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Mundane but precious: Greek liberation from Ottoman rule

Mark Mazower, *The Greek Revolution. 1821 and the Making of Modern Europe,* London: Allen Lane 2021, 608 pp., ISBN 9780241004104

Historiographic treatments of the Greek Revolution have traditionally offered binary depictions of this protracted, remarkably complex war of liberation. Yet a wealth of archival material, coupled with an increasingly nuanced awareness of its protagonists' diplomatic, social and economic motives, are beginning to yield a picture quite remote from the one-dimensional narratives of a clear-cut Greco-Turkish confrontation. Indeed, in 1821 a cross-class swathe of groups of wide linguistic diversity – which included the militant Albanian element in Epirus – were drawn into a clash that was not a "two-way Greco-Turkish struggle after all," as Mark Mazower aptly indicates.

While a generation earlier the protomartyr of the Revolution Rhigas Velestinlis had not hesitated to include the Turkish Moslems among those whom he believed should also take up arms alongside the oppressed Balkan peoples in their battle against Ottoman absolutism, the prospect of pursuing what the author characterizes as "the magnificently ecumenical horizons of Enlightenment republicanism" was short-lived, drawing its last breath not long after the first clashes broke out and religious faith reared its head over the revolutionary battlefield as the decisive dividing line between combatants and non-combatants alike. Earlier plans, quintessential products of the pre-national world, such as those devised by the astute Corfiot diplomat and first Governor Ioannis Kapodistrias, who had envisaged the Albanian Moslems joining forces with the native Greeks, were also thwarted by the momentum of what swiftly developed into an Orthodox uprising.

Although Mazower tips his hat to a number of key readings, from the "masterly" early histories of Thomas Gordon (1832) and George Finlay (1860) to the recent *Critical Dictionary* of the Revolution edited by Paschalis Kitromilides and Constantinos Tsoukalas (2021), his study is clearly suffused with a deep sense of sympathy with the Greek

fighters. Despite the widespread illiteracy of the times, he notes, and unlike their counterparts in the Iberian peninsula and in eastern Europe, the protagonists of the Greek revolution "were never very far from the written word… thanks to the Church and a network of village schools and enterprising merchants." Indeed, in the three decades leading up to the outbreak of the Revolution the Greek-speaking schools under Ottoman rule saw a tenfold increase and the publications a fivefold increase. Alongside works by prominent philhellenes such as Maxine Raybaud (*Mémoires sur la Grèce*) and Samuel Gridley Howe (*Letters and Journals*) as well as the modest but growing harvest of Ottoman memoirs translated into English, such as those by Yusuf el-Moravi and Kabudli Efendi, Mazower draws invaluable insights from the words set down by the insurgents who found themselves on the front line of an all-out battle with the Ottomans.

The work is divided into two parts, of which the first concentrates on the conditions that gave rise to the Greek Revolution. It details the collective resilience and valorous feats – but also, not infrequently, the disconcerting capitulations and fratricidal clashes – of an incipient nation on the long path to its liberation. A decisive source of social cohesion emanated from the grassroots imperative to fight, built on enhanced cross-class bonds as well as by default, a direct result of the monolithically religious character imposed on the conflict by the Porte from the outset. But it was also forged from the outside, through timely international interventions which secured the Revolution's success – the topic on which the second part of the study is focused. Even though the ostensibly humanitarian character of these interventions far from guaranteed their success, the philhellenic component provided an intellectually as well as aesthetically alluring framework for outsiders to empathize with the cause and thereby negotiate a revamped Hellenic identity capable of acting as a double-edged sword against both European reaction and Ottoman absolutism.

By 1823 time seemed to be on the side of the Greeks, as the Holy Alliance was beginning to lose ground, the Russian military was growing increasingly restless over the dark fate that had befallen their Orthodox brethren and the Ottomans were risking further alienating the European

powers for the brutal treatment they accorded to their subjugated peoples. A key point which the author emphasizes is that the remarkable endurance of the insurgents and the absence of a regular army or a standing navy under the command of the Sublime Porte indicated that both sides would need to form external alliances, which they sought in Europe and the Eyalet of Egypt respectively. This virtually guaranteed that, even if they were victorious, both sides would need to make some not insignificant concessions to the third parties whose aid they had solicited.

Thus it came to be after the destruction of the Ottoman fleet at Navarino in 1827, when the Great Powers made it clear to the Greek leadership that theirs had been an intervention which had sought to restore peace to the neighborhood – but little more. Independence would not be guaranteed before another three years of diplomatic horse-trading and a humiliating Ottoman defeat by Russia in 1829.

Even after the London protocol of 1830, however, a score of issues would remain unsettled, from citizenship rights, property and compensation to borders and the title of its ruler. The guarantor powers would not agree to disburse the first tranche of a much-anticipated 60-million-franc loan vital to sustain the nascent state's threadbare fiscal system until eight months after the first Governor had fallen to an assassin's bullet. By then the country had descended into such chaos that renewed credence was given to the enemies of the revolution's claim that the Greeks lacked the political maturity to stand outside the Ottoman edifice. The civil clashes after the death of Kapodistrias legitimized the imposition of a Regency Council composed of three Bavarians, who would govern Greece with ill-concealed disdain for the institutional legacy of the National Assemblies until finally transferring power to the absolutist monarch King Otto in 1835.

Indeed, Mazower reminds us that the ending of the Revolution was never a clear-cut affair: independence was a gradual process that would last "for years if not decades." During the insurgency, "all the weaker side could really do was to hold out and hope," while the road to establishing its national sovereignty was an upward struggle that "in some ways… continues to this day." This gave rise to a "litany of all-

round dissatisfaction" – not least with the fact that the Revolution did not culminate in a divine redemption of the Irredenta of Strabo – which would develop into a "trope that endures to this day." And yet, the author concludes, while the Greeks may not have succeeded in liberating Constantinople or in creating the conditions for an idyllic community dedicated to social justice, their independence must not be dismissed as illusory. For they had compelled the Powers to break "the old taboo against intervention" and finally achieved something "mundane but no less precious: the freedom to shape their future in a state of their own within an international system of states."

Drawing a parallel with Greece's present-day struggles, Mazower extolls the Greek society for being "remarkably resilient" and enduring many hardships, from the European debt crisis to the refugee crisis and the ongoing global pandemic. To him this indicates a mode of coping which was also a key to the success of the Revolution, a story that was less about individual heroics and self-sacrifice than "social endurance in the face of systemic upheaval." His is an intertemporal outlook which seeks to unveil the dimly acknowledged affinities between the past and the present, through the evolution of communities which act as nodes of a collective civic morality. This discrete but discernible hallmark of his works does not spring from ideological motives, nor from a wish to impose coherent structures on his account, but from a disinclination to be drawn into the realm of evolutionary historiography – and also, not inconceivably, from a desire to pay homage to the Bundist spirit of his ancestors which he has declared to draw inspiration from.

On an epistemological level, however, this proclivity likely originates not just in his unwillingness to sacrifice analytical rigor for the finesse of a seamless narrative but, principally, in his earlier imbuement in a mutely subversive paradigm which has treated social anthropology as an essentially historical discipline. In navigating the ebbs and tides of Enlightenment-inspired tinkering, his gaze has been transfixed on the perennial disjuncture between ideologically motivated proclamations and political practice – in this case, between the pronouncements of the revolutionary assemblies and the realities of

the networked socioeconomic substrata of the private interest-clusters which underpinned them.

The author does not limit himself to the formidable commercial or philhellenic networks that nourished the revolutionary efforts from without, stressing that, in the absence of a central command in the first days of the uprising, it was the preexisting bonds of "patronage and authority" which managed to remain operative and thereby to "structure the apparent chaos." As for the collapse of the endeavor from within – a prospect which, amid devastating defeats and perfidious factionalism, was never remote – it was only averted by the "'inexhaustible patience' of village society."

Employing the cartographic representations expeditiously prepared by 19th century military officers from the Continent, Mazower nevertheless opts to go deeper by adopting an approach borne of the empathetic anthropographies of J. K. Campbell and Michael Herzfeld. These sketch out the ecumenical micromechanics of power systems, perhaps more accentuated in the resource-starved peripheries but no less a fixture of their polities than in the fabric of the more affluent class-ordered societies of the West. He thus steers clear of both the linear-minded doxologies of traditionalist historiography and the fragmentary luster of presentist studies, offering an incisive account of the pursuit of Greek independence in post-Napoleonic Europe from the vantage point of the sheer resilience that was required to establish it. It is the voices from down below that he regularly strains his ears to listen to, from the lowly klepht's to those of the women of the revolution. By so doing he constructs a captivating narrative of the "mundane but precious" banality of heroism, in what would turn out to be the first successful revolutionary uprising among the incipient national movements of the Balkan peninsula.

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