

A Mediterranean Grenada in the making

by Liliana Gorini

Once a British colony, then a non-aligned country whose neutrality was guaranteed by Italy after 1980, the island nation of Malta is now being transformed into a Soviet-controlled "Grenada" in the middle of the Mediterranean. The small strategic island, only a few miles from the U.S. missile base in Comiso, Sicily, has signed a military treaty with Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and an assistance and cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union. The Soviets usually enter into such treaty arrangements only with extremely friendly countries such as Cuba, North Korea, or their East-bloc satellites.

There occurred, undoubtedly with British permission, a Soviet-inspired coup of sorts on the island at some point during recent weeks. It didn't look like a coup—because the old leader, Dom Mintoff, was kept in power for a while. But then, upon his return from Moscow where he had signed this treaty, the Maltese Prime Minister resigned, clearly a prearranged move. Taking his place at the head of the Maltese government is one Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, a radical extremist who had been pushing for a pro-Soviet shift.

Bonnici's ideological tendencies are exemplified by the fact that in September 1984, he led a left commando group which stormed the Archbishop's palace in La Valletta, capital of Malta. He is, in short, a little Qaddafi.

How did we come to such a dangerous development for the whole Atlantic Alliance? Who is the new Maltese Premier?

On Nov. 19, the day Italian Premier Bettino Craxi met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo to discuss Qaddafi's role in international terrorism, Qaddafi himself was in Malta. His discussions with Mintoff resulted in Malta's unilateral cancellation of the neutrality deal with the Italian government in force since 1980. There followed the expulsion of the Italian troops who were still on the island. A new military treaty with Libya was signed, according to which Libya will intervene in support of Malta "whenever the Maltese government will explicitly demand it." Libya also committed itself to training Maltese military personnel.

To make the point clear to the Italian government, which was not even consulted on the moves, the day of Qaddafi's visit a bomb blew up one floor of the Italian embassy in La Valletta, and two bombs exploded in the Archbishop's palace,

the same one that had been stormed by the new Maltese Premier Bonnici.

When Craxi telephoned Dom Mintoff to demand an explanation for the unilateral cancellation of the Italy-Malta treaty, Mintoff refused to come to the phone. He did let Craxi know that he was about to leave for Moscow.

Even before leaving on the four-day visit to Moscow, Mintoff had signed various economic agreements with the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Albania, North Korea, and China. He simultaneously renewed Malta's embargo on Japanese products and limitations on French imports, and threatened to do the same to the Italians.

The Maltese government also called in a Soviet ship and submarine to take care of the recovery of war relics in Malta's territorial waters, an assignment which had initially been given to Great Britain. The small island rapidly began to swarm with Czechoslovakian ministers, Bulgarian delegations, Soviet "experts," and, according to the Rome daily *Il Tempo*, even with hundreds of Cuban soldiers. Grenada indeed.

As of now, Malta has committed itself to build eight ships for the Soviet Union, two for Bulgaria, and a dock for China. It has struck similar deals with other communist countries.

When he arrived in Moscow on Dec. 17, Dom Mintoff received the red-carpet treatment: He was received at the airport by Soviet Premier Nikolai Tikhonov and various economic ministers. He then met at length with President Konstantin Chernenko. The two men issued a joint communiqué which demanded that the Mediterranean be declared a "nuclear-free zone" and emphasized the total agreement between Mintoff and Chernenko.

The Soviet daily *Pravda* dedicated its front page to Mintoff's biography, and praised his important role among the "neutral" countries.

It was a charade. So important was his role in fact, that upon his return to La Valletta, Mintoff resigned. In stepped Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici.

Bonnici's succession makes Soviet control over the strategic island official. Former education minister in Mintoff's government and a leader of the pro-Soviet Maltese Labor Party, Bonnici led his party in sometimes violent agitation against Catholic private schools. Bonnici launched the anti-Church campaign at approximately the time of the Vatican's pro-Western shift away from Cardinal Casaroli's *Ostpolitik* of the last two years. It was during this campaign that Bonnici and a gang of thugs stormed the palace of the Archbishop of La Valletta.

Since that time, September 1984, he has been deputy chairman of the Labor Party. He is considered its "ideological leader"—a perfect choice for Marshal Ogarkov and the Soviet leadership.

The Russians are very clearly determined to establish a military base on the island. For the Atlantic Alliance and all of Western Europe, Bonnici's government is a security threat that in the future can only grow.