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Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



Review of George Th. Mavrogordatos', 1915: Ο εθνικός διχασμός [1915: The national schism]

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46. His essay is a fitting one to end a volume concerned with upending nationalist historiography. Vangelis devoted his scholarship to the lives of those Ottoman Greeks who saw their future not in the nation, but in a reformed Ottoman empire. This is still a controversial topic in Greece and his patient reconstruction of the lives and thought of Pavlos Carolidis and Emmanouil Emmanouilidis is a tremendous excavation of a history that has been buried. As with so many others in this volume, Carolidis and Emmanouilidis were not committed to the nation-state but in the end they found that they had to surrender to it.

This is an excellent volume that should appeal to many audiences. Anyone interested in the modern Mediterranean, in transnational intellectual history and in the recovery of lost geographies and forgotten points of view will find it very worthwhile indeed.

George Th. Mavrogordatos

1915: Ο εθνικός διχασμός

[1915: The national schism]

Athens: Patakis, 2015. 343 pp.

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The Greek War of Independence started in the spring of 1821. By the autumn of 1823, after some significant military successes and a declaration of independence, a civil war broke out among the revolutionaries. It took a year and a half before this self-destructive civil war came to an end while the invading Egyptian army of Ibrahim Pasha launched a devastating campaign in the Peloponnese.

However, the better known Greek civil war is the one that followed Second World War. It lasted almost six years, from 1943 to 1949, and ended with the defeat of the communist guerrillas by a coalition government of conservatives and liberals. The impact of this civil war is still felt today.

If we study modern Greek history from 1821 to 2015, we may observe a pattern. Greek society and politics tend to extreme polarisation. This is not the usual party politics of a liberal democracy (Greece has been a liberal democracy since 1864 and a fully fledged one since 1875). Political polarisation in Greece very often turns ugly. There are many notorious episodes of extreme polarisation in Greek history, the more recent of them being the referendum of 2015. Despite the animosity, intolerance and fragmentation, these periods do not include widespread violence. They cannot be compared to a civil war.

According to George Mavrogordatos, professor of political science at the University of Athens, there is a third (somewhat forgotten) civil war in modern Greek history: the so-called National Schism. This was a period where extreme polarisation led not only to widespread violence but also to massacres, political assassinations, exiles, political trials and even a temporary secession of a substantial part of the Greek state.

In 1915, King Constantine I quarrelled with the prime minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, over the issue of whether Greece should enter the First World War or not. Venizelos believed that the end of the war would find the Entente victorious. Greece had a moral and political duty to help its traditional allies (Britain, France and Serbia). There was also a great opportunity for the country to profit by seizing territories with Greek-speaking populations, such as Thrace, Cyprus and the western part of Asia Minor. Constantine was the German kaiser's brother-in-law and an admirer of everything German. He did whatever he could to undermine Venizelos, by insisting that Greece remain neutral. This led to a major constitutional crisis, a blunt disregard for democratic institutions by the king and a bold reaction by Venizelos, who decided to form another government in the northern city of Thessaloniki with the support of the French army, which had occupied the region. Constantine, after tremendous pressure from the Entente, decided to retreat by leaving Greece. The politically dominant Venizelos officially entered the war and managed to make enormous gains for Greece in the peace conventions. The Greek army landed in Asia Minor and eastern Thrace and the Aegean Sea became, literally, a Greek lake. At this moment of triumph, he bitterly lost the national elections. Royalists brought back Constantine, and continued the campaign in Asia Minor but without the candid support of the dissatisfied allies. The emergence of Kemal Atatürk led to a crushing

defeat and millions of Greek dead or refugees. A coup by the defeated Greek military forced to Constantine to abdicate and led to a political trial, in which the royalist leadership was sentenced to death and summarily executed in autumn 1922. This was the end of the first phase of the so-called National Schism period.

This book was anticipated for many years. Mavrogordatos' doctoral thesis at the University of California, Berkeley, led to the publication of *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), his much acclaimed and award-winning book (Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award from the American Political Science Association) dealing with the second phase of the National Schism. *1915* is based on his 40 years of research (another important milestone was a 1996 book about the role that the royalist, protofascist Epistratoi corps played in the National Schism period).

1915 is a rewarding book. It is rather slim for such a subject and such an ambitious author – one could have expected even a multivolume treatise. However, the book is so comprehensive, fascinating and well written that I am certain it will be considered for many years the definitive book on the origins of the National Schism.

Mavrogordatos divides the book into two sections. In the first (which takes up almost half of the book) he narrates the history of the first period of the National Schism (from 1915 to 1922) in a way that achieves two ends: a convenient introduction for the uninitiated but also a stimulating outline for the expert. In order to help the reader, he has also included a useful appendix with short biographies of the leading actors.

However, the second part of the book (consisting of four chapters) is the core. After presenting

the evidence, Mavrogordatos attempts to explain and interpret the National Schism. First of all, he argues, these events led to a schism because the two leading antagonists were charismatic personalities. He uses Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, being very careful to define it and, at the same time, reject its trivialisation in everyday (political) language. For Mavrogordatos, both leaders were charismatic, in their own ways: Venizelos, because he was a political genius, and King Constantine, because of a combination of factors (ancestry, military fame and metaphysical beliefs) that transformed the image of a mediocre, failed and unpopular prince into the "Son of the Eagle", the Warrior-King. Ironically, Venizelos was instrumental for this transformation; almost single-handedly he created this false image.

The schism was obviously a class conflict. Venizelos (and his Liberal Party) was the representative of a dynamic rising class of industrialists, shipowners, entrepreneurs and merchants, who believed he was the only politician able to expand Greece's territory and the market for their goods and, at the same time, modernise the Greek state. Venizelos' opponents came mostly from the government-supported (through a clientelist system) part of the middle class, the major landowners, the low middle class but also labourers. These groups were identified by an anticapitalistic mentality, fear of competition and risk, a strong antiforeign bias and distrust in reform. Farmers, especially in the territories newly occupied by the Greek army, supported Venizelos strongly because he redistributed the land in their favour. However, a great part of them were minorities who supported, almost unanimously, his opponents. Venizelos was, after all, the symbol of Greek irredentism and their plight.

The National Schism was a crisis of national integration. From the very beginning, the Greek

state was an irredentist one. Irredentism was the national ideology (*Megali Idea* or "Great Idea") which stifled almost every other political ideology and encumbered normal political life for almost a century. When the one-time Greece decided (ill-advisedly) to materialise the dream of "liberating" areas massively populated by Greeks in 1897, the result was a major defeat and national humiliation.

When Venizelos started to realise this dream, he found that Greek society was not prepared for it. His political and diplomatic manoeuvres were too sophisticated for the narrow-minded Greek state. His astonishing success could not be dealt with by a conservative population unused to risky political and economic ventures. The small-time mindset of "Old Greece" (the Greek state from 1830 to 1912) was not prepared to do what was necessary to transform its nationalistic vision into a political reality, that is, to accept the cost of such a grand project of territorial expansion and radical modernisation.

Finally, according to Mavrogordatos, this was not a simple political conflict marked by extreme polarisation. This was a genuine civil war. The violence was not only widespread and ugly. It was reciprocal and systematic, organised or tolerated by the leaders of the two factions, and protracted. It essentially started in 1916 and continued with low or high intensity for two decades. The author dedicates a lot of pages to specific incidents. Some of them are not well known or totally forgotten (like the atrocities in Apeiranthos on the island of Naxos). He recreates scenes of horror that are reminiscent of similar scenes of the civil war of 1943–49. I'm not sure if we should call this a civil war as I am not an expert on civil wars. However, this does look a lot like a civil war. In addition, it left scars like those that only a civil war can inflict.

Is Mavrogordatos impartial? He does his best to document the brutalities of both parties (especially in the last chapter) and he criticises Venizelos' choices quite often, especially his zeal in accepting the brutal and humiliating interference of the Entente in Greek politics and the essential invasion and bullying by the French army. Venizelos is also blamed for his infatuation with Asia Minor and his failure to control the thuggish behaviour of his supporters.

The fact is that Venizelos' superiority, in almost every respect, is obvious. He was the reformer while his opponents were backward looking. He understood the geopolitical stakes while his opponents were myopic. He was dependable and committed whereas his opponents were flimsy and opportunist. He tried to be conciliatory but his opponents were vengeful. He was not a populist while his opponents invested in the basest instincts of their supporters.

Venizelos had many apparent flaws. He shares a part of the responsibility for the National Schism – one of the reasons being that Greece was not ready for Venizelos. As a genuinely charismatic leader, he asked for the impossible. The author presents the major critiques of Venizelos and he uses extensively the private diaries of two of his opponents. However, one of them, the most capable among the anti-Venizelos crowd, Ioannis Metaxas (who later became a dictator), is the only one who, in some instances, manages to distance himself from the rest. In a very critical moment, when paranoia had overtaken the royalists, he tried to talk some sense into them: "Do not destroy Greece in order to destroy Venizelos!" Metaxas' final verdict (which he recorded in his diary, two days before his death in 1941) is characteristic: "We are all responsible for 1915. Even Venizelos."

Since Venizelos has been historically vindicated, there is a strong hindsight bias in his fa-

vour. A century after the events, it is extremely difficult to prevent yourself from being biased while treating them with contemporary analytical and conceptual tools. It was a social and political conflict between conservatives and liberals. It was an institutional conflict between statists and reformers. It was a constitutional conflict between the adherents of the Prussian model of an authoritarian monarchy and the supporters of liberal constitutional democracy. It was even a conflict between feudalism and capitalism. Of course, the lines were quite blurred, as they always are, and falling into Manichaeism is a real danger. Mavrogordatos manages to avoid this trap. It is apparent that he doesn't like the royalists (especially since many of their actions were evidently treasonous) but he is not soft on Venizelos, despite his apparent respect and admiration for him.

In conclusion, I must emphasise how much I enjoyed this book. I wouldn't have minded if the first chapter was longer. Mavrogordatos, who is a first-rate storyteller, concentrates the narrative on the schism and leaves some gaps that might create confusion in someone who lacks the basics. There are also a few instances where he repeats himself. For some inexplicable reason, there is no index.

Mavrogordatos has covered the most critical, intense and violent first period of the National Schism. But what about the second period (1922–36), the period he covered in his dissertation (*Stillborn Republic*)? Since this book has not been translated into Greek, I hope that he plans to write a second volume on the National Schism, the forgotten civil war.