



# Revolutionary reckonings

Greek independence, 1821 and the historians

**MARK MAZOWER**

**T**HE UPRISING IN OTTOMAN EUROPE which culminated in the independence of Greece was launched exactly 200 years ago. In a matter of months, a Christian peasant insurgency ousted the Ottomans from most of the Peloponnese in a conflict of immense ferocity, while Greek ships challenged the Sultan's hold over the eastern Mediterranean. The contest could scarcely have been more uneven; Europe's Great Powers could not have been less supportive. Yet the Greeks persisted, plunging the Ottoman Empire into crisis, mobilizing the sympathies of the European public and eventually forcing the Powers to intervene to bring the fighting to an end by backing the establishment of an independent Greek state. Covid is unlikely to stop the exhibitions, lectures, conferences and festivities that have been planned; online you can already buy bicentennial backpacks, mugs, pens and commemorative coins. Nor does the anniversary merit less: the Greek war of independence was perhaps the earliest triumph of nationalism - famously defined by Lord Acton as the idea that "nations would not be governed by foreigners". It was in this sense a forerunner of the political struggles that transformed the map of Europe and created the world we inhabit today.

In 1822, a French philhellene called Claude Raffanel, based at the consulate in Smyrna, published the first volume of his *Histoire des Événements [sic] de la Grèce*. He was conscious of living in exceptional times. "There are famous epochs which seem marked out by Providence", he begins. "Such were the centuries of Sésostris, Priam, Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed and Louis XIV, and such, too, is our own." Two more volumes appeared, along with a separate history of the modern Greeks, before the author was killed in the struggle for Athens five years later. Raffanel was probably the uprising's first historian but others quickly followed in Europe and North America. Inside Ottoman Greece, the printing

press had been unknown; when it arrived after independence, veterans and their proxies began settling old wartime scores on the page. Their battles were not for the faint-hearted; anyone perturbed by the quality of public discourse in the age of Twitter should read the critical abuse endemic in Athens in the nineteenth century. The former chieftain Makriyannis taught himself to write at the age of thirty-two and produced famously invective-filled memoirs, a classic of modern Greek letters. The politician Spiridon Trikoupis's politely thoughtful three volumes - hailed in London as the work of a "second Polybius" - were contemptuously dismissed in Greece as "a speculative enterprise" by a Peloponnesian grandee whose own wartime recollections contained insults of such range and length that his family sat on them for a century. Memoirs elicited *Confutations*, then *Confutations of the Confutations*. Chroniclers published mammoth document collections to defend the honour and reputation of clans, islands and entire regions.

The Greek state embraced the veterans and their memories but cared little about wartime records, mouldering in ministry basements when not thrown away. It was left to a young researcher-collector called Giannis Vlachoyiannis to mount his own salvage operations in the capital's second-hand bookshops, tavernas and scrap-merchants. In 1901, he listed some of his finds: "The Samos archive was found in a builder's yard at 100 Odos Athinas; the collection of texts from the siege of Messolonghi was found in the same yard; ... another valuable collection was found in the garbage of the paperworks in Faleron". In 1915, Vlachoyiannis was appointed first head of the state archives; but on the eve of the Second World War, he was still bemoaning the "grievous signs" of indifference that had shrouded the subject for nearly a century.

That all changed in the Cold War, when indifference was replaced by ideological combat and the meaning of 1821 became an interpretative battlefield. The stridently anti-communist colonels who seized power in Athens in a military coup in 1967

**"Greek pirates defending a bay against Britons", by Carl von Heydeck, 1836**

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had a fixation with the event. They declared their dictatorship to be a "national-salvationist revolution" (*ethnosotirios epanastasis*) that would complete the work of its predecessor. In 1971, the 150th anniversary of the uprising, more than 300 books were published on the subject - an astonishing number dwarfing that of any year before or since. The nation's classrooms rang with the exhortation: "Long live the revolution of 25 March 1821! Long live the revolution of 21 April 1967!" It was ironic to watch an authoritarian military Junta heroizing a bunch of unruly and quarrelsome chieftains who had been united by few things stronger than their loathing for the idea of a regular army. But the predictable result of turning 1821 into fascist kitsch was that by the time the colonels fell from power in 1974, everyone was fed up with the subject.

This explains why, amid the truly remarkable resurgence in historical studies in Greece that took place with the restoration of democracy, the subject of its independence struggle was initially neglected. An exception was the scholarly journal *Mnimon*, which consistently published high-calibre research on the subject. Just three years ago, it published not one but two important volumes of essays on the Greek revolution. These signalled an end to the neglect of the recent past and showcased a younger generation of historians that was finding new reasons for returning to 1821.

One of these volumes is a collective tribute to the late historian Despoina Themeli-Katifori, who had contributed to the journal from the start. She had produced a pathbreaking dissertation in the midst of the Junta in which she examined the eradication of piracy in the Aegean in late 1820s. It was not the kind of subject the Junta liked to dwell on, not least because it used the wonderfully rich papers of the maritime courts to highlight the more mercenary struggles that often powered the revolution. Her work highlighted the importance of the economics of the war more generally, a crucial dimension which earlier generations had almost entirely ignored, as well as the realities of the independence struggle at sea.

Continuing Themeli-Katifori's maritime focus, Gelina Harlaftis at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Crete has directed two astonishingly rich collective research projects. The first, dating back to 2004, deployed an international team of scholars who scoured shipping manifests, trade statistics and other archival data in some sixteen cities around Europe to build up a picture of unprecedented scope and detail, not just about the Greeks and their ships but about the entire eighteenth-century Mediterranean world from which they sprang: a vast online database ensures their work will inspire more research in future. A second volume, out this year, focuses on 1821 and the interconnections between commerce and fighting during the conflict. Cumulatively, this work changes our understanding of the relationship between Mediterranean commerce, empire and nationalism at a crucial phase in world history. Since Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean has generally been relegated to the status of a secondary seaway after the discovery of the Americas. In fact it was at the heart of Europe's growth, with Greek ships in particular not only carrying the Russian grain trade and linking the Tsarist expansion into the Black Sea, but linking the Levant to Montevideo, Bombay and Calcutta. The eighteenth-century Ottoman empire too was no bystander: in reality it fostered this trade in all kinds of ways in the decades preceding the struggle. Even after the fighting started, amid scenes of great violence at sea as well as on land, Greek ships continued sailing in and out of Ottoman ports, blurring the line between combatant and non-combatants often to the point of non-existence in a struggle in which legally there was actually no Greek navy but rather a set of occasionally contracted vessels that remained privately owned by shipowners based in the islands.

The larger economics of the struggle that began in 1821 is another area where new scholarship is

transforming our understanding. With a handful of exceptions, mostly now extremely dated, money was too sordid a subject to sully the memory of the heroic struggle. Yet the truth is that when the Greeks took on the Ottomans, they faced an immense disparity in fiscal reach. The Sultan had a centuries-old empire at his disposal that was set up to extract taxes and possessed abundant manpower and many of the resources needed for war. If it was in the throes of a decades' long budgetary crisis and yawning deficits, that still placed the Ottoman state far ahead of the Greeks, who had no bureaucracy, no taxation system, few weapons and limited manpower.

Money may not have bothered earlier historians but it certainly bothered the protagonists. Soldiers haggled over their wages; traders ran blockades to provision all sides. A superb new study by Antonis Diakakis of the town of Messolonghi, perched between mountains and lagoon, brings the material conditions of wartime life sharply into focus. At sea, Greek crews bargained hard for pay and prizes. Eftychia Liata's new analysis of the all-important Hydriot fleet drills down into the expenses of a single ship, the frigate *Timoleon*. Piracy, privateering and plunder were hardwired into the war economy from the start, thanks to the investments of Greek leaders like Petros Mavromichalis, the so-called Bey of the Mani. But the struggle not only created a demand for the island ships; it also enabled a new means of financing them, and it is not coincidental that one of the earliest administrative acts of the first provisional government was to assert its fiscal prerogatives over the islands of the Aegean. It was thus the poor farmers and traders of Naxos, Santorini and other similar tourist destinations in our own times who became part of the great experiment of establishing a centralized state in the middle of the conflict.

The islands were targeted for a reason: the wartime government found it hard to squeeze anything out of the mainland peasantry. Too many other people were in the queue ahead of them. First and foremost, there were the traditional landowners and notable clans of the Peloponnese whose grip on "their" villages dated back deep into Ottoman times. The challenge these great families faced to their privileges came primarily from the armed fighters they had once employed as bodyguards, men like Theodoros Kolokotronis who rose in the struggle to become great warlords and heroes and - if they played their cards right - "generals" and "commanders" as well. A revelatory new book by a young historian, Simos Bozikis, trawls through the wartime archives of the provisional administration to show how weak and impoverished the central direction of the Greek revolution really was. Published at the end of 2020, *Elliniki epanastasi kai dimosia oikonomia* (Greek Revolution and Public Finances) fundamentally reshapes our understanding of the conflict. It underscores the uneven nature of the contest, the fragile fiscal basis of centralized power and the continued privileges afforded by private wealth. Above all, it makes one marvel at the endurance and tenacity of the large mass of poor Greeks eking out a living from the rocky soil, while a succession of powerful forces - sometimes claiming to fight in their name, sometimes in the Sultan's - did their best to take from them what little they had.

The Greeks were poor in most things but wealthy in one - their language - and it is hard to think of a comparable peasant insurgency in which so many of the participants managed to leave their own testimonies. The tongue of Orthodox faith, learning and commerce, Greek was not spoken by all the participants - some of the great heroes of the conflict in fact preferred Albanian - but it was surprisingly accessible as a means of record-keeping and correspondence. A chieftain such as Spiros Milios, from the crags of southern Albania, had already learned how to write before the war and penned his experiences afterwards. Illiterate chieftains had secretar-

ies, often village boys who had attended local schools run by priests. Fotakos was the *nom de guerre* of one of them: a priest's son, sent off as a youth to learn trade in the Black Sea, he returned to the Morea as a revolutionary and served Kolokotronis as his adjutant and secretary. His memoirs eschew later pieties and present the war as a set of intimate encounters among men who knew one another well, Muslims and Christians alike. The Greek Parliament has marked the bicentennial with a series of publications to highlight the importance of such accounts. A brilliant set of essays entitled *1821 kai apomnimonevmata* (1821 and Memoirs), focuses on the autobiography as a form. It not only explores individual memoirs; more fundamentally, it asks how we should read them. They are the building-blocks in the construction of heroic myths; that is clear. But they also embody strange confusions of genre and perspective, shifting often from first-person testimony to third-person narrative and back again. The very discipline of history is being produced through them, and this thoughtful volume reminds us that the nineteenth century is the era not only of national war but also of the professionalization of disciplines and of criticism, so that event and text are wrapped together in a complex in which each contributes to the making of the other.

Along with Fotakos, a number of these literate Greek intellectual-revolutionaries had banded together before 1821 in the *Filiki Etaireia* (Friendly Society), the secret conspiratorial organization that had been formed in Odessa in 1814 and laid the groundwork for the revolution. It was not the largest of the secret societies that alarmed the Holy Alliance in those years but it was certainly the most successful, for which other could claim to have won national independence? Greece's intellectual historians, for whom modernity was synonymous with the Enlightenment, once focused on the high-profile, mostly older Greek savants who wrote serious texts and were in close contact with their counterparts among the philosophes of Paris, London and Göttingen. The new research focuses on these younger men in the thick of the fighting, "secondary" figures (as two scholars describe them) who served the revolution as "pen-pushers", drafting proclamations and acting as the crucial intermediaries between the more parochial fighters and the international scene. Great ideas give way to the power of networks as the key to the Greeks' revolutionary success.

One of the best works of this kind is Vasilis Panayiotopoulos's study in 2019 of a little-known figure called Konstantinos Kantiotis. The author, now in his late eighties, belongs to the generation of leftists who reshaped the historical profession in Greece after 1974 and turned the country into what it is today - on a per capita basis, surely one of the world's leading producers of high-quality scholarly history. Having overseen the publication of the archives of Ali Pasha of Jannina, an extraordinarily complex undertaking, Panayiotopoulos turned his attention first to a pair of Phanariot princes, enmeshed in the Etaireia, and then to Kantiotis, a kind of Zelig-like figure, shrouded in mystery. How to explain the presence of this man, aide to Russian foreign minister Capodistrias - supposedly an avowed enemy of the Etaireia - in the Etaireia itself, and then not just in the Etaireia but in the mission it sent to the Morea in the summer of 1821 to take charge of the uprising there? The life of the "lesser" Kantiotis is revealed to be of some importance after all as the reader, guided sensitively by the author, tries to fill in the blanks in the historical record. A similar effect is produced by a younger scholar, Giannis Kokkonas, who recreates the ideological activism of another "lesser" Etaireist, Skylitzis Omiridis, whose ceaseless journeying and intense revolutionary commitment provided Greek islanders with counsel and guidance at key moments.

Kokkonas is also the author of a remarkable piece of historical sleuthing. The Greeks' capture - and

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subsequent sack - of the town of Tripolitsa in the Morea in September 1821 was the first major victory of the revolution. It had been preceded by tense negotiations between representatives of the town's Ottoman elite and the Greek revolutionary leaders. Kokkonas has dug up an extraordinary verbatim account of their exchange - a record kept at the time by a conscientious Etaireist whom almost everyone else has overlooked - to show both the Ottomans and the Greeks struggling to define the political stakes of their conflict and to articulate what political dispensation might follow. Once again it turns out to have been the humble Greek revolutionaries, as yet lacking any state of their own, who understood the power of the written record and give us insights of astonishing immediacy.

Which leads naturally to the last and perhaps most important area now opening up before our eyes. Can the Ottoman speak? would be a reasonable question of the generations of historians who simply ignored the entire imperial dimension of the conflict. But Ottoman studies have taken off in Greece and this has begun to change. We now have, for instance, the translation of an important account of the revolution written by an Ottoman official from the Morea. The impact of seeing these events through Ottoman eyes can scarcely be exaggerated. The publication of the recollections of Yusuf Morawi Bey in particular speaks not only to the presence of Ottomanists in Greek universities, but to their close interactions with colleagues in the field in Turkey and elsewhere, and to the Greek National Research Foundation's laudable commitment to supporting this work.

One might have thought that there was nothing more to be said about 1821. And yet, this is not how history works. The eternal verities of the revolution and the endless replays of a few familiar scenes have hidden a far more interesting reality, one in which the emergence of an independent nation turns out to have been simultaneously a new chapter in the life of the empire it was trying to escape and a formative moment in the life of the continent it was seeking to join. It is unlikely that there will be any more appropriate or important tribute to the revolutionaries of 1821 than the devotion of the historical profession in Greece today. ■

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