example, John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 10.

¹⁷ John W. Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arnold, 1997), chap. 4; David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 2000), chap. 5.

¹⁸ Henry Frendo, *Europe and Empire: Culture, Politics and Identity in Malta and the Mediterranean (1912–1946)* (Santa Venera: Midsea Books, 2012); Alexis Rappas, "The Transnational Formation of Imperial Rule on the Margins of Europe: British Cyprus and the Italian Dodecanese in the Interwar Period," *European History Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 467–505. Regarding the origin of the Second World War in the Mediterranean, Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

2. The Mediterranean Theatre and British Imperial Defence during the Second World War

In the Second World War, Britain was initially pushed back on the European front by the momentum of Nazi Germany. Coupled with the early surrender of its main ally, France,¹⁹ Britain was compelled to fight almost single-handedly. In the fierce battles that followed, Britain confronted the Axis powers also in the Mediterranean. It was an essential region that connected the European and North African fronts and was closely watched by both camps. In this light, the following section discusses key battles over the islands of Crete and Malta in the Mediterranean where Britain was deeply engaged and examines chiefly their relationship with British imperial defence.

(1) The Battle of Crete

Allied and Axis Powers' Intentions for Crete

As the war approached Europe, Britain and France gave prior military assurances to countries in the Balkans. Greece, in particular, was highly attuned to the security threat due to Italy's annexation of Albania by force in April 1939.²⁰ After the war began, the British War Cabinet received a report from the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COS) in late May 1940 that in the event the Italian armed forces advanced into Greece, Britain and France would jointly occupy Crete as an emergency measure.²¹ However, there were strong concerns that a hasty move may conversely provoke Italy, requiring the British government to exercise caution.²²

With France soon surrendering to Germany, the defence of Greece became the sole responsibility of Britain. The need for a significant number of anti-aircraft weapons and fighters on Crete was expressed. However, the British forces in the Middle East, which had jurisdiction over the region, were in charge of a vast area including Gibraltar to Iraq in the east and west, and the sub-Saharan region of the African continent in the south. As most resources were sent to the Middle East, personnel and equipment were clearly lacking for the defence of Crete.²³

In October 1940, Italian forces advanced into Greece on Mussolini's orders but were initially driven back by Greek forces. For the Allies, this was their first victory in a ground war on the European front.²⁴ Britain entered Crete under the emergency measure noted above, turning the Souda Bay in the northern part of the island into a refuelling base and establishing three airfields. Its strategy was, however, generally reactive. The Royal Air Force fighters sent to Crete on 14 November not only were inferior in performance; they also had been deployed finally after a three-month conflict of interest.²⁵

¹⁹ For the French factor in the Second World War, see Martin S. Alexander, "French grand strategy and defence preparation," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Vol. I*, pp. 78–106; Martin Thomas, "France and its colonial civil wars, 1940–1945," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Vol. II*, pp. 581–603.

²⁰ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 63, 122.

²¹ WP (40) 175 (Also COS (40) 403), Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Seizure of Crete in the event of Italian Hostilities," May 29, 1940, CAB 66/8, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London [hereafter cited as TNA].

²² Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, pp. 202–203.

²³ Stubbs, "Reappraising the Royal Air Force Contribution to the Defense of Crete, 1941," p. 461.

²⁴ Peter Ewer, "The British Campaign in Greece 1941: Assumptions about the Operational Art and Their Influence on Strategy," *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 76, no. 3 (July 2012), p. 729.

²⁵ Prince, "Air power and evacuations," p. 74; Stubbs, "Reappraising the Royal Air Force Contribution to the Defense of Crete, 1941," pp. 462–463.

Subsequently, in April 1941, German forces advanced en masse and occupied the Greek mainland in just one month,²⁶ forcing its government and royal family to flee to Crete. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill reiterated the importance of Crete and focused on the island's defence, including ordering the redeployment of troops. Nonetheless, the deployment of Royal Air Force aircraft in the Middle East remained limited, and its impact on the defence of Crete was not reviewed,²⁷ culminating in Britain's immensely weak posture.

At that time, German forces were planning a major airborne operation against Crete. While British intelligence had deciphered the code on 28 April, Churchill was somewhat optimistic about the situation, describing that this airborne attack would be "a fine opportunity for killing the parachute troops".²⁸ Moreover, albeit the necessity to secure air defence capability for the defence of Crete, the struggling Royal Air Force had a severely depleted arsenal of aircraft. Nor could fighters be relocated from other bases. In other words, in the preliminary stages of the Battle of Crete, the British were already facing setbacks in securing air control. The battles for seizing control of the surrounding seas also intensified, and Britain's air power was further reduced amid repeated German bombardments of ships in the Souda Bay.²⁹

Moreover, Major General Bernard Freyberg of the 2nd New Zealand Division, who served as the overall commander of the Allied forces on Crete, failed to prioritise the defence of the Maleme airfield, which was considered vital ground for airborne strikes, and deployed only 620 garrison troops around it. Furthermore, the troop strength was not increased, in disregard of the apprehensions of his subordinates.³⁰ The fact that the critical airfield was left vulnerable became a key factor behind the outcome of the Battle of Crete. In addition, while the Commonwealth forces on the island, consisting of British, Australian and New Zealand forces, totalled less than 30,000 troops including those from the Greek mainland and Egypt, there were only 36 fighters, many of which had not yet undergone maintenance.³¹

From the perspective of the Axis powers, the seizure of Crete had symbolic importance, as it would signal the launch of an offensive against the British sphere of influence extending from North Africa to the Middle East. They intended to use the island as a foothold to expand the Axis controlled area from Mediterranean islands, such as the Dodecanese and Cyprus, to the Middle East.³² Therefore, Britain could not overlook the battle for Crete, also in terms of defending its expansive empire. However, with force reinforcements demanded everywhere, it was not until mid-May that Crete was given higher priority than North Africa and the Middle East,³³ and this

²⁶ Regarding battles in Greece, Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock, "Reconsidering the Luftwaffe in Greece, 1941," *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 76, no. 3 (July 2012), pp. 747–773; David Stubbs, "Politics and Military Advice: Lessons from the Campaign in Greece 1941," *Air Power Review*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn/Winter 2014), pp. 102–126. For an analysis of the official history, see also Christopher Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 1952), pp. 3–142.

²⁷ Confidential Annex, WM (41) 41st Conclusions, Minute 2, April 17, 1941, CAB 65/22, TNA; From Foreign Office to Athens, Telegram No. 836, April 17, 1941, attached to Ibid.

²⁸ From Churchill to Wavell (Commander-in-Chief Middle East), Telegram No. 63822 (MO5), April 28, 1941, attached to Note by Bridges (Secretary, War Cabinet), "Crete," May 26, 1941, CAB 66/16, TNA.

²⁹ Stubbs, "Reappraising the Royal Air Force Contribution to the Defense of Crete, 1941," pp. 470–472, 477–478. Ibid., p. 479.

³¹ Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, p. 155.

³² Ibid., p. 162.

³³ Prince, "Air power and evacuations," p. 74.

action turned out to be fatally delayed.

The Battle of Crete and the Fighting Withdrawal

In the early morning of 20 May 1941, hostilities on Crete began with a massive German offensive named *Unternehmen Merkur*.³⁴ Supported by bombers of the German Air Force, Luftwaffe, that were used in the attacks on the Greek mainland and the Dodecanese, paratroopers called Fallschirmjäger descended on the northern part of the island that was centred around the Maleme airfield, and carried out several waves of attacks.³⁵ In fact, due to bad weather and poor execution, the German forces suffered heavy casualties and were far from achieving their initial objective. However, the Allied garrison's control was also greatly disrupted, and it had to abandon the position overlooking the Maleme airfield prematurely. As a result, the vulnerable airfield fell under the control of the German forces.³⁶ The loss of the Maleme airfield, one of the most vital grounds, suddenly made the Allied powers inferior.

The Royal Navy fought bravely in the sea battles that preceded the paratroop drops. However, as the land war progressed, the Luftwaffe shifted from ground support to sea attacks, solidifying the outcome of the battle for sea control. Lacking air support, the Royal Navy was exposed to German dive bomber attacks and, unable to prevent their landings, the Mediterranean Fleet was forced to retreat from Crete.³⁷ During this phase, members of the Greek royal family and government managed to evade the bombing, board a dispatched Royal Navy vessel, and escape from Crete. Then, King Georgios II of Greece stayed in Britain until the end of the war.³⁸

For the Allied forces facing shortages in aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery, it was impossible to bridge the gap in strength with the Germans.³⁹ When the latter began landing on Crete on 27 May, the Royal Navy, with defeat most certain, was forced to change its mission to supporting the withdrawal of ground troops.⁴⁰ At this point, the authorities at home decided to approve the evacuation of Crete. However, the Allied forces came under further German onslaught during the fighting withdrawal, and the troops who retreated from the northern bases to the southern area, across the central mountainous region, were compelled to endure a particularly hard march. After several days of the fighting withdrawal, the Allied forces, which were supported by the Royal Navy, escaped to Egypt. On 1 June, the entire island of Crete was occupied by the German forces.⁴¹

Of the around 30,000 troops who make up the aforementioned Cretan garrison, about

³⁴ With regard to German actions, Heinz A. Richter, *Operation Merkur: Die Eroberung der Insel Kreta im Mai 1941* (Ruhpolding: Verlag Franz Phillip Rutzen, 2011).

³⁵ Ebd., S. 80–90.

³⁶ Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, pp. 173–210; Richter, *Operation Merkur*, S. 106–141.

³⁷ WM (41) 52nd Conclusions, May 22, 1941, CAB 65/18, TNA; Minutes of COS (41) 185th Meeting, May 22, 1941, CAB 79/11, TNA. See also Prince, "Air power and evacuations," pp. 76–77.

³⁸ Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, pp. 211–216. The close relationship between the modern Greek state and Britain is also evident from royal family intermarriages, with Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, husband of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, descending from the Greek royal family. Regarding the history of the royal family of modern Greece, see Κώστας Μ. Σταματόπουλος, *Περί της βασιλείας στη Νεότερη Ελλάδα*, Β' Έκδοση (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Καπόν, 2016).

³⁹ From Lampson (Cairo) to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1528, May 26, 1941, A/26, FO 954/15, TNA.

⁴⁰ Prince, "Air power and evacuations," p. 77.

⁴¹ Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, pp. 261–290; Prince, "Air power and evacuations," pp. 77–80. See also WP (41) 125 (Also COS (41) 357), Weekly Résumé (No. 92) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation, June 5, 1941, CAB 66/16, TNA.

15,000 were British troops and less than 14,000 were Commonwealth troops. Only 52% of the total managed to escape to Egypt after a series of battles. The British suffered particularly heavy losses, losing 57% of their personnel. Throughout the Battle of Crete and the subsequent fighting withdrawal, the Royal Navy's war casualties exceeded 2,000, with three cruisers and six destroyers sunk and a number of vessels seriously damaged, including two battleships and one aircraft carrier.⁴² The Mediterranean Fleet lost a quarter of its assets, and a third of the vessel losses were concentrated in the period of the fighting withdrawal. Without aircraft support, the British incurred considerable losses.⁴³

The fall of Crete, which had been a strategic position after the Greek mainland, was a bitter blow to Britain and the Allied powers. Crete, under Nazi German rule, suffered the same harsh fate as the Greek mainland until it was liberated by the termination of the war in 1945.⁴⁴ In addition, the loss of Crete significantly undermined the British control of the Eastern Mediterranean, and hard battles continued for them. This is epitomised by the battle for Malta discussed next.

(2) The Siege of Malta

The Battle for Malta and Britain's Response

As mentioned earlier, Malta, situated in the centre of the Mediterranean, had been accorded a special status as a Royal Navy base in the region. During the Second World War, the island's presence was closely watched by both the Allied and Axis powers, partly because it was in a strategic place for maritime transport. Malta was in a prime location for the Allies to disrupt the Axis powers' supplies to North Africa. On the other hand, the Axis sought to take control of Malta to interdict this. Against this backdrop, the island became the focal point of the Mediterranean Theatre.

In the latter half of the 1930s, the Royal Navy, wary of war, moved the base of the Mediterranean Fleet from Malta to Alexandria, Egypt. In late 1940, after war had broken out, the German Luftwaffe was sent to Sicily. Grand Harbour, the port of Malta's main city of Valletta, became a target of heavy air raids. The local forces fought back bravely, and in London, Churchill stressed the need to maintain a strong air defence posture.⁴⁵ Unique to Malta, the locals cooperated resolutely with the forces. Some kind of solidarity was formed between the British and Maltese people, sharing a sense of crisis that transcended the ruler-ruled relationship of the colonial empire. The mobilising power of the Catholic Church played a large role, and many residents reportedly took part in the dangerous work of repairing the airfield runway. This strong unity between the two sides further highlighted the standing of Malta during the war.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, as the Axis powers fought on, Malta faced increasingly serious fuel and supply shortages which hampered aircraft reinforcements.⁴⁷ After the fall of Crete, air raids on Malta, the

⁴² Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, pp. 290–292; Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, p. 102.

⁴³ Prince, "Air power and evacuations," p. 80.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Harald Gilbert, *Das besetzte Kreta: 1941–1945* (Ruhpolding: Verlag Franz Phillip Rutzen, 2014).

⁴⁵ WM (41) 8th Conclusions, January 20, 1941, CAB 65/17, TNA.

⁴⁶ Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, pp. 217–218, 253–254; Anastasia Yiangou, "The Political Impact of World War II on Cyprus and Malta," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2014), pp. 106–107.

⁴⁷ From Foreign Office to Cairo, Telegram No. 722, March 14, 1941, CAB 65/22, TNA.

next target, became much fiercer. Coinciding with the intensification of the offensive on the North African front, the Siege of Malta entered a critical phase that would determine the course of the Mediterranean Theatre. The start of the German-Soviet war drew large numbers of German troops out of the Mediterranean and helped give the Mediterranean Fleet a slight advantage over the Italian Navy, Regia Marina, in their battle for sea control. However, this advantage, too, eroded as the Luftwaffe in Sicily re-enhanced its troop strength.⁴⁸

An Intensifying Siege and Malta's Predicament

In 1942, the Axis strengthened their offensive campaign, creating an even more dire situation for Malta. On the other hand, with the United States entering the war in December 1941 and ironically Japan achieving breakthrough in the Asia-Pacific, Britain was accidentally able to shift its strategic focus to the Mediterranean and Europe. Churchill appealed to the United States to make the Mediterranean Theatre a primary strategic objective, believing that securing the Mediterranean was strategically important not only for Europe but also for the Pacific and would help retain imperial interests. His appeal succeeded; the British Empire was saved from a critical situation in the Mediterranean, peculiarly with US support.⁴⁹ At around the same time, however, Malta-based land forces and submarines were no longer able to withstand the intense bombardment by the Axis and were forced to retreat to Gibraltar and other places.⁵⁰ The Allied powers had a growing concern regarding the defence capabilities of Malta, and the British War Cabinet struggled to address them.⁵¹

Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, was keenly aware that, in order to maintain local supply lines, they needed to seize the air control of the German forces that threatened the link between Malta and Alexandria. Reinforcing the island's assets was desired, as well as the Royal Air Force's deployment of state-of-the-art Spitfire fighters. Whether or not Malta, a natural fortress, could be adequately resupplied and readied for the offensive was regarded as affecting more than the island's survival, that is, as seriously influencing Britain's position in the Mediterranean Theatre and on the North African front, and by extension, the fate of the Allies.⁵²

Repeated Luftwaffe attacks to "neutralize" Malta gradually took on aspects of indiscriminate

⁴⁸ Eric J. Grove, *The Royal Navy since 1815: A New Short History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 195; Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, pp. 255–256. See also Austin, *Malta and British Strategic Policy 1925–43*, chaps. 8, 9. For the conclusion of the War Cabinet meeting that discussed this point, WM (41) 138th Conclusions, December 29, 1941, CAB 65/20, TNA.

⁴⁹ Simpson, "Superhighway to the World Wide Web," pp. 64–65; Kennedy, "Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy," pp. 56–58. There was considerable US opposition to these British intentions. Delaney, "Churchill and the Mediterranean strategy," pp. 8, 10; French, "British Military Strategy," p. 39. For an extensive contribution that discusses the complex relationship between the British Empire and the United States during the Second World War, Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (London: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁵⁰ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Volume III (September 1941 to September 1942): British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb* (London: HMSO, 1960), chap. 7.

⁵¹ Minute from Eden (Foreign Secretary) to Attlee (Lord Privy Seal), January 13, 1942, B/651, FO 954/14, TNA.

⁵² Confidential Annex, WM (42) 24th Conclusions, Minute 1, February 25, 1942, CAB 65/29, TNA. See also Kennedy, "Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy," pp. 58–59.

bombing.⁵³ On 15 April 1942, King George VI of Britain conferred the Award of the George Cross on the people of Malta in recognition of their sustained struggle and endurance. The fact that the Axis strategy underwent a number of changes during this period was fortunate for Britain. In addition to the German-Soviet war once again thinning the German forces in the Mediterranean, the Axis powers also prioritised the North African front. Consequently, the large-scale airborne attack on Malta envisaged by both Germany and Italy was postponed.⁵⁴ In the meantime, over 100 Spitfires were transported to Malta via British and US carriers, gradually improving the island's ground-to-air counter-attack capability.⁵⁵

The next pressing issue was the provision of supplies to Malta. The importance of the island, where 27,000 Army and 4,500 Air Force troops were stationed, was evident to the British War Cabinet, including the island's strategic importance for cutting off Axis supply lines and securing routes for Allied reinforcements.⁵⁶ Several supply operations were planned by the Royal Navy to save the island, which continued "splendid and historic resistance".⁵⁷ However, both Operation Vigorous and Operation Harpoon in June 1942 failed miserably. In the former, not one vessel reached Malta; in the latter, only two supply vessels arrived on Malta and only 15,000 tonnes of supplies were transported.⁵⁸ According to the report by Cunningham, the former operation was particularly cursed by the lack of air support and inadequate capability to intercept with anti-aircraft weapons.⁵⁹ The challenges facing the Allied forces were exposed once again following on from the Battle of Crete.

Successful Supply Operation and the Turnaround of the War

The repeated failures of supply operations meant that the success or failure of the subsequent operation was vital to Malta's fate. "We are absolutely bound to save Malta in one way or the other", said Churchill, reiterating his determination.⁶⁰ Yet after the intense war of attrition, Britain hardly had tankers left fast enough to accompany the supply operations. Furthermore, it was thought that losing the few remaining suitable ships in the next operation would create an irreparable situation.⁶¹ The Axis still had an advantage in controlling the Mediterranean, and the

⁵³ Report by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, "Malta," WP (R) (42) 17, Report for the Month of February 1942 for the Dominions, India, Burma and the Colonies, and Mandated Territories, March 25, 1942, CAB 68/9, TNA; WM (42) 47th Conclusions, April 13, 1942, CAB 65/26, TNA; The Chargé in the United Kingdom (Matthews) to the Secretary of State, 740.0011 European War 1939/21036: Telegram, London, April 16, 1942, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter cited as *FRUS*], *Diplomatic Papers 1942, Volume II: Europe* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office [USGPO], 1962), Doc. 178.

⁵⁴ Denis Richards and Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939–1945, Volume II: The Fight Avails* (London: HMSO, 1954), pp. 209–210; Kennedy, "Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy," p. 60. This airborne operation was respectively called *Unternehmen Herkules* in Germany and *Operazione C3* in Italy.

⁵⁵ Kennedy, "Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy," p. 61.

⁵⁶ Confidential Annex, WM (43) 60th Conclusions, May 10, 1942, CAB 65/30, TNA. The army personnel also included 8,900 Maltese people.

⁵⁷ *Parliamentary Debate [Hansard]*, House of Commons, 5th Series, vol. 380, May 20, 1942, col. 219.

⁵⁸ S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939–1945, Volume II: The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 73, Table 2.

⁵⁹ Message from Cunningham to Pound (First Sea Lord), No. 626, June 17, 1942, B/665, FO 954/14, TNA.

⁶⁰ Minute from Churchill to Attlee (Deputy Prime Minister), Eden and Hollis (Senior Assistant Secretary, War Cabinet), D 123/2, June 17, 1942, B/673, FO 954/14, TNA.

⁶¹ Extract from Minutes of COS (42) 181st Meeting, June 17, 1942, B/668, FO 954/14, TNA.

fall of Tobruk, vital ground in North Africa, was inevitable. Under these circumstances, supplies could not be shipped from the Eastern Mediterranean either. Nevertheless, Britain was unable to abandon Malta,⁶² so the Royal Navy planned a new transport operation from Gibraltar to the island.

This transport operation, named Operation Pedestal, was the largest one carried out during the Second World War.⁶³ With planning beginning in July 1942, transport ships assembled in ports throughout Britain. At that time, the most urgent commodity apart from food was oil. As noted above, the Royal Navy was unable to furnish tankers large enough to meet Malta's needs and fast enough to sail with the convoy. It was therefore decided that its ally, the United States, would provide the tanker *SS Ohio* owned by Texaco. Although an intense Axis attack was fully expected, the COS acknowledged the exceptional urgency of the operation.⁶⁴ As for Churchill, he asked the War Cabinet members to firmly support whatever decision was taken.⁶⁵

On 2 August, a convoy of 14 transport ships left Britain. It entered the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar on 10 August, joined a Royal Navy support fleet, and headed for Malta. The support fleet led by Vice Admiral E. Neville Syfret consisted of three aircraft carriers, two battleships, seven cruisers and light cruisers, and more than 30 destroyers, also including over 100 fighters.⁶⁶ From 11 to 13 August, the convoy and support fleet, under heavy Axis attacks, sought to enter a port on Malta.⁶⁷ The support fleet's aircraft carrier *HMS Eagle* was torpedoed and sunk, and the fleet also lost its two cruisers and one destroyer. In addition, the aircraft carrier *HMS Indomitable* was badly damaged and forced to retreat to Gibraltar. Two cruisers were heavily damaged, and six destroyers sustained major and minor damages.

Similarly, the convoy suffered significant losses, with nine of the 14 ships sinking. Ultimately, however, four transport ships arrived on Malta and succeeded in delivering valuable supplies. The tanker *Ohio*, while on the verge of being sunk in a series of concentrated attacks, arrived in Grand Harbour on the morning of 15 August. Crowds that gathered in the harbour waved and cheered, and a brass band played the patriotic song "Rule, Britannia" to welcome the ship. For the Maltese people, the arrival of *Ohio* was truly the "Miracle of Santa Maria".⁶⁸

The losses the Allies sustained throughout Operation Pedestal were not small, including more than 30 aircraft along with damages to vessels. However, Malta was supplied with 32,000 tonnes of supplies and 15,000 tonnes of fuel, enough to ensure the island's survival for the

⁶² From Middle East Defence Committee to Air Ministry, Telegram No. IZ 649, June 21, 1942, attached to Confidential Annex, WM (42) 78th Conclusions, June 21, 1942, CAB 65/30, TNA; Part of COS (42) 187th Meeting, Minute 6, "Convoy to Malta," COS (42) 56th Meeting (O), June 23, 1942, CAB 79/56, TNA.

⁶³ For more information on the operation, see also Milan Vego, "Major Convoy Operation to Malta, 10–15 August 1942 (Operation PEDESTAL)," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 63, no. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 107–153.

⁶⁴ Minutes of COS (42) 223rd Meeting, July 31, 1942, CAB 79/22, TNA.

⁶⁵ Confidential Annex, WM (48) 101st Conclusions, Minute 1, August 1, 1942, CAB 65/31, TNA.

⁶⁶ Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939–1945, Volume II*, p. 346, Table 27; Vego, "Major Convoy Operation to Malta, 10–15 August 1942 (Operation PEDESTAL)," p. 124; Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*, p. 114. The number of destroyers varies slightly among the sources.

⁶⁷ Regarding the overview of the operation and the evolution of the battles, see WP (42) 360 (Also COS (42) 373), Weekly Résumé (No. 154) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation, August 13, 1942, CAB 66/27, TNA.

⁶⁸ Vego, "Major Convoy Operation to Malta, 10–15 August 1942 (Operation PEDESTAL)," pp. 137–142; Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, pp. 259–260; Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, pp. 314–320.

foreseeable future.⁶⁹ For Britain and the Allies, Operation Pedestal provided a foothold for turning the situation around in the Mediterranean Theatre and launching a counteroffensive,⁷⁰ while for the Axis powers, the operation was a serious blunder. At a time when the situation on the North African front was changing dramatically, Germany and Italy missed their opportunity to win the Siege of Malta and failed to obstruct the supply operation. This was by no means insignificant, considering the developments that followed.⁷¹

In a report submitted shortly after the successful completion of the operation, Syfret recognised the dedicated efforts made by the fleet escort force responsible for a challenging and dangerous mission, paying tribute particularly to the conduct, courage, and determination of the crew members of the supply convoy. He bestowed the highest praise, noting that many lives were lost in the operation but the memory of their conduct “will remain an inspiration to all who were privileged to sail with them”.⁷² In this way, the Operation Pedestal was remembered as a symbolic event that marked a turning point in the Mediterranean Theatre, on the North African front, and by extension, on the European front.

3. Assessments of the Narrative

(1) The Military Significance of Crete and Malta

Taking into account the cases of Crete and Malta, this section compares the two battles and attempts to ascertain their military significance. Both cases highlight the importance of air support and anti-aircraft weapons. In the Battle of Crete, Britain generally failed to respond effectively because of underestimation of German airborne operations and slowness in maintaining anti-aircraft weapons. It lost the initiative in the series of battles due to inadequate air power, and also largely due to the contrasting situation in the way Britain lacked a usable airfield nearby Crete, while the German forces could use the Greek mainland and the Dodecanese.⁷³ Freyberg, who served as the overall commander of the Allied forces on Crete, affirmed this view, stating that there could be no victory in this region without aircraft support for the ground troops and counterattacks by dive bombing.⁷⁴

In the Siege of Malta, Britain similarly struggled with lack of air defence capability but withstood the Luftwaffe’s intense airstrikes and bombings and ultimately survived the siege. The

⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the total amount of lost supplies was estimated to be as high as 88,588 tonnes. WP (42) 368 (Also COS (42) 379), Weekly Résumé (No. 155) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation, August 20, 1942, CAB 66/27, TNA.

⁷⁰ At around the same time, the British also successfully conducted an operation that reinforced Malta’s air force using aircraft carriers. Furthermore, the option of sending fighters directly from Gibraltar to Malta was becoming a reality. Minutes of COS (42) 86th Meeting (O), August 11, 1942, CAB 79/56, TNA.

⁷¹ Kennedy, “Sea denial, interdiction and diplomacy,” pp. 61–63. Regarding military relations between Germany and Italy in the Mediterranean during the Second World War, Gerhard Schreiber, “Italy and the Mediterranean in the Power-Political Calculations of German Naval Leaders, 1919–45,” in *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean*, pp. 124–133. As for the outcome of the North African campaign, for example, Ball, “The Mediterranean and North Africa, 1940–1944”; Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*, chap. 6.

⁷² Report on Operation “Pedestal” by Vice-Admiral E.N. Syfret, August 25, 1942, *The London Gazette*, Supplement, No. 38377, August 10, 1948, p. 4505.

⁷³ From Lampson to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1549, 27 May 1941, A/65, FO 954/11, TNA; Confidential Annex, WM (41) 56th Conclusions, Minute 1, 2 June 1941, CAB 65/22, TNA; From Foreign Office to Angora, Telegram No. 1346, 2 June 1941, CAB 65/18, TNA. The city to which the telegram was sent is written in the old spelling of Ankara, the capital of Turkey.

⁷⁴ From Lampson to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1666, June 3, 1941, A/42, FO 954/15, TNA.

repeated transfers of fighters, mainly Spitfires, as well as constant attempts at air support and replenishment of anti-aircraft weapons were critically important to Malta's survival, alongside the support of the United States as the largest ally.⁷⁵ Furthermore, with the intensification of air operations utilising the reinforced Maltese fighters, the war situation in the Mediterranean Theatre made a turnaround, and the operations were increasingly effective. As a result, air raids and other attacks on Malta declined rapidly, especially after the success of Operation Pedestal.⁷⁶

Needless to say, the Mediterranean Theatre was primarily a sea area. As aircraft gained an increasing presence in naval warfare, fighter-launching carriers took on an even more significant role. The war was characterised by the coupling of carrier-based air operations and sea operations, and this trend was clearly exhibited in Crete and Malta. Of course, the actions of ground forces also could not be ignored, in terms of their influence on the outcome of the respective battles. In this sense, the Second World War was a war of unprecedented scale in which the three dimensions of land, sea, and air were intricately intertwined, and the Mediterranean Theatre was a prime example of this.⁷⁷

Interestingly, the Allies and Axis drew different lessons from the use of paratroopers. It is often noted that Germany became reluctant to use drop operations, taking seriously the immense damage caused by paratrooping operations in the Battle of Crete.⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, the Axis powers shelved the paratrooper attack on Malta, and therefore, missed an opportunity to capture the island. By contrast, the Allied powers focused on the effectiveness of the paratrooping operation that had caused Crete to fall and hastened the training of troops. British and US paratroopers were deployed on the European front in large-scale operations, such as the Invasion of Normandy in June 1944 and Operation Market Garden in September,⁷⁹ and contributed to the eventual victory of the Allies.

(2) The Significance and Limitations of British Imperial Defence

Let us now examine the two cases from the perspective of British imperial defence. First, the fall of Crete into the hands of the Axis powers not only had a tremendous impact on both the European and North African fronts; it also signified an increased threat to British imperial interests extending from the Mediterranean to the Middle East.⁸⁰ The fact that a disruptive and heated debate over this issue continued at the British House of Commons on 10 June, after losing the island, bore testimony to the shock of the loss.⁸¹ Given also that about half of the Cretan garrison consisted of

⁷⁵ Confidential Annex, WM (42) 52nd Conclusions, Minute 3, April 24, 1942, CAB 65/30, TNA; Confidential Annex, WM (42) 73rd Conclusions, June 11, 1942, CAB 65/30, TNA.

⁷⁶ Not a single bombing by German forces was reported in the week following the operation, and no notable combat occurred in September 1942. WM (42) 118th Conclusions, August 25, 1942, CAB 65/27, TNA; WM (42) 121st Conclusions, September 7, 1942, CAB 65/27, TNA.

⁷⁷ Ball, "The Mediterranean and North Africa, 1940–1944," p. 387.

⁷⁸ The British War Cabinet also analysed that the German losses in Crete exceeded Allied ones. WM (41) 56th Conclusions, June 2, 1941, CAB 65/18, TNA.

⁷⁹ Regarding the two operations, Mary Kathryn Barbier, "The War in the West, 1943–45," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Vol. I*, pp. 394–404, 407–410.

⁸⁰ The Chargé in Germany (Morris) to the Secretary of State, 740.0011 European War 1939/11503; Telegram, Berlin, May 31, 1941, *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers 1941, Volume II: Europe* (Washington: USGPO, 1959), Doc. 733.

⁸¹ *Hansard*, House of Commons, June 10, 1941, cols. 63–164.

troops dispatched from the Commonwealth, the series of events were regarded as a serious threat to the entire British Empire.

Furthermore, the Second World War decisively eroded the influence of the British “informal empire” in Greece. Following Italy’s surrender in 1943, Churchill renewed interest in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, his concern was unequivocally incompatible with the overall approach of the Allies that gave top priority to France. Moreover, Churchill’s hard-line response to the Greek Civil War that broke out during the war was censured by the United States for “colonialism”.⁸² Ultimately, post-war Britain could no longer bear the burden of defending Greece, which it saw as part of its sphere of influence, and asked the United States to take its place.⁸³ In other words, the fall of Greece and Crete, together with the Greek Civil War that followed, foreshadowed the downfall of the British Empire in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁴

In contrast, located in a geopolitically strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta was vital to the defence of the British Empire which maintained the Empire Route. The loss of the island, coupled with the North African front, would inevitably have had an enormous impact on the defence of Egypt and, above all, would have been one of the greatest disasters for the British Empire.⁸⁵ The Siege of Malta, which determined the course of the Mediterranean Theatre, combined with the island’s nature as a crown colony, was directly linked to the fate of the empire. The strengthening of unity between Britain and Malta, following the extreme circumstances brought about by the siege, cannot be discussed without referring to the island’s nature as the core of the empire. In this sense, the King’s conferment of the Award of the George Cross to the Maltese people for their heroic resistance had more than mere symbolic significance.

Nevertheless, when the subsequent rush towards decolonisation reached Malta, the confusion surrounding post-war reconstruction led to the declaration of a state of emergency, deprivation of autonomy, and a reversal to direct rule before Malta gained independence in 1964.⁸⁶ The island then began to shed the remnants of British colonial rule in the 1970s.⁸⁷ A retrospective look at the history shows that the Second World War had a decisive impact on the relationship between Britain and Malta without exception. In an era of changes in the international order interlocking with shifts in norms, the British imperial order was reaching its limits, and the unprecedented Second World War precipitated an epochal shift. For Malta, the war marked the beginning of the end of the empire.

⁸² Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, pp. 269, 274–275. Regarding the Greek Civil War, for example, Svetozar Rajak, “The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945–1956,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War; Volume I: Origins*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 203–207; Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), chap. 24.

⁸³ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 121–127, 142–146.

⁸⁴ Maurice Vaïsse, *Les relations internationales depuis 1945*, 16e éd. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2019), p. 14.

⁸⁵ From Air Ministry to Auchinleck (Commander-in-Chief Middle East), Telegram No. OZ 175, May 8, 1942, attached to Confidential Annex, WM (42) 59th Conclusions, May 8, 1942, CAB 65/30, TNA.

⁸⁶ Simon C. Smith ed., *British Documents on the End of Empire, Series B, Volume 11: Malta* (London: The Stationery Office, 2006), pp. xxxv–xxxix.

⁸⁷ In respect to this point, see Simon C. Smith, “Conflict and Co-operation: Dom Mintoff, Giorgio Borg Olivier and the End of Empire in Malta,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2007), pp. 115–134; Simon C. Smith, “Dependence and Independence: Malta and the End of Empire,” *Journal of Maltese History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2008), pp. 33–47.

Conclusion

This article focused on the Mediterranean Theatre during the Second World War and attempted to provide an analysis from the perspective of British imperial defence. As specific examples, the Battle of Crete and the Siege of Malta were discussed, including an overview of their respective historical background and an examination of their significance.

Crete and Malta highlighted the military characteristics of the Second World War. In both cases, air support was essential, while defence capabilities, such as anti-aircraft weapons, had vital significance. In addition, as was strikingly demonstrated in the Malta case, continuous transport of supplies and force reinforcements was indispensable, particularly for the defence of islands. Securing air routes and sea lanes to enable such reinforcements was an important strategic objective of both the Allied and Axis powers.

At the same time, the Mediterranean was critical area for Britain to defend its empire. Whether or not it could protect its global interests, comprised of colonies and an “informal empire”, was to determine the course of the British state, both militarily and politically. Therefore, measures to maintain the ties and unity of the empire were strictly needed. Britain, which had naval hegemony in the region since the modern era, was inevitably forced to lead the fierce battles in the Mediterranean Theatre, which would also affect the European and North African fronts.

Individual battles such as Crete and Malta were linked to British imperial defence and had significant impact in their respective phases. Moreover, the issues that arose in the process planted the seeds of transformation of post-war international relations. Having severely exhausted its national strength, it was impossible for Britain to adapt to the new phase of the international order while retaining its empire. In this sense, the Second World War put at stake the fate of the British Empire, and at the same time, triggered the collapse of its structure. The battles in the Mediterranean, located in a strategic position on the Empire Route, were events that epitomised this tendency.