

Historein

Vol 20, No 1 (2021)

1821: What Made it Greek? What Made it Revolutionary?



Introduction: 1821 and the Crooked Line to the Nation-State

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doi: [10.12681/historein.28741](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28741)

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To cite this article:

Dialla, A. A., & Kotsonis, Y. D. (2022). Introduction: 1821 and the Crooked Line to the Nation-State. *Historein*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28741>



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Dialla, Ada, and Yanni Kotsonis. 2021. "Introduction: 1821 and the Crooked Line to the Nation-State". *Historein* 20 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28741>.

Introduction: 1821 and the Crooked Line to the Nation-State

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It is often said that politicians start revolutions and historians complete them with the interpretative schemes they attach to them. However, historians have never been alone in conceptualising the past in general and revolutions in particular. Politics in its wider sense, as well as a people's present and future anxieties, give meanings to a revolution, always ready to transform themselves in another historical moment. A historical past is always relived and reinvented in the present, and it is a mass, participatory process that takes place in the schools that organise plays and parades and cover their walls with posters every 25 March (or 4 July, or 14 July, and so on); on television where the politicians speak and the documentaries are broadcast; and on the internet where just about anyone can speak back with blogs and videos.

This is a constantly renewed process that is lived today, and bicentenary of the Greek Revolution is as much about 2021 as 1821. Anniversaries tend to have a jubilant and theatrical character. Done wrong, they express satisfaction with an event that we pretend to understand in a final way. Done right, they address the ongoing existential needs of the community and ask probing questions about who we are and who we can be. Historians are in a position to look at old facts in a new light and propose that a past event had unexpected (to us) meanings. Historians offer research achievements, ideally as a challenge – to assess and reassess where we came from and where we might go.

These are possibilities and nuances that can be lost because of the way we narrate and celebrate the Great Events. Historians tend to simplify by way of teleology: the messy past is rearranged to arrive at a specific outcome, the crooked lines are straightened.¹ The instinctive reaction is to offer complexity, but at the expense of explaining outcomes. Our aim here is to appreciate the complexities in order to show the many possibilities that the event offered; to explain how the events produced specific outcomes, in this case the Greek nation-state; and to remind ourselves that the past nevertheless offered up multiple alternatives, precedents that can help us consider the present and future.

The workshops

This special issue is the outcome of a renewed interest in the study of 1821 – thanks to the

bicentenary – and has its own history. It is the result of a series of workshops co-organised by New York University under the auspices of the Jordan Center for Advanced Study of Russia (New York) and the Research Centre for the Humanities (Athens). They took place in New York, Athens, London and Berlin; a final meeting in Paris was cancelled because of the Covid pandemic. These workshops brought together historians and social scientists from different universities, and different national and academic environments, to discuss how the history of 1821 could be reconceptualised. 1821 was and still is, *par excellence*, an example of the political uses and abuses of history. So we seek to understand the revolution in terms of its own present or, to use Pierre Rosanvallon's wording, to restore "to the past the presentist character it had in its time".² We titled these workshops as "1821: What Made it Greek and Revolutionary" because we aimed to view the events as if visiting them for the first time and reconsider them beyond the teleology which so much characterises any kind of revolutionary narrative.

We intended to approach the Greek Revolution as a complex historical process which contains the dynamics of contrasting tendencies, including parameters not anticipated, including the accidental, unorganised and subjective. We asked if the Greek state and the new nation it contained were the inevitable results of the revolution or if there were many "open futures" of political formations that could be born of the revolution, and the Greek state was just one of them. During the Age of Revolution there were various ways to conduct a revolution and ideologies were characterised by hybridity and complexity. Having this in mind we tried to avoid strict divisions which tend to favour bipolarities such as conservatives–liberals, secularism–religiosity, Religion–Enlightenment, nation–empire, east–west, and Europe and the rest of the world.

One of our aims was to contextualise the revolution. Context is a relational and relative category which includes among others the question of how a local phenomenon becomes part of a larger context or trend. We paid attention to interregional approaches, and the transcription and transference of ideas, symbols, and concepts from one cultural environment to the other, to the fluidities of the concepts. Hence we ask ourselves in which way national history remains at the centre of our enquiry; whether the nation is a binding framework for the study of the revolution in question or simply one of the parameters, one of many social phenomena. Our emphasis is on the fields of the history of empires, global history and transnationalism. There is a family resemblance between these fields to the extent that all confront the hegemony of the national canon in historiography, offering alternative ways of thinking in order to transcend certain limitations of national history. To put it bluntly: even if the nation-state was the outcome of the revolution, and even as Greece became the prototype of a national revolution leading to the national state, there is no good reason to assume that the nation had to assume the specific character that it did. There were, and are, multiple ways to imagine a national community.

The point of this collection, then, is this: Revolutions do not settle the big questions; revolutions open all questions to negotiation. With this in mind we see it fit to disrupt some of the certainties with which generations of Greeks and historians have narrated the Greek Revolution and War of Independence of 1821–1830. (There is a debate over whether the revolution and the war or independence are part of the same process; we do not address it here.)

In the domain of public history, the certainties are many, notwithstanding some useful correctives that have been introduced by academic history in recent years. We know better that the Secret School was a myth, even if schoolchildren and adults are still taught what we all know to be untrue. We know that the declaration of Aghia Lavra on 25 March 1821 was neither on 25 March, nor at Aghia Lavra. We better appreciate that the “fall of Tripolitsa” was an out-and-out massacre of civilians. Even these correctives were ignored in many of the public and official celebrations, the inaccuracies repeated with abandon, but this is not the main point.

These are factual issues looking for a new argument. What concerns us here is the very structure of the history as it is still being written and disseminated, and it concerns this: Was there a Greek nation waiting to be liberated by 1821? The consensus is yes, since virtually all historians – Greek and foreign, left and right – proceed from the assumption that there was a clear Greek nation that rose up to demand independence in 1821, because that nation was preexistent. In some awkward merger of ancient paganism and Byzantine Christianity, we have somehow created coherence over space, and continuity over time, and the culmination is in the year 1821. The story is easy to repeat; it is easy to contest; and as the following articles make plain, it can be replaced with more plausible stories. And in substance the alternative narrative goes like this: The Greek nation was created in the crucible of war and revolution, it took specific forms for historical reasons – it became that nation and not another – and, since people made it one way, it can be rethought and remade today. Taken together these articles open a discussion of multiple categories and certainties: Europe, the Ottoman Empire, Greece, religion, nation, and contingency rather than inevitability.

The articles, each excellent in its own way, should speak for themselves. Our task here is to suggest how they collectively make a start at telling a new story.

A European event, but which Europe?

For some decades historians have pointed to what is a fact: Greek revolutionaries connected their own movement with the European Enlightenment, and sometimes with the French Revolution. It is true that dozens of intellectuals based in Europe, the Ionian Islands and the Ottoman Empire – since labelled the Neohellenic Enlightenment – began to

develop their own ideas about light and liberty. People would transform into rational people who might not submit as freely to earthly powers, but decide their own fates as rightful, rational people. Or better yet: they would submit to an authority that was legitimate because it was enlightened, a version that might include the Russian tsar, the French Republic or the French emperor.

A few of these people were revolutionaries and in a hurry: Rigas Feraios with his vision of an ecumenical federation encompassing all languages and religions is the case in point. Many more were moderates who could see a future human material but doubted its maturity. Decades of education and civilisation would have to come first, under the guidance of a small, educated class and one or another benevolent empire such as France (Korais) or Russia (Sturdza and Kapodistrias). One can see their point: it was hard for them to imagine shepherds and barefoot farmers, Morean notables who were implicated in Ottoman governance, and Rumeliot mercenaries as deep thinkers who contemplated the universalistic Man of the Enlightenment. For the time being these ideas concerned dozens of people, and they produced books that very few could read. Hence we continue to cite the same people and their texts over and over. In the years after 1821 they would matter more because the people who had actually made the revolution went looking for an explanation of what they had done; and because the likes of Sturdza, Kapodistrias and Korais played the important role of explaining the revolution to readerships who were versed, like themselves, in French. This mattered because it was the French-speaking European courts that would decide the outcome of the Greek War.

People such as Kapodistrias (Venetian, Russian), Sturdza (Ottoman, Russian) and Korais (Ottoman, French) were the children of empires, not nations, well into the 1820s. Kapodistrias did not visit what would become Greece until 1828; Korais and Sturdza never did. The important role they played was to make the Greek Revolution intelligible and acceptable to the powers at a time when the Christian rebels of the Balkans seemed like just more rebels in a place that had many. Dialla shows us that Kapodistrias in relation to Serbia had already prepared the ground for casting the sultan as illegitimate, a barbaric Muslim despot in a land of Christians. Kapodistrias helped ensure that the Ottomans would not attend the Congress of Vienna and would indeed not be treated as a part of Europe. He redoubled his efforts in the 1820s, perhaps more easily once he had ceased acting as Russian foreign minister. He and Sturdza produced that argument that would allow the European courts to recognise this revolution (Christian, legitimate) but not those of Spain, Naples and Piedmont (radically liberal and revolutionary). Dialla focuses on the revolutionary period of 1821 and examines how the bloody uprising of the Greeks against the Ottomans in conjunction with the international environment – especially the Russian matrix – transformed the notion of the nation. Before the revolution, the term “nation” had mostly cultural connotations and, from a political point of view, it was a neutral category

within an imperial framework, without claims to be the primary and the dominant element of political identity. The revolutionary period transformed the perception of the nation into an active political and social force and to the most important actor/subject of the historical and political processes. Ultimately it was a way to argue for national sovereignty, the sovereignty expressed in ways that were not yet clear.

If we are to agree that the Greek Revolution was a European event, we have to explain which Europe we mean. There was the Europe of the philosophes and 1789, but since 1815 official Europe was that of the Restoration, the Holy Alliance and legitimacy. There was room for liberal ideas for those countries that were prepared for them, but the Greeks were not among them; they would need strong authority, be it the Russian-style centralising rule of Kapodistrias or the absolute rule of Otto. In 1821 the European courts agreed that the Greeks were subjects of the sultan.

If the European empires were not about to recognise a liberal revolution, their attitude to nations was changing in ambiguous ways. Karakatsouli's contribution tells the story of French interventions in revolutionary Greece as part of France's global colonial ambitions. This story can be read as an interesting example of the parallel process which took place in Europe in the long nineteenth century: the imperial projects and the national construction of European space. They intersected when the empires decreed Greek independence in February 1830.

Karakatsouli explains the remarkable convergence in French politics that produced a pro-Greek stance in the second half of the 1820s. Among public opinion and politicians, liberals might defend the Greeks as a liberal and Christian cause, and conservative Ultras defended them as Christians tout court; the king followed suit as he mobilised Christian sentiment to begin to rebuild France's imperial status – first in Spain in 1823, then at Navarino, then with the Morea Expedition, then in Algiers. All this was fed by a market, a boom in the mass production of commemorative ceramics that put Greek pallikars and Bouboulinas in every household, induced workers to invest in Greek liberty, artists to stop engraving paysages and turn to Chios and Messolongi. It was a beautiful symbol of the convergence of public opinion, parties, state, and market when the French king bought Delacroix's *The Massacre at Chios*.

All this mattered because it was the three European powers that decreed Greece into existence – indeed, wittingly and unwittingly, the powers saved the Greek cause when by all indications it was lost. And it mattered because this vision of Greece – a Christian Greece – was already the reality on the ground as the Greek revolutionaries – all Ottomans until 1821 – introduced a European idea of a Christian Europe into an Ottoman regime where religion also mattered, but in a different way. Europe approved *that* Greece, a territory in which the Orthodox Christians were the full citizens, the Muslims entirely absent, and the Jews and Catholics up for discussion.

The Eastern Mediterranean

The Revolution can be recentred in other ways. Karakatsouli, Hill, Kousouris and Dimitropoulos situate the events of the 1820s in the eastern Mediterranean, a space where all the empires intersected according to a regional geopolitical logic. This is a forgotten aspect of the period and it has been lost in the fragmented stories offered by various national historiographies. Hill brings them back in a fascinating encounter of what would be considered two peripheries, the Greek periphery of Europe and the Middle Eastern periphery of the Ottomans. Like it or not, the confessional and local communities of Mount Lebanon and the Near East were embroiled in the Greek War because the Ottoman rulers applied blanket labels on them; and because people claiming to represent Greece arrived on ships to stir them up. Ottoman measures and Greek entreaties enmeshed in local communities – the Maronites and Druze as well as the Orthodox and Muslim. The effects of 1821 would last for the remainder of the century. It is worth asking why these movements and overtures produced a different result in the shape of a multiconfessional state in Lebanon. One suspects that the balance between confessions was maintained by the competing pulls of the Porte, Egypt and France. Either way, it is a reminder that different nations were possible.

An Ottoman event: Millets become nations and an empire becomes a state

The transition from the empire to the nation-states was accomplished through a long process; it was not linear, and it was accompanied by a number of transitional forms between the empire and the nation.

Religion as an organising principle was not at all new, and it mattered that a person was Orthodox in the Ottoman Balkan lands. Privileges, obligations and status were determined in part by the fact that the empire was organised by confession. (This was true in much of Europe, where rights and privileges were distributed along confessional lines: think the place of the Muslims in Russia, the absence of Muslims in most of the rest of Europe, the place of Protestants in Catholic states, and the place of Catholics in Protestant states.) Indeed for an Ottoman subject before 1821, the most obvious response to the question – Who are you? – was Romios (Roman, meaning Eastern Christian), Frank (Catholic), Believer (Muslim) and so on. That was never the end of the conversation, of course, since locality, occupation, and place in one or another administrative hierarchy mattered as well.

But the fundamental fact that Doxiadis makes plain is that the Greek Revolution was waged as a Christian affair. In the course of the early 1820s that label persisted but was transformed into something new: Hellene, the term derived from ancient sources, one of the

terms available in published works before 1821, but certainly less common than *Romios* and *Graikos*. Outside the Ottoman Empire the latinised equivalent for the Orthodox was already current: Greek, grec, grek, Greco, and one wonders if the imported generalisation was not decisive to an evolving sense of Greek national coherence. In the practice of the 1820s this was monumental because it was an absolute label, implying absolute belonging, and it fed into and reflected a total war. The many complexities of language and region were elided and reduced to a vast simplification: Greeks (Christians who spoke Romaic, Albanian, Vlach, Roma, Turkish and Italian) and Turks (Muslims who spoke some of the same languages).

The revolutionaries proceeded to wage recognisably Ottoman warfare – including the enslavement only of Muslims, as Doxiadis shows, the mirror image of what Muslims had been permitted to do to Christians. There was something new, though, because in good European fashion the revolutionaries imagined a territory and a nation that would be exclusively Christian – Wasn't this the Europe imagined since Vienna? – and proceeded to make this a reality on the ground. Islam disappeared from the Morea in under one year. By decade's end the powers made the Balkans the new, southeastern border of Europe, and agreed that it had to be Christian. Muslims would have to leave. It is still the boundary – geographic and demographic – today as Europe patrols its coasts against (Muslim) refugees.

From Kostantaras we can begin to understand why the Morean notables would embrace the new terms and the new ideas, though at first glance this was not the obvious thing for them to do. They were still, in 1821, Ottoman subjects and notables making the system work by thoroughly exploiting the Christian peasantry, working with their Muslim partners. The *Filiki Etaireia*, when it appeared with a new national message, offered one more option but not at all the exclusive one. The notables were pushed into revolution by a combination of circumstance (the false belief that the Russians were coming), desperation (Hurşid Pasha would have their heads), and opportunity (they would finally rule alone, without agas, beys, and pashas). By April the die was cast because of the murder of so many Muslims and the Christians were implicated collectively; they were revolutionaries now whether they had wanted to be or not.

It was a Christian movement leading to a Christian state, but not all Christians were the same. Among the Orthodox, not much of the clerical hierarchy outside the Morea showed sympathy for the rebels and the rebels were duly anathematised by the patriarch. When the clergy were punished, it was for failing to control their flock. Punishments were applied to Christian populations indiscriminately, and the massacre of Chios was only the most notorious of the many local round-ups and murders. The Orthodox across the empire were subjected to punishments for events they had scarcely heard of; see the Orthodox of Syria, whom Hill cites. In the process one wonders if the sultan, in his panic, and rage did not make Christian solidarity more real: it was hard not to behave as a Greek revolutionary when you are being executed as one. But very many Christians were Catholics,

concentrated on the islands of the Aegean and larger towns like Nafplio. Kousouris shows us that the Catholics saw little advantage in a revolution of the Rum: left alone on islands like Syros, Tinos and Naxos, they already did well, and it was only by force that they paid dues to the revolutionary regime. We know that they would be inducted into the nation-state, though not for obvious reasons: the Catholics were protected by French warships and France insisted they be given rights; and there is a tendency in Greek nationalism to not only allow persons to be Greek, but then to insist on it.

Who is Greek was a question settled in part by violence as an entire demographic disappeared; by persuasion as many decided that being Greek was closer to what they wanted; and by accident, as a few French ships preserved a minority. As today we contemplate the same question – who is Greek? – we should remember that the term is made by people; and people can make it into something new. If religion is no longer the *sina qua non* of citizenship – Christianity is written into the preamble of the Constitution but not its articles – what is?

The endless possibilities that existed for a time are made plain by Dimitropoulos, who uses the example of a single cargo on a single ship to lay out the choices, and these were many. Ottoman Christians probably saw no problem when they carried supplies for Constantinople, though one might equally call them Greeks and Albanians (like so many crews), or Russians because of their flag. They could plausibly subject themselves to the authority of the sultan, the revolutionary government, the tsar, or the Austrian emperor and his Greco-Ottoman consul. The raiders who seized that ship could be acting on behalf of themselves as refugees and now islanders from Syros, as corsairs for the Greek state, as outlaws acting for themselves, or, theoretically, as the Ottoman subjects that they had been. So long as the war continued, they could choose; very soon they would have to make the final choice.

The Balkan century: Legacies, liberalisms and mass politics

The Greek Revolution and the new state became models across the Balkans over the next century: a demographic shift that created out of an empire homogeneous populations of Christians in most cases, and of Muslims in the last act of the revolutionary century, the Turkish Republic. For a time the model did not take hold in other parts of the empire. Hill impresses with his command of local knowledge and imperial politics. Best we can tell, those who governed Lebanon and Syria saw the Greeks as one more way to view themselves and their realms, but despite some concerted efforts on the part of Greek pirates and politicians, the model of an exclusive religion in a given territory did not take hold. The communities found their *modus vivendi*, preserved in part by the pulls of France, the Porte and Egypt. Not that the future relations of the confessions were altogether

peaceful; at least there was a consensus that they all had the right to exist in the same place. The closest the Balkans would come to that model was and is Albania, an exception that should be taken seriously given the coexistence of Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims. Again: contingency matters. Even if we agree that the nation-state was the future, the nation can take many forms. It still can.

Were Greece and the revolution liberal? According to the texts analysed by Sotiropoulos, liberal terminology permeated the written word, carried largely by outsiders to the Morea and Rumelia: separations of powers, individual rights to property and security, and government by representation. These were not only written by outsiders; they were directed at the European powers and public opinions. It would not be until the 1840s that these would become political practice. And yet there was something liberal, at least modern about the movement and the new state, and it took two forms. The one was the outcome of the local civil wars of 1823–1825, which limited the power of the Morean notables and signalled that Greece would not be a return to business as usual. This would not be an old regime of arbitrary privilege and power; the locality would become secondary to the state. There would be a Greek state and nation, a nation-state, in which some rights would be recognised and gradually enforced: property and person. (Like any liberal regime of the time, economic rights were not on the agenda.) The deep arbitrariness of the *ancien régime* would finally be abandoned. It is here that the words of that small minority of enlightened intellectuals would start to matter, a template to which future generations would refer. Whatever the factors that impelled the revolutionaries in 1821, by 1830 they might draw on a tradition that had been, but no longer was, alien, propagated by the likes of Kapodistrias while he lived, and Mavrokordatos and Kolettis who lived much longer.

Quite soon after the outbreak of the revolution, its leaders busied themselves with the business of a modern state. Here we arrive at a liberalism of practice sooner than statute, or to be more exact, the biopolitics that occurs in a modern state, liberal included. Barlagiannis shows that the focus on the health and effectiveness of the body, in this case the soldier's body, was already a concern for the Ottomans and an undertaking for the Egyptians, who imported doctors along with commanders when they formed the new-style army, the same army that invaded the Morea. This is both surprising and not surprising. That a state in its infancy should even attempt such a focus on the individual is unexpected. But it is also the flip-side of liberal thought, broadly conceived: the person who now had rights also had value and therefore required attention whether s/he wanted it or not. Liberalism is not always about choice and consent.

Still all this led to a notion of a collective of individuals who were forming a nation-state, not simply as an abstraction but as a practice of mass mobilisation and mass inclusion. This brings us to a final point, a *mea culpa* of the editors. For all our care in seeking out such excellent and original researchers and writers, we neglected the final truth about the Greek Revolution, the one factor that made it a revolution rather than one more rebellion, and the one factor that let the movement survive as long as did until the allied

fleets could settle the matter at Navarino: the masses of villagers and townsfolk who populated the armies and supplied them. Our fault is all the more unforgivable because we knew better. Kostantaras, in his study of notables, does point us in the right direction: unlike Polish and Italian revolutionaries at the time, the Greek notables and warlords turned to the mass of the peasantry and used their one weapon against the Ottoman regime: overwhelming numbers, especially in the Morea. Our history books tell us of Kolokotronis and Deliyannis, of Botsaris and Mavromichalis, but alone they would have ended their lives as outlaws or reconciled Ottoman subjects. The Polish and Italian movements of the time were extinguished in part because they could not see their peasants – very often serfs – as political actors; they were still products of their ancien régimes. The Greeks were bolstered by tens of thousands of peasants who marched on Tripolitsa to end Ottoman power in the Morea and on Dervenakia to stop it from returning. This really was new to the region and a model for future revolutionaries. And having made the revolution possible, they could no longer be ignored. The final proof was in the elections of 1844, where every adult male voted, the most expansive franchise on the continent.

To conclude we might ask some more questions about the character of the Greek state and Greek nationalism, and in the process anticipate the observations that will mark the founding of the Greek state in 1830. (Exhausted by 2021, not everyone is looking forward to 2030.) Most people will agree, albeit quietly, that the Greek Revolution was a bloody affair that left behind devastation and real loss, of people and groups of people. This should not be papered over. People fought for independence for less-than-lofty reasons, and only later found lofty reasons. This is not exceptional and any revolution, it seems to us, will seem petty and ugly if we look too closely. As historians, though, we can also look ahead and use the advantages of time and perspective. In this case we can observe that people might espouse good ideas for the wrong reasons, and they may act poorly in the name of something that will be lofty in the future. It is safe to say that many Greek revolutionaries became liberals – in the 1820s and into the 1840s – to protect themselves, or tolerated non-Orthodox because the French ships made them, and in the process protected others and the idea of a liberal state. It is safe to say that masses of peasants rose up for immediate reasons – survival and, well, war booty and freedom from overtaxation – but in the process created a mass state. There will be many anniversaries that remind us that the path was bumpy and crooked – the poor treatment of religious and linguistic minorities at some moments, dictatorships and mass repression at others – but ultimately the outcome of the Greek Revolution was a liberal, mass state. It entitled masses of people who could make new claims on the basis of their national belonging. We live that state today and it is the framework for appreciating not only what 1821 produced, but for celebrating how Greece continues to evolve.

¹ Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); in connection with Greece, Yanni Kotsonis, *Η ελληνική επανάσταση και οι αυτοκρατορίες: Η Γαλλία και οι Έλληνες, 1797–1830* [The Greek revolution and the empires: France and the Greeks, 1797–1830] (Athens: Alexandria, 2020).

² Javier Fernández Sebastián and Pierre Rosanvallon, “Intellectual History and Democracy: An Interview with Pierre Rosanvallon,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 4 (2007): 710.