

1821. The Revolution, the Nation, the State

The Revolution of 1821, like any other revolution, was a direct intervention of the masses into historical events. The forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership, which until that time determined their 'destiny', created a new political-state edifice and a new 'destiny' of the people.

The national idea, nationalism, was the guiding principle of the Revolution, having as its other side republicanism and constitutionalism. The economic and political processes of the unification of populations and regions brought about by the development of capitalist relations and its related commercial networks constituted the background for the prevalence of nationalism and the ideas of the Enlightenment.

The aim was the 'revival of enslaved Hellas' in a new 'enlightened' state, i.e. a modern constitutional-democratic state, thus a bourgeois state. The resolution of the 1st National Assembly formulates the above in a clear manner:

'Descendants of the wise and philanthropic nation of the Hellenes, contemporaries of the at present enlightened and based on the rule of law peoples of Europe, and spectators of the good, which they enjoy under the unbreakable aegis of the laws, it was no longer possible for us to endure the cruel scourge of the Ottoman state to the point of callousness and gullibility, which for about four centuries has been on our heads, and instead of reason, acclaimed arbitrary will as law, persecuted and ordered everything despotically and autocratically (*Resolution of the first National Assembly of the Hellenes in Epidaurus*, in *Epidaurus*', Jan. 15, 1822.

From the very first moment of its declaration, the Greek Revolution proclaimed its radical enlightenment-bourgeois character. And, from the very first moment, it constituted corresponding bourgeois-representative institutions, in the perspective of establishing a (capitalist) constitutional state.

But if the character of the regime which the Revolution sought to create was more or less clear, and which, moreover, it did indeed create in the regions where it prevailed in the period 1821-1827, the boundaries of the 'Hellenic nation' which the revolutionaries sought to incorporate into the new state, i.e. to 'liberate', were not as clear.

Lets briefly look back at some facts. The Greek Revolution was plotted by the secret-conspiratorial Friendly Society (*Philiki Etaireia*). In fact, it was the leader of the Friendly Society, Alexander Ypsilantis himself, who the Revolution on 24 February 1821 in the semi-autonomous from Ottoman rule (the 'Sublime Porte') principality of Moldavia, i.e. in present-day Rumania. It was almost immediately extended to the neighbouring principality of Wallachia (also in present-day Rumania).

The official 'national' account of the Revolution, which always praises the contribution of the Friendly Society in the preparation and declaration of the Revolution, bypasses, usually with a brief or epigrammatic reference, the events in Moldavia and Wallachia during the period February-September 1821.

In fact, even before the end of the second decade of its existence, the Greek state, by a Decree signed on 15 March 1838 by King Otto and the Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs G. Glarakis, 'decided' that the Revolution was proclaimed in the monastery of Aghia Lavra in Kalavryta on 25 March 1821 (the day of the celebration of the 'Annunciation of the Virgin Mary' by the Orthodox Church).

The legend of Aghia Lavra, which the Greek state maintains reverently to this day with the annual celebrations of the Revolution, is not only intended to symbolically link 'Hellenism and Orthodoxy'; it functions also as a mechanism for capturing the Revolution within the Greek state, and conceals a question that is, however, before our eyes: why did the *Greek Revolution* begin in *Rumania*?

This question becomes even clearer if we consider in some detail the events that took place in the Principalities. A typical example: in one of the three Proclamations issued in Iași, the capital of Moldavia, by Alexander Ypsilantis on 24 February 1821, entitled 'To Greek Men, those sojourning in Moldavia and Wallachia!' is declared: 'Morea, Epirus, Thessaly, Serbia, Bulgaria, the Islands of the Archipelago, in a few words the whole of Hellas took up arms, with a view to shake off the onerous yoke of the Barbarians'.

Several Greek historians have challenged the myth of 'Aghia Lavra'. Nevertheless, while 'Aghia Lavra' and the 25th of March may be matters of dispute, contemporary Greek historiography, almost unanimously, abstains from any attempt to penetrate the riddle, of why the *Greek Revolution* started in today's *Rumania*.

This chasm in the national narrative (and lapse of memory) is a symptom of an aporia vis-à-vis the vague boundaries of 'the nation' at the time of the Revolution. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the exponents of Greek

Enlightenment and at the same time forefathers of Greek nationalism believed that Greekness is identified with Orthodoxy, as the nascent Greek nation was at the time, the first to emerge in the broader Balkan and Asia Minor region. And this perception was maintained until at least the middle of the 19th century, when other Balkan nationalisms began to form, also claiming an independent national state, different from the Greek one (Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian...).

The belief that all Christians in the Ottoman Empire were Greeks is also the ideological ground of the ‘Grand Idea’, the expansionist strategy of the Greek state in the first century of its existence. Indicative is the formulation by Ioannis Kolettis, in his speech at the National Assembly of the 3rd of September (3/11/1843-18/3/1844). Kolettis, after noting ‘how far we have diverged from that grand idea of the motherland, which we first saw expressed in the song of Rigas’, states:

‘we, who, carrying the banner of religion in one hand, and that of freedom in the other, have for many years worked hard for the liberation of all Orthodox Christians in general’.

This formulation by Kolettis did not convey anything new for the time period, or for the National Assembly. Other speakers participating in the Assembly had already put forward the same argument.

Despite the conviction of the revolutionaries, not all Orthodox Christians in general wished to be ‘liberated’. Certainly not Constantine Mousouros, the Ottoman ambassador in Athens, whose confrontation with King Otto led to a temporary break in Greek-Ottoman diplomatic relations in 1846. Nor did Hieromonk Gerasimos Papadopoulos, who in a pamphlet published in 1836 explained that the ‘so-called Greeks’ ‘were motivated and inspired by the Devil to such a terrible and most senseless great revolution’. Nor the member of the Friendly Society Savvas Kaminaris-Fokianos, who, when realising the supremacy of the Ottoman army before the battle in Drăgășani, where Ypsilantis’s ‘Sacred Battalion’ was decimated, joined the Ottomans with his troops and fought against Alexander Ypsilantis.

The Revolution, therefore, as well as the society of Orthodox Christians at the time, were full of contradictions. Through these contradictions, which even manifested themselves in the two civil wars of 1823-24, and the third civil war of 1831 in which the dictatorial regime of Ioannis Kapodistrias was abolished – for

whom Adamandios Korais, a major figure in the Greek Enlightenment, wrote that ‘the befitting punishment for Kapodistrias would not be death, but expulsion from Hellas, accompanied by a great many wishes to live and live a long life, to regard Hellas, whose future prosperity he hastened in every way to frustrate’ – consciousness were transformed, and also the regime of a *constitutional* monarchy was finally (in 1844) formed. A regime that was particularly ‘advanced’ by the standards of the time.

For the Revolution succeeded in ‘dragging’ to its goals the ‘traditional’ element of the previous Ottoman reality. In order to succeed in eliminating the localism of the former primates, it tolerated plundering and looting. And it linked it to the inherent tendency of any new nation to eliminate the ‘Other’, i.e., those who cannot be integrated into the nation and must be expelled from the national territory and national memory, by the new ‘homogeneous’ society which corresponds to the ‘national historical destiny’.

With the seizure of Tripolitsa, all non-Christians, Muslims and Jews were indiscriminately slaughtered – men, women and children alike. General Theodoros Kolokotronis describes the massacre of occupied Tripolitsa as follows:

‘The Hellenic contingent which entered it, cut down and were slaying men, women and children from Friday until Sunday. Thirty-two thousand have been slain, one hour around Tripolitsa. [...] My horse from the walls to the palace never touched the earth’.

The scenario at Tripolitsa may be considered as the most bloody, yet it is by no means the only such event. In nearly every seizure of a town or capturing of a ship, the fortune of the Ottomans was the same: the indiscriminate slaughter of all men, women, children. As Nikos Poulantzas points out apropos to the *national* capitalist state:

‘The capitalist state marks out the frontiers when it constitutes what is within (the people-nation) by homogenizing the before and the after of the content of this enclosure. [...] Genocide is the elimination of what become ‘foreign bodies’ of the national history and territory: it expels them beyond space and time’ (Poulantzas 1980, *State, Power, Socialism*, pp. 114-5)

The Revolution politicised the popular masses, bolstered their bargaining position with the (former) lords and provided them with ‘power’ over the lives and the

conditions of existence of the ‘enemy’ and ‘foreigners’: ‘May no Turk stay in the Morea, nor in the entire world’, according to the folk song of the period!

John Milios, Professor Emeritus, National Technical University of Athens,

author of the book:

1821. Tracing the Nation, the State and the Grand Idea.