

Historein

Vol 13 (2013)

Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 2



Review of Petros Pizanias (ed), The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event

Vasiliki Amorati

doi: [10.12681/historein.204](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.204)

Copyright © 2014, Vasiliki Amorati



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Amorati, V. (2013). Review of Petros Pizanias (ed), The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event. *Historein*, 13, 118–122. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.204>

tween forest and power and to substantiate the argument that runs through the whole of his book that “forest conservation is successful only when it coincides at least partially with the interests of the people living there and the concepts they have of legal rights” (325).

In this book, Radkau has succeeded in integrating forest history, the history of technology, the history of labour and social and cultural history into a cohesive history of the interaction between man and wood. As a trial in “big history”, the book has a deficit in detailed documentation – almost inherent to such ambitious undertakings – especially in quantitative facts that could support author’s main arguments about wood scarcity and the “wood brake”. In general, the perspective of economic history is rather weak. On the other hand, Radkau’s claim for a “global history of the coevolution of man and nature” seems not to have been accomplished here. His focus is German, with some British and North American references. The global “essence” of the last part is more geographical than historical, since Asian experiences are treated separately and not in their interconnection with the European ones.

What makes *Wood* extremely relevant is that it offers us the impetus to think critically about natural resources. In this sense, it is a highly political book. Radkau shows that without scarcity, every commodification and control over a resource would lack its legitimising foundation. In the next scarcity alarm, we have to think about this seriously.

Petros Pizanias (ed)

The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event

Istanbul: Isis Press, 2011

By Vasiliki Amorati

Boğaziçi University

The Greek revolution of 1821 has been documented in multiple personal narratives and testimonies, especially by people who lived during those years, people who were the protagonists of these events. Vivid memoirs and descriptions, including personal diaries written in an authentic style by the people who fought in the Greek lands against the Ottomans, and by foreigners, who either took up arms or supported the revolution through philhellenic movements, started to circulate immediately after the establishment of the first Greek independent state. However, in recent decades, there has been little academic historical research efforts and studies on the Greek war of independence and what has appeared mainly involves biographical analyses and anthropocentric stories.¹

Generally speaking, the research interests of historians specialising on 25 March 1821, when the banner of revolution was raised against the Ottoman Empire and the story of “modern Greece” is usually said to have begun, have been around the protagonists – the heroes and their heroic acts before, during and even after the revolutionary war, neglecting numerous issues relating to the period. With this perspective in mind, *The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event*, edited by Petros Pizanias, brings together the work of scholars in the hope of facilitating a more transparent discourse. Taking this into consideration, and at the same time moving beyond the military

and political events of 1821, the contributors to this volume aim to situate the war of independence within the broader context of European and Ottoman historiography, always within the framework of the European and Greek Enlightenment, in a way that has not been done before.

The book is organised into four uneven parts, the first of which is an introduction written by Pizanias. Although the reader would expect that, in the 70 pages of his introduction, Pizanias would present each contribution and try to interconnect them, he does not do so. What he seeks to present, via an intellectual approach, are the three different phases of the revolution – its organisation, operational phase and aftermath – and he does so by introducing the arguably fictitious social group of “enlighteners/intellectuals”, on which a whole research programme involving a digital prosopography database has been established at the Ionian University in Corfu. Additionally, Pizanias analyses the notion of liberty within the framework of the war of independence and the identity of “Hellene” by focusing on the historical transition “from Christian *reaya* to *Hellenes* during the Enlightenment years and Greek citizens after 1822” (39).

However, the problem starts when the author chooses to include in his invented social group of enlighteners/intellectuals people of extremely different social status and origin, geographical descent and distribution, educational background and professional experience. There are multiple reasons and causes for excluding some of the people from the social group. While Pizanias dedicates some lines to mention that people belonging to the group were largely heterogeneous, he clearly does not see the need to examine closely and take into serious consideration the differences and contradictions between them. At the same

time, he mentions that “the desire for liberty in the general sense set the limit of the relative homogeneity among the members of the group of Greek Intellectual/Enlighteners” (22). A few pages later, he seems to contradict himself by presenting the long-awaited liberty in the ‘plural’, pointing out that each subgroup aspired to a different notion of liberty.

It is interesting and innovative that he includes in the same social group Alexandros Mavrokordatos, the political general of the revolution, as well as the *kocabaşı* (village elders and notables) and *armatoloi* (armed local militias in the service of the Ottoman authorities), perhaps in an effort to analyse the military history of the revolution through an intellectual lens. Still, no matter how hard one tries to understand the connection, there will always be a gap in Pizanias’ approach.

Before moving on to discuss the other contributions to the book, the absence of a structured and scholarly terminology is evident at this stage. If Pizanias’ aim, as stated in his foreword, was “to introduce the 1821 Greek Revolution into international bibliography by means of this volume” (7), then he should have taken more care in explaining what the terms Rumeli, Morea and even “Greece” meant, especially before the revolution. Dionysis Tzakis’ explanation, in the same volume, of Rumeli as “West-central present day Greece” serves as a good example of how not to limit the readability of the text to specialised scholars only.

Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos’ contribution in the second part of the book, entitled “Preliminary aspects”, is an excellent analysis of the Greek political thought as it emerges in *Elliniki Nomarchia*, in particular, and two other texts. The intellectual context of these texts and their political state of mind spread in the run-up to the revolution and show how “these Greek

radical nationalists who live on the frontier between the declining Ottoman Empire and Napoleonic Europe imagine their free polity" (96). Besides, what is interesting and extremely useful for the purposes of this book, the general historiography of the Greek Enlightenment and its impact on the revolution, is the term "activist intellectual" that Sotiropoulos uses. He demonstrates the influence of the French revolution and the appearance of a new type of intellectual, the "revolutionary intellectuals", who did not merely support the ideas and means of the Enlightenment but were rather "transformed into tools and weapons of competition to be used for the needs of social and political struggle" (88).

While the bibliography on the Filiki Etaireia (literally Society of Friends) is extremely broad, Vasilis Panagiotopoulos, in his essay and through a selective presentation of some events and actions of the secret revolutionary organisation, manages to satisfy the interest of those already familiar with the topic as well as the informed audience. He starts by indicating that the majority of acts of violence and opposition, even a century before 1821, did not have the character of local revolts but more of serious uprisings, connected to foreign political plans. Thus, Panagiotopoulos effectively presents the importance of the founding of the Filiki Etaireia and its role in organising the Greek revolution. He shows us exactly how the Filiki Etaireia used the modernist concepts of the "politicised Enlightenment" (101) and early romanticism to lead to the "attainment of the desired objective", as it was stated in the organisation's texts; in other words, to the anticipated and long-awaited restoration of a nation.

The third and main part of the book is divided into three sections, each dedicated to a different analytical framework (Greek, European and Ottoman). Focusing on Karaiskakis, the

charismatic leader of Central Greece in the 1821 revolution, in the section looking at the creation of the Greek state Tzakis succeeds in presenting how the events of the revolution led to the total restructuring of the balance of power in mountainous Rumeli and the rearrangement of local sociopolitical relations in the provinces where *armatolism* prevailed. Karaiskakis' actions show not only the rapid changes that occurred among the leaders (*kapetanioi*) of the *armatoloi* and the new opportunities presented by politics and the new administration but also the interplay between them.

In his contribution, Nikos Rotzokos reestablishes the historical circumstances under which the Greek nationalist movement was created, organised and developed, by outlining the value of war experience for understanding the formation of a new kind of collective identity, expressed in the form of national ideology. He also shows how the National Assembly of Epidaurus epitomised a new collective identity that expressed the desire for political self-determination and how the American and French constitutions influenced the modern political definition of nation in the Greek case.

Liana Theodoratou discusses Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Hellas*, a lyrical drama written during the crucial year of 1821 and which still remains one of the most powerful allegories of a nation's effort to reinvent and establish itself. For the British romantic poet, the revolution had all the characteristics necessary for it to appeal to people beyond the strict borders of the centres of Hellenism and, thus, deserved to be considered, at least, as a European event. Shelley aimed at promoting and encouraging people to become philhellenes and to support the Greek war of independence. What is remarkable though is that through the allegory of "We are all Greeks. Our laws, our litera-

ture, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece”, Shelley suggested that the singularity of a nation should always be related to others, expanding beyond the Greek case. Therefore, Theodoratou concludes by suggesting that any effort to provide a monogenealogy of a nation is an attempt towards its mystification and that only by ‘humanising the enemy’, by looking at things through the eyes of the other, can we learn more about ourselves. In other words, as is already stated through Shelley’s words, Theodoratou places 1821 within a European and, perhaps, much broader, imperial context.

The third section (‘The Ottoman reactions’) of part three offers radically fresh approaches to the Greek revolution. Addressing a number of well-known topics, H. Şükrü İlicak uses Ottoman sources to shed light on Alexandros Ypsilantis’ revolt and his insistence on Russian involvement, even though the Russians insisted that they did not provoke it. The sources reveal Ottoman reactions to the revolt in the Danubian Principalities, the fate of the Phanariots and their strategy for survival after they lost their positions in the Ottoman state mechanism after the revolution. A glance at the footnotes and references in İlicak’s contribution demonstrates the value of mining Ottoman sources for additional information on what are considered well-known topics.

The second contribution in this section, by Sophia Laiou, is an excellent example of the parallel use of Ottoman and other sources. It is mainly, but not exclusively, based on the account of an Ottoman official, Mîr-Yusuf el-Moravî, who happened to be in Nafplio when the revolution broke out and who was present at the negotiations between the Greeks and the Ottomans after the surrender of the fortress of Palamidi. Using this narrative, Laiou focuses on how one Ottoman understood the revolution. She recommends an analysis of the

terminology that the official uses to describe the movement (*hareket*) of the Greeks (*millet taife*) in pursuit of their freedom (*serbestiyet eylemek daiyesiyle*), together with some of the adjectives that he uses for the Greek rebels. Conceivably, one wonders whether this single narrative, written by an official in a rather insignificant Ottoman province, manages to transcend the political-religious conception of the Ottoman state to present the internal ideological and social processes of the Greeks. While Mîr-Yusuf el-Moravî may have been a member of the state apparatus, he wrote as someone who had survived the initial turmoil and was forced to abandon his home. So, the text is not objective. As Laiou aptly remarks, “that which is of special value in this manuscript is not the description of the events but rather the search for mentalities and behaviour, and the contraposition of the imperial, traditional political system with the modern ‘national’ system, in an epoch that was characterised by fluidity for Greeks and Ottomans” (253).

In part three, Yusuf Hakan Erdem highlights how much Greece is neglected in Ottoman historiography and especially within the context of modernity and modernisation. By using documents from Ottoman archives, ecumenical patriarchate sources and many secondary works, he focuses on showing how the Greek revolt helped the transformation of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the period immediately preceding the Tanzimat era, which marked the formal beginning of the transformation period of the Ottoman state. Erdem looks at the ways in which the Ottoman system and the Orthodox church rewrote the modern imperatives of the revolution into traditional codes of narrative and comprehension. It is also noteworthy that Erdem is one of the few scholars in the general field that makes clear-cut distinctions between terms such as “Greek revolt”, “Greek war of independence” and “war of liberation”.

These terms may appear to mean the same and, indeed, they have been used for years in the historiography to describe the same era; but, in fact, they each bear distinct characteristics that make Erdem's attention to detail all the more useful. In the hope that this could broaden established historiographical horizons, he concludes by claiming that "the Greek revolt truly pushed the Ottoman elite to rise up to the challenges of a new world where ties other than religious ones would define citizenship" (264).

The title of the fourth and last part, "After words: the ideological manipulation of the revolution" [sic], looks at how the revolution was ideologically viewed in official historiography and manipulated by contemporary events in the twentieth century, such as during Metaxas and Colonels' dictatorships. They also address the role of music historiography on the modern Greek (neohellenic) historical models.

As this short review did not allow for a discussion of all the contributions to the volume, it focused on the chapters that have adopted innovative approaches and scholarship to make a significant contribution to the general historiography of the Greek revolution. Regardless of the implausibility of Pizanias' invented social group, we cannot but congratulate him for adding a long-overdue volume to the international bibliography, filling a prominent gap in the literature. *The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event* represents a very promising step away from traditional and nationalistic stereotypes, doing its part to nudge academic historiography in the right direction.

dition, 2012; Konstantinos Svolopoulos, *Fighting in Messolonghi: The Life and Times of Thanassis Razikotsikas, 1789–1826*, Athens: Estia, 2007; and Christos Loukos (ed.), *Το ανέκδοτο ημερολόγιο του Αλέξανδρου Μαυροκορδάτου. Μόναχο–Βερολίνο, 1834–1837* [Alexandros Mavrokordatos' unpublished diary: Munich–Berlin, 1834–1837], Athens: Hellenic Parliament Foundation/Benaki Museum, 2011.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Paschalis Kitromilides (ed.), *Adamantios Korais and the European Enlightenment*, Oxford: Voltaire Foun-