

Historein

Vol 15, No 1 (2015)

Revisiting Democratic Transitions in Times of Crisis



Review of Thomas Gallant's *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1768 to 1913: The Long Nineteenth Century*

Konstantina Zanou

doi: [10.12681/historein.315](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.315)

Copyright © 2015, Konstantina Zanou



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:

Zanou, K. (2015). Review of Thomas Gallant's *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1768 to 1913: The Long Nineteenth Century*. *Historein*, 15(1), 160–163. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.315>

studies of Ottoman religio-linguistic communities. It goes a step further in the direction of weakening the monopoly of now century-old national(ist) historiographies on the narratives of belonging, thereby taking the porosity of intercommunal boundaries back up to historically credible levels. By sifting through a treasure trove of anecdotal evidence in connection to momentous historical events with empire-wide impact, this book invites not only reflection on the Jewish communal trajectory, but even more importantly, to the mind of this reviewer at least, comparative explorations of the experiences and trajectories of other imperial communities, such as Greek- and Bulgarian-Orthodox, Armenian and so on. Therein may lie one of its most lasting legacies in terms of setting a stimulating agenda for future comparative research that will be, more likely than not, along collaborative lines.

Thomas W. Gallant

The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1768 to 1913: The Long Nineteenth Century

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. viii + 372 pp.

Konstantina Zanou

Paris Institute of Advanced Studies/
Columbia University

There are four major traps a historian confronts when embarking upon the adventure of devising a new book: first, to write a boring book; second, to write a narrowly framed book which loses sight of the big picture; third, to write a chaotic and labyrinthine book; and fourth, to write a too general, oversimplified and teleological account.

In one masterful movement, Thomas Gallant manages to avoid all of that. His *History of the Greeks* offers at one and the same time a book that can be taught in class as well as advance the knowledge of experts, be read in the metro as well as discussed at academic conferences, and engage unsuspecting readers as well as surprise specialists. How does he manage to do all of this? To begin with, Gallant seems to enjoy writing. In his book, detailed micro-descriptions and representations of the wider historical context follow one another without the narrative ever losing pace (apart from one moment, as we will see later). Take for instance his chapters on the Greek War of Independence and on the Othoman kingdom: both start from the end and, in the manner of a film that features a story told backwards, they open with a single and powerful retrospective image: the assassination of Kapodistrias and the punishment of the perpetrators, in the first case, and the last sad

years of Otho's repatriation to Bavaria, in the second. These images introduce the reader to the discussion of the major questions of the period and allow the author to reach back and seize the thread with which his story begins. Gallant's narrative skills are also exemplified in his breathtaking description of battles. His writing is not only bright and clear; it is also light and imbued with a sense of humour (I had never imagined that a book of Greek history would bring a smile to my face). In short, Gallant's sheer pleasure in writing makes his book a joy to read, with some of the virtues of the nineteenth-century novel (I confess that I could not put it down, even though I knew how the story ends, of course).

This does not mean, however, that Gallant sacrifices depth, complexity or academic rigour. This book is serious; indeed, it is profoundly so. Gallant revisits critically some of the most contested issues in modern Greek history. In addition, he introduces elements which have long been missing from accounts of the Greek long nineteenth century, as I shall now try to show.

First of all, the Ottoman empire. Of late, historians have been drawing attention to the fact that the Greek and the Ottoman worlds hardly communicate in our depictions of their modern histories. Nonetheless, far from being two self-contained political and cultural universes in the long nineteenth century, they can only be understood fully when their histories are fused or at any rate intertwined. Following that lead, Gallant's book places developments of the long nineteenth century, such as the Enlightenment, the Revolution, the creation of the Greek state and the Macedonia question, back in the context where they really belong, the Ottoman empire. (Besides, Gallant's appreciation of the Ottoman framework can be seen in his choice, as the general editor of the Edinburgh series of the *History of the Greeks*, to include a

volume – written by Molly Greene – on the Ottoman empire between 1453 and 1785.)

Second, the Russian empire. Gallant's history of the Greek nineteenth century does not start with the ascent of the Phanariots in Constantinople, the consolidation of the Greek merchant diaspora in western and central Europe and the Enlightenment teachings of Adamantios Korais, as most histories do. It starts with a war between two empires, the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–74, to which the author dedicates not one page, but an entire chapter. In fact, by paying due attention to the Russian element, this is the first account of modern Greek history, to my knowledge, that views the country as the historical product not of the (incomplete) diffusion of Enlightenment ideals and modernisation processes from Western Europe to its southeastern periphery, but rather of a Mediterranean geography of the "in-between", where different traditions from East and West met and conversed.

But it is not only the Ottomans and the Russians who are present in this volume. There are other important presences too, notably women, Greek Jews and Greek Catholics. Gallant successfully incorporates the pieces of their neglected stories – to the distaste, perhaps, of Greek nationalists or male chauvinists – in the master narrative of Greek history.

The most important device, however, deployed by Gallant is highlighted in his title: the *History of the Greeks* – not the *History of Greece*. The difference is huge and the consequences of this decision are threefold: first, doing history of the people rather than of the place means that you include in your story not only the Greeks within the boundaries of the Greek state, but also the numerous Rom who remained in the Ottoman empire after the creation of the new state. Second, by examining seriously the history of

these people, as well as of other portions of Greek society which remained under the jurisdiction of different states – and not necessarily “national states” – like the Greeks of the Ionian Islands under British protection, you arrive at a very different idea as to the inexorable necessity of the nation-state in the nineteenth century. By describing the different options available during this transitional period, Gallant manages indeed to show that on various occasions nationhood and empire were not mutually exclusive. His book thus challenges the teleology of the nation-state. But the author’s decision to write the history of the Greeks rather than that of Greece has yet another implication: it obliges him to take into account the various worlds of the so-called “Greek diasporas”, from late-eighteenth-century settlers to southern Russia to early-twentieth-century immigrants to North America. Consequently, Greece is automatically placed within the wider regional and transnational framework that determined its history. In fact, it is a central contention of the book that Greek history, like any other, is part of global history. Gallant is fully abreast of current theoretical debates.

This leads me to comment on another contribution of the book, which is, I think, equally significant: the critical reassessment that it attempts of modernisation theory and of Greek exceptionalism. Gallant is clearly weary of histories that treat Greece as an exception to the “normal path” of modernity. He has dispensed with the once-dominant notion (still widespread among Mediterranean and Balkan scholars) that there are countries with different levels of political, industrial, social or intellectual modernisation. His observations in regard to the Greek clientelist/patronage system and to the level of industrialisation of the Greek economy are a case in point. The tendency to view a widespread use of patronage as the root cause of Greece’s political instabil-

ity and supposedly impaired modernity – Gallant argues – obscures the fact that patronage was at the core of every democratic polity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As to the theory of the country’s backwardness and of its “incomplete” path towards industrialisation, Gallant says that while it is true that Greece did not attain the level of industrialisation that Britain or Germany did, nowhere else in Europe did so either. Greece, in other words, was no exception.

All in all, this is a book that surprises with its richness of perspectives and disciplinary domains. It literally has a little bit of everything: economic history, political and legal history, military history, social and demographic history, urban history, environmental history, cultural history, gender history, social anthropology and archaeology. One is tempted to say that the book reflects Gallant’s own universal formation, as a historian, an ancient and contemporary archaeologist and a social anthropologist.

Like every book, though, this one too has its flaws – if only minor. The first is that only a chapter before the end, the story is interrupted by two (long) chapters which are dedicated, respectively, to the social history of everyday life and to the economy during the Greek long nineteenth century. Both chapters are extremely interesting and useful (even if the joy of reading diminishes when one is assailed by numbers and statistics, be they economic or demographic – but what can you do? Numbers are by their very nature unforgiving). What is not completely clear is why the author chooses to insert these two analytical chapters at this point, interrupting thus his narrative and deferring the chapter about developments during the Greek *fin de siècle* to the very end of the book. Wouldn’t it just have been simpler to put these two chapters at the

end? The second weakness of the book is the fact that it contains several spelling mistakes, both in English and in Greek, which can sometimes be a little irksome. This, of course, has to do more with the scant proof-reading services of the publishing houses nowadays than with the author himself.

But these are minor details. When all is said and done, Gallant's delve into the past has produced the most all-encompassing account of the Greek long nineteenth century to have been written, a book that has genuine literary merit and at the same time can be usefully used in class.

Christopher Clark

Οι Υπνοβάτες: Πώς η Ευρώπη πήγε στον πόλεμο το 1914

[*The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914*]

Athens: Alexandria, 2014. 736 pp.

Elli Lemonidou

University of Patras

There is hardly an issue (except obviously for Nazism and the Holocaust) in the entire history of the twentieth century that, in the course of time, has captured so much interest from historians and has seen the production of such a huge number of books and articles as the one regarding the origins of the First World War. If for the average European citizen knowledge and memory of the Great War is mainly linked to the images and descriptions of the suffering in the trenches of the Western Front and to the specific commemorative narratives existing (to a varying extent) in each separate country, academic historiography, which is very prolific as a whole in all war-related issues, has shown a particular interest in the core question of how Europe arrived at the bloodshed of 1914–1918 and who is mainly to blame for this outcome.

The existing number of both primary and secondary sources available on the subject is immense, almost beyond the reach of even the most hard-working and polyglot historian.¹ The quest for the causes and responsibilities for the war emerged almost simultaneously with its outbreak in the summer of 1914² and in the intervening decades has never ceased to attract the interest of historians, politicians, diplomats and the general public. The question became even more crucial after the end of the