

Volume 2, Issue 2 (Nov 2025)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life



BOOK REVIEW

The Great Siege of Malta, by Marcus Bull

Published by Allen Lane, 2025

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Keywords: Siege of Malta (1565), Marcus Bull, Ottoman Empire vs. Knights of St. John, Religious and Political Conflict, Military Strategy and Siege Warfare, Christian-Muslim Relations in the 16th Century

Anyone who has read other books about the siege of Malta like Bruce Ware Allen's 'The Great Siege of Malta: The Epic Battle Between the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of St. John', would be curious to know if there is any new perspective or information about this war. Allen presented the historical, political and religious perspectives to this war. Needless to say, it was a consequential war that defined religious future of Islam and Christianity in regards to their expansion beyond the 16th Century. Its significance in Christian history can be seen in works of art about it in places like the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In evaluating Marcus Bull's book, this review looks at its strengths in view of earlier works, while analysing the historical, political and religious aspects presented.

The 18th day of May 1565 set the stage for an epic battle between the Knights in Malta and the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of their Sultan. The match was unequal, with all the odds seemingly favouring the Turks. A small contingent to defend the island was composed of about 580 Knight Hospitallers supported by a couple thousand soldiers from the native inhabitants of Malta. They were to face the might of the Ottoman Empire. Bull poses questions and presents an inquisitive aspect to the reader. At this point in history, there are religious tensions between the Christians and Muslims. There is the quest to control trade between Europe, Northern Africa and Asia not to mention piracy by the surrounding nations. He brings these tensions to the fore as he narrates the battle, but seems lean in favour of the Christian side in his presentation.

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The style of using 'siege' as a strategy of war is discussed here in light of other historical events where this strategy was used. Readers who love war strategies will be curious to find out how the powerful Ottoman Empire, which had pushed the Knights from Rhodes Island to settle in Malta would have the tables turned against them. Earlier, the Ottomans had used the art of the siege, assault and attrition to successfully gain a victory over the Knights and drive them from the Island of Rhodes. On the religious front, readers may like to know how a solidly united Islam under the leadership of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent would not win against a divided Christian side led by the Grand Master Jean Parisot la Vallette. The Christians were divided by the Reformation with the west part of Europe like England and Germany largely moving away from the leadership of the Pope, while Spain and Italy were leaning towards the Roman Catholics under the leadership of the Pope.

The book gives a detailed background of the activities leading to the war making it easy for the reader to understand the context of the battle. The tense situation politically and religiously around the Mediterranean is highlighted without forgetting the other activities that were a mix of trade and piracy. Bull's work is well researched and includes the aftermath of the war. The chronology of events from the time of the Crusades leading to the advent of the war is explained.

The Knights had been preparing for such an eventuality since their arrival in Malta. The strategic planning before the battle included, fortification, food and gun fire storage and supply. A weakness in Marcus Bull's book is that he does not attribute the success of the Knights to some specific strategy.

A detail that several books do not capture but is captured by Bull's investigative approach is that not every Knight was of noble character and behaviour. The Knights of St. John's were dedicated to caring for the sick and the poor pilgrims to Jerusalem from the eleventh century under the leadership of Grandmaster Gerard. Because of frequent attacks, the Knights had to include military skills in their work. Before the siege of Malta, some Knights had deviated from the main course of the Order of St. John. An example was Gregorio de Adorno who had abandoned the Knights' charitable course and even turned into a murderer. These 'former knights' played a significant role during this war, bringing them back to the original course of the order of the Knights of St. John.

For those who love military strategies and adventure, this is a book to read. The book also gives a honorific mention of the contribution of the local Maltese in this battle. They fought heroically alongside the Knights to protect the Island from falling into the hands of the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the book, the reader will see the

importance of the siege of Malta in Christian history. Although Bull's presentation leans on the Christian side, a religious zealot would be disappointed in the book's attribution of success to control of trade, piracy, politics and power of the wider Mediterranean area and beyond.

For the Ottoman Empire, the victory of the Knights despite being celebrated by Christendom, does not change much in their broader scheme of operations. This is Bull's view on the impact of the war. He sees this war as a major event in history, but that changed very little. The quest for the Ottoman activities in the region did not change. This can be seen when the Ottomans, using the same siege tactics to attack the Hungarian town of Szigetvar the following year. That siege took place from 5th August to 8th September 1566 and resulted in Ottoman Victory, in spite of the Sultan dying in his tent of natural causes. Bull points at the sultan as the one whose ego may have been hurt by this small setback which was corrected by staging the Sultan personally leading the next assault on Szigetvar within months.

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To cite (Harvard):

Lucas N. (2025) 'The Great Siege of Malta, by Marcus Bull Published by Allen Lane, 2025'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 101-104.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.