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Basil C. Gounaris, “See how the Gods Favour Sacrilege”: English Views and Politics on Candia under Siege (1645-1669)

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Basil C. Gounaris,
“SEE HOW THE GODS FAVOUR SACRILEGE”:
ENGLISH VIEWS AND POLITICS ON CANDIA UNDER SIEGE (1645-1669),
Athens: Department of Neohellenic Research,
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF, 2012, 136 pages.

Based principally on English archival and published sources, this work is a study of British politics in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Cretan War (1645-1669). Its main thesis is that Venice, in the hope that England, one of the major naval powers of the time, could engage in military action against the Ottomans, set out on a race against time and conflicting commercial and political interests in order to gain the British State's support. Yet, despite the widespread anti-Islamic feelings running through the English government and society, financial pragmatism and diplomatic interests would eventually prevail over religious enthusiasm, preventing England from actively intervening in the conflict.

The author masterfully explores a series of events that influenced the above-mentioned developments in six main chapters. In the second chapter, following the book's preface (chapter 1), he deals mainly with the issue of Anglo-

Venetian commercial relations until the 1640s and the image of Venice and the Ottoman Empire in the English popular imagination. The third chapter is devoted to the diplomatic implications of the commercial rivalry between the Levant Company and Venice right before and after the outbreak of the Cretan War, the alliances and antagonisms created due to the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the impact these events had on England's political stance on the Eastern Mediterranean. The fourth chapter deals with the turbulent decade that preceded the Restoration (1660). It explores the repercussions that the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654), the Anglo-Spanish War (1654-1660), the Ionian currant trade, the problem of Barbary corsairs and the Interregnum's ideological and religious standpoint had on the Anglo-Venetian negotiations over the involvement of England in the Cretan War. The fifth and sixth chapters are concerned with the

complicated relations of England with the Ottoman Empire and Venice after the Restoration: to Venice's disappointment, the new British royal regime increasingly distanced itself from the prospect of active participation in the war. Yet, this attitude of neutrality was put to the test several times, in part because of the continuous assaults of Algerian corsairs on English ships, and in part because of the diplomatic zeal displayed by the new English ambassador to the Porte, which often resulted in tensions between him and both the Ottoman government and the Venetian bailo in Istanbul. Occasionally the Venetians would manage to get vague promises of intervention from the English side, but with the outbreak of the second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667) and the Levant Company's supporters opposing any interference that could harm its trade with the Ottomans, they were in the end left without help and Candia fell into Ottoman hands. The final chapter is an assessment of the role that religion and trade played in the shaping of English political decisions regarding the Cretan War, the conclusion being that religion-based sympathy, even if sincere, could not have been a decisive factor for the British to engage in war in order to support the Venetian interests in the Levant.

Until now little has been written about the way Western European states responded to the Cretan War, with the historians' emphasis being placed mainly on the important role of France, in which "the sultans found the friend that Venice had so sorely lacked".¹ In this respect,

one of the biggest merits of this book is the introduction of an approach that focuses on the impact that a "secondary" front of Ottoman diplomacy – England – had on an issue of grave importance for the Ottoman State, specifically the conquest of Crete. Gounaris deals with the information provided by his sources in a balanced way through the parallel examination of their political, diplomatic and ideological aspects and manages to produce a clear-cut image of the way in which England responded to the *de facto* challenges caused by its maritime involvement in the affairs of the Eastern Mediterranean states.

On the downside, one can argue that even though, as the subtitle of the book suggests, Gounaris' goal is to study the "English Views and Politics on Candia under Siege", these views and politics were to a great extent still products of the "incredible complication of the triangular relationship between London, Venice and Constantinople" (p. 12), a relationship that cannot be examined thoroughly without the juxtaposition of the English and Venetian sources used by the author to the multitude of Ottoman sources available on the subject. Yet, even if this lack of cross-reference can be understood as a result of the difficulties that the task of reading Ottoman palaeography entails, the same cannot be said about the evident lack of use in the bibliography of some of the latest and most important publications that contain valuable information on the Ottomans' attitude towards the Cretan War (such as Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Princeton 2000; Antonis Anastasopoulos [ed.], *Halcyon Days in*

¹ Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Princeton 2000, pp. 74-77.

Crete VI. The Eastern Mediterranean under Ottoman Rule: Crete, 1645-1840. A Symposium Held in Rethymnon, 13-15 January 2006, Rethymnon 2008; and Ersin Gülsoy, *Girit'in Fethi ve Osmanlı İdaresinin Kurulması [1645-1670]*, Istanbul 2004, to name a few). Still, on the

whole Basil C. Gounaris' book is without doubt a well-written monograph from which researchers of British, Venetian and Ottoman history could benefit, and it definitely constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the international aspects of the Cretan War.

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