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Mark Mazower, Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση

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Mark Mazower,  
*Η ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΕΠΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΗ*  
[The Greek Revolution],  
Athens: Alexandria, 2021, 565 pages.

This important work, and its translation into Greek, has come in time to be added to what was written in 2021 about the Greek Revolution. After many years of research and writing, the author attempts to give as comprehensive a picture as possible of many aspects of the Greek revolt, of the great impact it had abroad, of how, finally, with the “inexhaustible patience of the people” (chap. 16), European intervention was provoked and defeat was avoided. Mark Mazower shows here too how remarkable a historian he is, how he can raise new questions, reassess old ones, seek out unknown or inappropriately used information, and all this in a writing style that seems fictional, fictional but always remains historical. The reader will feel the immediacy and intensity of the description when reading about what the civilians suffered (massacres, captivity, forced displacement, starvation), about the brutality of a war that also had a strong religious character, about Ibrahim’s scorched-earth tactics, about the personality and behaviour of captains, primates and politicians, as well as foreigners who in one way or another were connected with 1821. Among the most beautiful images: the arrival of a Bavarian corps under Lieutenant Christoph

Neezer in Athens, the withdrawal of the Turkish garrison and the raising of the Greek flag on the Acropolis.

Some elements give another dimension to the narrative: It is very aptly pointed out that Napoleon’s death, more than Byron’s, contributed to the strengthening of a new public consciousness that decisively influenced the Greek struggle; Mehmet Ali wanted to be the Napoleon of Egypt; Dorothea Lieven, wife of the Russian ambassador in London and known for her love affairs with Metternich and prominent British politicians, not only contributed decisively to Anglo-Russian rapprochement but is said to have introduced the waltz to Britain; Admiral Codrington, who was discredited for his initiative at Navarino by Prime Minister Wellington, was received with honours by the Russian tsar and danced with members of the imperial family; in London’s taverns and cafés, Greek support contributed to another form of resistance to Tory policy; John Bowring, who was the main founder of the London Philhellenic Committee and chief negotiator of the first Greek loan, was a Bentham supporter (but, above all, he wanted to make money), deceived the Greek committee, became rich and later was appointed governor of Hong Kong

and became involved in the Opium War with China. The picture of the captains is enriched by a detailed description of their outfit, and we learn about the equipment of a philhellene before he left Marseilles for Greece.

In the 18 chapters of his book, Mazower incorporates much that, as ideas, information and, above all, as a method of historical writing, cannot fail to arouse the interest of experts on 1821. Of course there will be disagreements about persons and things, but the payoff is certain. I was thinking how beneficial a postgraduate seminar would be where all the major issues raised in the book could be studied in comparison with other approaches. It would also better highlight what new things the author brings to the table, what testimonies in particular he highlights at the possible expense of others, if there are aspects, which there certainly are, where a critique would be necessary and constructive. I will not dwell on some such cases, but I will venture a few thoughts which do not entirely deviate from what the author says but which I think show how much more complex some of the issues under consideration are.

To oversimplify, the central theme of the narrative is how a people rebelled, endured for six years a struggle against a clearly superior opponent and, ultimately, through this endurance, generated an unprecedented wave of sympathy from European and American public opinion which, combined with the conflicting interests of the major powers in the region, caused them to intervene and save the revolution. And that these conflicting interests were, to a large extent, fostered by an enlightened revolutionary leadership which understood in time that only by

internationalising the Greek struggle and strengthening it from outside could it not be defeated. And this scenario has two protagonists: Alexandros Mavrocordatos and Britain, mainly through the policy of George Canning. I would be the last to question the crucial role that both played but I would hesitate to subscribe to an almost exclusive contribution of both to the success of this ultimately happy development for the revolutionaries. Mazower writes:

Then in 1825, the Egyptians had invaded the Morea. Terrified by the speed of Ibrahim's advance, the Greek chieftains in the Peloponnese appealed to London to mediate with the Sultan for them. George Canning had the opening he sought and sent his cousin, Stratford Canning, to Constantinople as ambassador. On his way to the Ottoman capital at the start of 1826, he moored off Hydra to order to meet with Mavrokordatos, who came aboard his ship for a conversation in which they discussed the idea of making the Morea and the islands a single tributary state of the empire, a goal that fell far short of independence. Their informal conversation turned out to be highly consequential: not only did it signal the Greeks' growing orientation towards the British, an orientation already anticipated by the two loans, but without the conversation between the two men the Holy Alliance might have remained intact and there would have been no Anglo-Russian negotiations, no Protocol of St Petersburg that spring, no Treaty of London, and no battle of Navarino. (405–6, English ed.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Mazower, *The Greek Revolution: 1821 and the Making of Modern Europe*

I think this is where the exaggeration lies. Mavrocordatos was completely weakened at the beginning of 1826, having also received the consequences of the inability of the Kountouriotis government, of which he was a part, to deal with Ibrahim's successive victories. Accepting British mediation to avoid defeat by retreating from the demand for independence to a form of autonomy was a one-way street for almost the entire revolutionary leadership; this decision no longer depended on Mavrocordatos. And if he did indeed give his consent – information that certainly needs cross-checking – to the creation of an autonomous state with only the Peloponnese and the islands, it reinforces the then widespread fears of many fighters about such a development that would leave Central Greece outside its borders. On the other hand, the process of Anglo-Russian rapprochement had already begun by the end of 1825, as the book points out, so yes, George Canning achieved his main objective, that Russia should not intervene unilaterally in the Greek question, but, as it is also pointed out, without Russian complicity nothing could succeed. Therefore, it was not Stratford Canning's meeting with Mavrocordatos that determined subsequent developments, it was an episode, important of course, in a course now determined by new Anglo-Russian contacts to put some end to prolonged unrest in the Eastern Mediterranean. If Greek endurance caused the intervention of the powers at Navarino, perhaps more emphasis should

have been placed, rather than on Greek diplomacy, on the months gained until that intervention took place, with the successes of Karaiskakis in Central Greece and the irregular warfare of Kolokotronis in the Peloponnese – precious months that did not allow Ibrahim and Kütahi to secure full submission in time, as the sultan wanted, and thus cancel the European intervention.

This exaggeration of Britain's decisive role, combined with the projection of the domestic and foreign policy of Mavrocordatos and his collaborators, as well as his Hydra supporters, as the only salvation for the revolution, would perhaps be mitigated if the end of the revolution was not specified at the end of 1827, after Navarino. The last chapter, chapter 18, does indeed deal with the period 1828–1833, but as a sort of epilogue to what preceded it. Had this too been bravely included in the negotiation, I am sure that more would have been gained and some appreciations of what preceded it might have been more refined.

George Canning was not alive when the news of Navarino reached London. Possibly, had he lived, he might have joined with the British fleet in a forceful intervention of forces to compel the Porte to accept the Treaty of London of July 1827, given that Mahmud II, even after the destruction of the Turco-Egyptian fleet, insisted on the subjugation of the rebels, and might have prevented the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829. But his successor in power, Wellington, would not only regard the Navarino as an unfortunate event and use pretexts to dismiss Codrington, but he considered that the July 1827 treaty was no longer advantageous to Britain's interests and

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(London: Allen Lane, 2021). The extract appears on the same pages in the Greek edition.

was seeking a way of disengaging from it. It was common knowledge that the majority of the British cabinet and the king himself made no secret of their Turcophile feelings and their dislike of the Greek revolutionaries. And here it should be emphasised that we must not confuse the liberal and constitutional sentiments of the British with the brutal and colonial policy of their government when its interests were at stake abroad or when it was asserting its own aims.

Since a release from the July 1827 treaty was not possible, Wellington insisted that the territories of the negotiated Greek autonomous state be limited to the Peloponnese and the surrounding islands and would disapprove of the British ambassador in Constantinople, Stratford Canning, for accepting, together with his colleagues from Russia and France at the Poros Conference (late 1828–early 1829), a border that incorporated a large part of Central Greece into the Greek state.

In the meantime, France's active involvement in the Greek question would add a new dimension to the Anglo-Russian antagonism. The French Expeditionary Force under Maison would drive Ibrahim from the Peloponnese and through its presence would reinforce France's attempt to regain some of its formerly strong naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which it had lost after the British victories against Napoleon. Finally, only after the victorious advance of the Russian army to the outskirts of Constantinople during the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829, the sultan was forced to accept, under the Treaty of Adrianople, the autonomy of Greece as provided for in the July 1827 treaty. Then the British government made a decisive manoeuvre to counterbalance

the consequences of the Russian victory in the Greek question. Wellington proposed an independent rather than autonomous Greek state, but with limited borders on the Ionian side, and the election of a hereditary monarch, which meant setting aside President Ioannis Capodistrias. The other powers agreed and in early 1830 the Greeks gained an independent state. Capodistrias resisted the restriction of borders and without the consent of the Greeks. Mavrocordatos and those around him acquiesced unquestioningly, believing that the removal of the President would avoid the danger of perpetuating the centralised model of government he had imposed and the consequent Russian influence. The resignation of Prince Leopold, whom the three powers had elected hereditary monarch of the new state, postponed, with disastrous consequences, the orderly resolution of the Greek question. His resignation was due, among other things, to the insistence of the Wellington government not to yield on the question of the territorial limitation of the new state. The objection to the question of the northern Greek frontier would be lifted by the new British government in the treaty of 1832.

With this in mind, it would be difficult to attribute Capodistrias' corresponding aversion to the British government, which considered him an agent of the Russians, only to the fact that "he was no great fan of the British governing class either, disliking their snobbery and philistinism" (422, English ed.), and not to emphasise that it was difficult for him to forget that, in violation of the relevant treaty, the commissioner of the Ionian Islands was treating the Ionian Islands as colonies, and that he had feared that something of the same kind would happen to embattled Greece if

Britain accepted the petition for protection which in a moment of desperation many Greeks had asked for and Mavrocordatos had not discouraged. Before Stratford Canning met with Mavrocordatos in the Greek territories, he had talked with Capodistrias in Geneva and he had unequivocally heard from him that he did not want Greece to become a colony of Britain like the Ionian Islands. And, as mentioned, the Wellington government was adamantly refusing to extend the borders of the Greek state entity under formation. A small Greece, a French official had said, would inevitably become the eighth island of the Ionian Sea.

The last chapter of the book, the 18th, is entitled "Love, Concord, Brotherhood, 1828–33". If it came, as it seems, from what Georgios Mavromichalis, one of Capodistrias' assassins, is alleged to have said as he faced the firing squad, I think it is unfortunate, to say the least. Mavromichalis, who, it should be noted, sought during his trial to attribute the murder to his now dead uncle Konstantinos, another assassin, does not express the real attempt in this period to "love, concord, brotherhood". The reasons why the Mavromichalis family opposed Capodistrias are well known and indeed he, despite justifiable indignation, demonstrated, with a lack of political tactics, excessive severity towards them. But I think it is limiting to attribute the murder to a simple revengeful feud, common among the Maniots, and not to place it in a general climate of fierce opposition and complete disparagement of Capodistrias where "tyrannicide" could have taken and did take on a different meaning. And Mavrocordatos and his close associates had played an important role in the creation of this climate.

I have dwelt a little more on issues that I like to think I know somewhat better. Let us return to the great book before us. I admired, among many other things, how the author highlighted in his own way the philhellene movement and its qualitative changes over time. How the Greek Revolution, as a reference point and hope of liberals all over Europe who were fighting or dreaming of political freedoms in their countries under authoritarian rule, gradually, after the atrocities of the Turks, Messolonghi, the resistance of the revolutionaries and the attempted "barbarisation" of the Peloponnese by Ibrahim, acquired a new label that embraced individuals and groups from all over the social and political spectrum. Philhellenism inspired not only liberals, but Christians and philanthropists, becoming in the diversity of its reception a powerful weapon in the then-forming public opinion that governments in Europe and North America could not ignore.

Mark Mazower is widely known. His books, some on Greek history, have been hits and have been read, in their English versions and in translation, by many in various countries. It is therefore fortunate that his new study of the Greek Revolution will be more widely known. A historical study rich in every respect that further demonstrates that the triumph of Greek nationalism over a firmly entrenched dynastic power, with the sympathy and solidarity it engendered, had a significant impact on the societies of the time and forced powerful European states into new forms of collective action.

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