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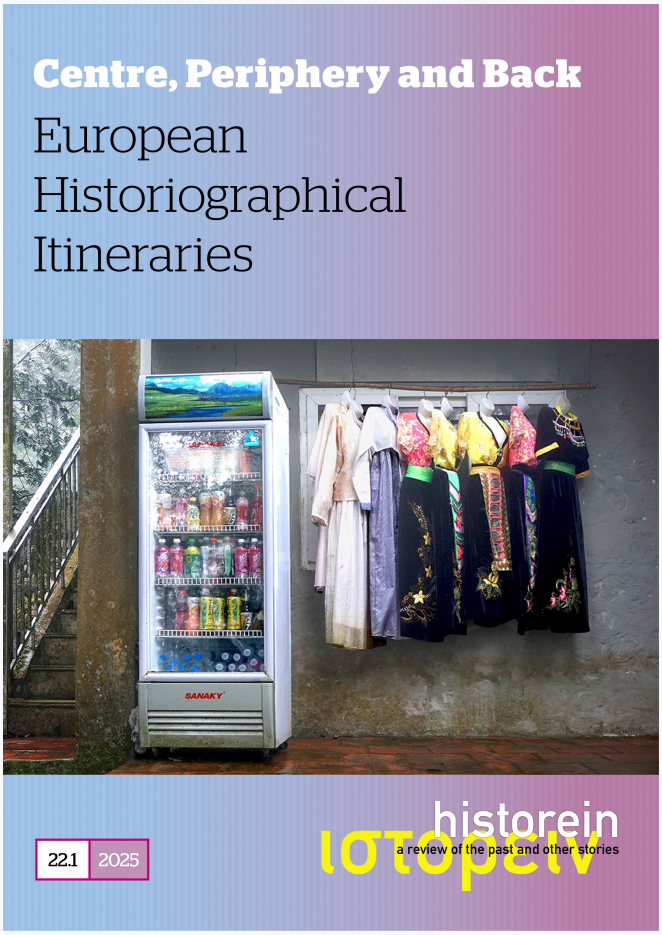

Review of Ada Dialla, Η Ρωσική αυτοκρατορία και ο Ελληνικός κόσμος: Τοπικές, ευρωπαϊκές και παγκόσμιες ιστορίες στην εποχή των επαναστάσεων

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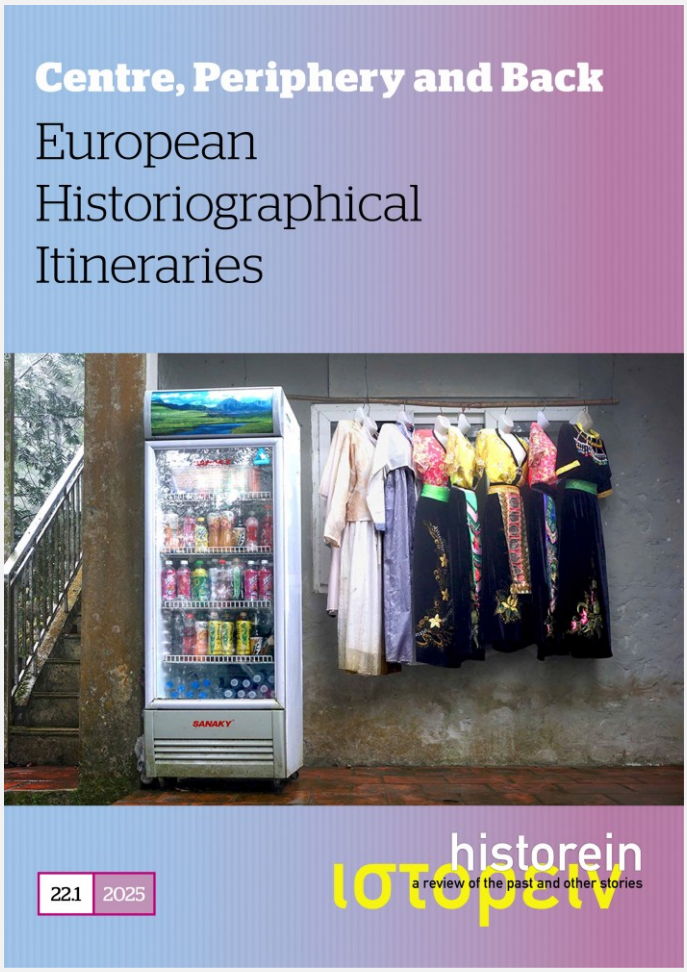

Ada Dialla, *Η Ρωσική Αυτοκρατορία και ο ελληνικός κόσμος: Τοπικές, ευρωπαϊκές και παγκόσμιες ιστορίες στην εποχή των επαναστάσεων* [The Russian Empire and the Greek world: Local, European and global histories in the Age of Revolutions]

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Ada Dialla

Η Ρωσική Αυτοκρατορία και ο ελληνικός κόσμος: Τοπικές, ευρωπαϊκές και παγκόσμιες ιστορίες στην εποχή των επαναστάσεων

[The Russian Empire and the Greek world: Local, European and global histories in the Age of Revolutions]

Athens: Alexandria, 2023. 328 pp.

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The seemingly endless anniversaries and commemorations of the Greek Revolution and War of Independence are set to last at least 10 years, more if one decides that Greece became a country in 1833. By then we will have started to mark the 110th anniversaries, so one can expect more waves to come. For those not familiar with the 200th anniversary celebrations, which can only have happened if they are abroad, not specialists or ascetic monks, the country has seen a mass mobilisation of institutions and people. I cannot think of a university or research centre that did not mount its celebration or commemoration, ranging from the predictably patriotic to the serious inquiry. Scholars have been on the march. Aside from the battalions who have specialised in the period for some time, a new army, formed of historians who had no scholarly connection with the revolutionary decade or even Greece, retooled and offered their perspectives. The sea of literature became an ocean, and I was among the many who added a drop. And with good reason: the topic is fascinating, and some of the literature has been very good indeed. We are left with some very good works of scholarship and narration. The late Vassilis Kremmydas penned what I think is the best concise overview, with the aim of showing how the foundation stones of the revolution were put in place in order to create what we already recognised as the revolution.[1] Kostis Papagiorgis, by contrast, is critically engaged and overhauls our understandings of who many of the heroes were, or at least were not, in a book that is profoundly original.[2] Edited collections use serious research to unravel myths and set the record straight, and leave it to the readers to draw the larger conclusions.[3] Konstantina Zanou takes the indirect route when she looks at the Ionian Islands in that period as places

that were only just becoming national, implying that the same can be true of the mainland as well. What was Greece before there was a Greece? Who were the Greeks before they were Greeks? These questions should be the obvious ones, and yet they are rarely asked. The historiography, for the most part, assumes the nation and is part of the ongoing affirmation of the nation.

Ada Dialla does ask the harder questions by looking through the eyes of Russia over half a century, and there are good reasons to read this book. Dialla is a historian of Russia, trained at the then-prestigious Moscow State University, and later apprenticed under the late, great George B. Dertilis. These have left two imprints that are detectable. One is an abiding interest in sources and empirical work, which in this case means not only the many archival collections we usually associate with the revolution, but sources buried deep in the Russian archives that she brings to light for the first time. Others, though not many, have paid more attention to Russia in recent years and indeed it is one of the sorely neglected facets of the revolution. Most notable is the work of Lucien Frary, who is a self-professed empiricist, with the task of mining sources and making them available to the reader in narrative form. It is not meant as a rethinking, and it is very good as an exposition of facts that were hitherto unknown.[4] Avgusta M. Stanislavskaia and Grigory Arsh put to good use their talents, and in recent years others have been reinforcing the mantra of Orthodox affinity.[5]

Otherwise the neglect of Russia is explainable but not defensible. Greece has maintained a western orientation since the 1850s, anxious to remain in the good graces of Britain, France, the US and Germany, and keen to represent itself as western rather than eastern (or northern). It was compounded by anticommunism in the postwar, and sealed by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, which the Greek government, and most Greeks, have rightly condemned. But this is not a reason to avoid studying it, given Russia's pivotal role in the emergence of Greek nationalism and the Russian arms and diplomacy that secured independence at the end of the revolutionary period.

The second imprint on Dialla, then, is conceptual, an attempt to fill a conceptual void and gently cast doubt on the received narrative of the pre-existing Greeks. The awareness of the short, medium and long terms is classic Annales – a tribute again to her mentor – and indeed the book is organised into three parts. The first part looks at the early Russian encounters with the future Greeks, beginning during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774, and is in effect about structures of thought. The second part looks at the Napoleonic period, when Russia entered the region in a more sustained way, and is concerned with geopolitics and diplomacy in a conjunctural manner. The book ends with the early years of the revolution itself, or the events. The Annales school was open to criticism because of the manner in which the structure might seem to determine the event and lend it a certain inevitability. Dialla's book is different because there is no reason to suppose that Russia's

arrival in the Mediterranean presaged any kind of revolution, let alone a nationalist one. Until 1821, wars were imperial rivalries that simulated local rebellions but not at all revolutions. Russia was as likely to ally with Arabs and Mamelukes as Christians in the Morea and the Archipelago.

Within this basic outline Dialla achieves what should be the goal of a good work of history: she surprises. Many, in fact most works tend to confirm for us what we vaguely knew, and the excitement is in the telling. Think of the ancient Athenians attending a theatre performance with which all were familiar, and came to find out how it will be told rather than what will be told. Now imagine that they were seeing a performance for the first time. From the very start the Russian encounter with the Greeks is a paradox: a country that is basically both European and Asian, at that moment insisting only on its European Enlightenment credentials, arrives in the Mediterranean to rally to its side just about anyone – Christians, Muslims, Arabs, Europeans. It offers the patronage of a state more powerful than the Porte. It flatters them in any way that might work. In the case of the southern Balkans it encounters the Christians whom it calls *greki*, always wondering why it was the Christians who were *greki* and not the Muslims and Jews who could claim much the same heritage. After all, every one of them were coverts from paganism. It was and still is a good question, which she aptly terms Leonidas with a cross. Dialla shows that the Russians had no particular preference for the Greeks, though the Greeks thought they did and accepted Russian affirmations that they were the heirs of the ancients and Orthodox brethren. Be that as it may, it established the notion that the Rum of the region were to be the Greeks to the exclusion of all others, and Dialla fairly maintains that the Russians were the first philhellenes in all but name, and like later philhellenes shared in a disappointment in the people and in a Grecomania that would be used to justify Greek independence when the geopolitics permitted. As it happened, and as Roderick Beaton told me more than once, the Greeks had a trump card in their claim to an ancient heritage. On the other hand, it was still not clear who exactly the Greeks were – what to do with, say, the Vlachs and Christian Albanians. And all along, the Russians wondered if the Greeks – whoever they might be – and the Balkans and the Mediterranean were more African or Asian than European.

There was no direct line to 1821 or 1830, but plenty of contingency. Dialla shows that a lot had to happen in between 1770 and 1830, and much of this was conjunctural and circumstantial. The wars and deliberations in 1814–1815 left the future Greeks out of the Congress system, but diplomats like Capo d'Istria (now Kapodistriia in Russian, later Kapodistrias in Greek) left in the texts precedents that could be revived when needed. To what end even they did not know, though it is certain that hardly any of them had in mind an independent Greece. It so happened that these precedents were revived to serve the cause of the Greeks rather than, say, the Bulgarians or the Serbs, and Dialla shows how: the special relationship of Russia with the Ottoman Christians as a result of treaties, the notion that the Ottoman regime and all the Muslims in the Balkans were foreign entities, the

campaign against slavery which was about the Atlantic but could be used to intervene on behalf of the Greeks, and the idea of humanitarian intervention which was put to use in 1827. Still this was not about the Greeks per se but Christians and humans, so 1821 was a surprise to the Russians themselves (and a lot of the new Greeks). As we know, the Russians roundly condemned the uprising along with all the European powers – Haiti alone recognised Greece – but were arguably the first to execute an about-face in 1826 when they invited Wellington to join them in intervening, one way or another, on behalf of the rebellious Christians whom they now were sure were the Greeks. The last part of the book, then, shows the operation of Russian diplomacy where a clear sense of the Greeks takes shape. It ends before the military intervention of 1827 but by now readers will have gotten the point: nations are a work in progress.

This is a work of serious research and intellectual daring. It is also written in a smooth prose that is a pleasure to read. And read it one should because there is still a lot to learn about the Greek Revolution: facts but also the concepts that organise the facts.

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[1] Vassilis Kremmydas, *Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση του 1821: Τεκμήρια, αναψηλαφήσεις, ερμηνείες* [The Greek Revolution of 1821: Evidence, reflections, interpretations] (Athens: Gutenberg, 2016).

[2] Kostis Papagiorgis, *Τα Καπάκια: Βαρνακιώτης, Καραϊσκάκης, Ανδρούτσος* [The *kapakia*: Varnakiotis, Karaiskakis, Androutsos] (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2009).

[3] Dimitris Dimitropoulos, Christos Loukos, and Panagiotis D. Michailaris, Όψεις της Επανάστασης του 1821 [Aspects of the 1821 Revolution: Conference proceedings] (Athens: Society for the Study of Modern Hellenism–Mnimon, 2018); Ada Dialla and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., "The Greek Revolution: What Made It Greek? What Made It Revolutionary?," special issue, *Historein* 20, no. 1 (2021), https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historein/issue/view/1537.

[4] Lucien Frary, *Russia and the Making of Modern Greek Identity, 1821–1844* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[5] In particular: A.M. Stanislavskaia, *Россия и Греция в конце XVIII–нацале XIX века: Политика России в Ионической Республике, 1798–1807 гг.* [Russia and Greece in the late 18th–early 19th century: Russia's policy in the Ionian Republic, 1798–1807] (Moscow: Nauka, 1974); G.L. Arsh, *Этеристское движение в России. Освободительная борьба греческого народа в начале XIX в. и русско-греческие связ* [The Etairist movement in Russia: The liberation struggle of the Greek people in the beginning of the 19th century and Russian-Greek relations] (Moscow: Nauka, 1970).