

Worksheet S6.3.3

The experience of the Maltese during the Second World War.

THE HORRORS OF WAR (*historical drama – third part*)

Caroline: What are shelters, grandpa?

Grandpa: These were like rooms dug underground or in a hill used for people to take shelter during air raids. The British government dug a tunnel (similar to a corridor) in rocks and families dug rooms for themselves to the sides of it. Every shelter used to have two entries, in case a bomb blocks one entry then the people could use the other entrance.

**A shelter from the inside**

Charlene: How did you all realise that they were coming to attack?

Grandpa: We would know the Italians were coming because the sirens would be played. These made a very loud sound heard around the whole village. As we heard the siren, everyone, old and young, would go running as fast as we could inside the shelter. We would stay in the shelter until we did not hear the airplanes and the bombs anymore. When these stopped we would go back outside and everyone would go running to see if their house was still standing or not.

Francesca: And what if a house was bombed?

Grandpa: Those were really horrible moments. After the attack, people would be all teary. Children would be crying for their fathers. Families torn apart because someone of their family ended up victims of war. Oh! I do not want to remember all the suffering we passed through! Houses destroyed, beautiful churches in ruins, even the roads disappeared because there were stones and walls everywhere – total destruction everywhere.

Roderick: And what did you eat then, grandpa? I imagine you were hungry at times!

Grandpa: There was a lot of poverty during that time. Farmers stopped working their fields due to fear of bombs. Food was really scarce. Even with money you would not be able to find food to buy. And we had no money! There was a lot of hunger! Children remember that until December of 1940, the Italians came and threw over two hundred bombs!

Charlene: So, it was always the Italians who came to attack Malta?

Grandpa: No! Later, Hitler realised that it was not easy to win Malta quickly. Indeed, he then started to send his German airplanes as well. These were really dangerous. They attacked everything. They used to fly very low to the ground so that their aim was more precise and hence, cause more destruction. This happened mainly in 1941 and 1942. Indeed, during these years, more than 10,000 tons of bombs fell over Malta!

Klara: That is a lot! It really was a horrible period considering that one ton equals more than one thousand kilos! Let alone 10,000 tons!

Roderick: So, what defense did Malta have?

Grandpa: There were large number of guns (called batteries) around Malta and Gozo which the soldiers could use to shoot the enemies' airplanes when these came close to land to attack. The radar helped greatly the soldiers to realise that enemy airplanes were coming and so be prepared for them. Due to the danger of an invasion, the shores were surrounded by barbed wire and a number of pillboxes (small concrete rooms with small holes from where soldiers could shoot with machine guns) were made to keep watch on the beaches and the countryside. Initially, Malta had only three old airplanes called Faith, Hope and Charity.



A pill-box hidden with rubble wall ('*ġebel tas-sejjieh*')

Roderick: Only three airplanes?

Grandpa: Over time we received more weapons and better airplanes. The Maltese did their very best and they greatly helped the British. So much that on 15th April 1942, King George VI of England, awarded the whole Maltese population with a cross, known as the George Cross. On the cross there is written in capital letters: "FOR GALLANTRY".

Francesca: Now I understand! It is the same cross found on the Maltese flag!

Grandpa: Exactly! He gave us that precious cross as a demonstration and as an appreciation for the courage shown by the Maltese people. However, that period was so horrible that until 10th May of 1942, two thousand air attacks were done – two thousand times that the siren was played! It was a time of fear and hunger. Malta was on the very edge for surrendering.

Francesca: No one came to help us?

Grandpa: Many did help us, especially England and America. However, it was very difficult for the convoys (ships with food and other help) to arrive Malta. The reason for this were the German airplanes that used to fire and shoot bombs on these large ships to sink them. And so, Malta would have to surrender. In May 1942, the food in Malta had almost finished completely. Victory kitchens were organised, so that the little food left was equally distributed amongst everyone. Convoys had to come to provide Malta with help. In total, there were 14 ships coming; 9 of them ended-up sank.

Roderick: Were they not able to enter the Grand Harbour?

Grandpa: On 13th August 1942, 3 ships arrived in Malta. These were: Port Chalmers, Melbourne Star and Rochester Castle. Two days later, on 15th August, even Brisbane Star and the tanker Ohio, which was in badly damaged and almost sank, arrived.

Klara: Who knows how much our fellow Maltese rejoiced that day!

Grandpa: We were very happy! It was a time of great joy when the ships entered the port. It was a memorable day. A day of hope. A day when what we prayed for in the shelters was heard.

Caroline: And it was also the Feast of the Assumption!

Grandpa: Exactly, it was the day of Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven! This is the reason it remained known as “The Santa Marija Convoy”.

Francesca: Grandpa, I am truly enjoying listening to the involvement of Malta in the Second World War.

Charlene: Even me, grandpa. Also, did the children go to school then?

Roderick: And, did they play any games?

Grandpa: We rarely went to school due to constant attacks. Often times, we used to play by imagining we were fighting and shooting each other! Still, many children used to be sick with serious illnesses due to lack of proper food and dirt.

Klara: What a pity, you all suffered without a reason! Also grandpa, was Gozo hit during the period of the Second War?

Grandpa: Yes. The Island of the Three Hills suffered and cried the same way as its sister Malta. This happened especially when the Luftwaffe (the German air power) arrived and attacked locations like the Mġarr Harbour, near the church of Lourdes and even homes in Rabat and Ghajnsielem were demolished. Actually I remember the Grech family from Hamri Street, inside Ghajnsielem, which ended when a bomb fell over their house! Unfortunately, all of them died!

Roderick: When did the war end then?

Grandpa: The war continued until 1945, but in 1943 many air strikes on Malta were decreasing slowly until they totally ceased when Italy surrendered in September of 1943. This is why on 8th September two Sieges are remembered: the Great Siege of 1565 and the end of the Second World War for Malta.

Caroline: Wow, grandpa! You really know how to tell a story!

Grandpa: Remember what I just told you. There are no winners and no losers in war. The horrors of war are something that should be dreaded. There is nothing better than unity and peace. Now I have a dried throat. Wouldn't it be better if we went to take a coffee from our Roman friends?

Children: Yes, grandpa! You really need one. Thanks.

Answer these questions.

1. Mention some damages caused to the Maltese Islands during the Second World War.

2. Why were the shores surrounded by barbed wire?

3. What use did the radar have during the Second World War?

4. Which were the worst years of the war for Malta and why?

5. Why do you think Malta did not fall to the hands of the enemies?

6. Why did the war in Malta stop before the end of the Second World War?

7. What effects did the war have on the Maltese population?

8. Why do you think Grandpa said “There are no winners and no losers in war”?

9. What is the name of the international organisation founded after the war in order to protecting peace?
