

# Review Article “Greece, Cyprus and the Age of Revolutions in the Eastern Mediterranean”

Ada Dialla, *The Russian Empire and the Greek World: Local, European, and Global Histories in the Age of Revolutions*. Athens: Alexandria, 2023. 327 pages (in Greek).

Antonis Hadjikyriacou, *Peninsular Island: The Mediterranean and Cyprus in the Ottoman Age of Revolutions*. Thessaloniki: Psifides, 2023. 438 pages (with 63 maps and 7 tables) + 1 map (in Greek).

Michalis Sotiropoulos, *Liberalism after the Revolution: The Intellectual Foundations of the Greek State, c. 1830-1880*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 300 pages.



Eleni Gara

## *Article Review*

What does the local look like when it is considered from a supra-local or global viewpoint? Which approach is best suited to understanding historical change in the late 18th and early 19th-century Eastern Mediterranean? How are the political and intellectual processes in the Greco-Ottoman world before, during and after the Greek Revolution connected to the rivalries of European empires and colonial expansion? Three books published in 2023, *The Russian Empire and the Greek World: Local, European, and Global Histories in the Age of Revolutions* by Ada Dialla, *Peninsular Island: The Mediterranean and Cyprus in the Ottoman Age of Revolutions* by Antonis Hadjikyriacou, and *Liberalism after the Revolution: The Intellectual Foundations of the Greek State, c. 1830-1880* by Michalis Sotiropoulos, grapple with these questions by taking the age of revolutions as a frame of reference and by conceptualizing the issues they deal with as aspects of its Mediterranean manifestation.

*The Russian Empire and the Greek World: Local, European, and Global Histories in the Age of Revolutions* is about the outbreak and the crucial first year of the Greek Revolution, but from a perspective that puts Russia on central stage. Dialla discusses the political and intellectual developments that shaped the Russian stances toward Greeks since the 1770s and analyses the international and imperial contexts of the Russian reactions to the Greek uprising. *Peninsular Island: The Mediterranean and Cyprus in the Ottoman Age of Revolutions* is about Cyprus and how it changed between 1764 and 1840, an era that witnessed the island's transition to modernity. Hadjikyriacou uses the methodologies of spatial history, a field focusing on the role of space and environment in historical change, to examine the case of Cyprus in its Mediterranean and Ottoman contexts, and analyzes archival data with the help of GIS tools to discuss the island's economy and society in the *longue durée*. *Liberalism after the Revolution: The Intellectual Foundations of the Greek State, c. 1830-1880*, on the other hand, is concerned

with change in political and legal thought. Sotiropoulos discusses the theoretical elaborations and public interventions of a group of European-trained legal scholars who influenced the shaping of Greek state institutions after independence, and analyzes the political and intellectual contexts of Greek liberalism from a transnational perspective. Taken together,<sup>1</sup> these three very different books add to the bibliography on the Greek world during the age of revolutions and enrich reflection on the manifold and interconnected changes, political, intellectual, social, or economic, that it underwent before and after the watershed event of the Greek war of independence.<sup>2</sup>

In its most recent incarnation, which emerged after the publication in 2010 of the collective *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*,<sup>3</sup> the concept of the age of revolutions is quite different in content and scope from the one introduced by Eric Hobsbawm half a century earlier.<sup>4</sup> It is an expanded concept for a global era of change produced by the advent of modernity in different societies and under diverse circumstances. The focus is no longer on the “double revolution,” namely the French and the industrial revolution, which between 1789 and 1848 reshaped first Europe and then the rest of the world, but on the global crisis of sovereignty that started in the 1760s and was caused by the expansion of colonial powers and the conflicts between them. A crisis of sovereignty that, as Ada Dialla explains in her book, “raised anew questions such as what are political communities, what are the rights and obligations of citizens, what is the relationship between monarchs and peoples, between different territories of the same polity” (p. 185).

From this point of view, the age of revolutions in the Mediterranean does not begin with the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars, but with the operations of the Russian fleet in the Aegean and the Levant in the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-74. In Greek national history, the Russian expedition forms the background of the so-called Orlov revolts, a series of anti-Ottoman and pro-Russian uprisings in the Greek lands triggered by the appearance of the Russian squadrons in 1770 which are considered the prelude of the revolution of 1821. From a European and world history perspective, however, the Russian victory at the Battle of Chesme was more impactful than the revolts, which were quickly suppressed by the Ottomans, because it enabled Russian forces to control the sea routes and operate as far as the coast of Syro-Palestine. It also permitted them to experiment in colonial governance by organizing an island principality in the Cyclades. By the end of the Russian campaign, as Dialla points out, the Eastern Mediterranean had been geographically reconceptualized as a European sea and geopolitically projected as a field of Russian imperialism and a channel of global trade connections in which Russia also had a stake.

The Russian expedition and the Orlov revolts make 1770 a reasonable beginning for the Mediterranean age of revolutions.<sup>5</sup> If, however, the perspective is shifted to particular regions, things may look different. The Ottoman Mediterranean had already witnessed uprisings that can be considered as manifestations of the crisis of sovereignty related to the changing imperial

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<sup>1</sup> This review article originated with a presentation at the panel “The Mediterranean Age of Revolutions,” organized on 7 June 2023 at Panteion University, Athens, on the occasion of the three books’ publication.

<sup>2</sup> See also Paschalis M. Kitromilides (ed.), *The Greek Revolution in the Age of Revolutions (1776-1848): Reappraisals and Comparisons*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768-1776: The First Crisis*, trans. R. Burr Litchfield. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

order. Antonis Hadjikyriacou, who studies the case of Cyprus, locates the turning point for the island's entrance to the age of revolutions not in the appearance of the Russian fleet but in the rebellion of 1764, which he characterizes as "the first joint uprising of Christians and Muslims in Cyprus with clear social characteristics" (p. 343). The events of 1764, according to Hadjikyriacou, inaugurated a period of joint uprisings against local authorities that led rather to "a renegotiation than an overthrow of the balance of power" on the island (pp. 362-363). This period ended with the rebellions of 1833. In the meantime, however, the executions or flight of members of the higher clergy, Christian notables and merchants in July 1821 had decimated the Greek Orthodox elites of the island, while the confiscations of property belonging to them had resulted in an unprecedented redistribution of wealth in favor of powerful Muslims or European merchants.

In Greece, the international recognition of the nation's independence in 1830 and the foundation of the Greek kingdom in 1832 marked the end of a cycle of sovereignty crisis and the start of a new one, but with different characteristics, this time centered around the concepts of popular and national sovereignty. In the field of political ideas, as Michalis Sotiropoulos reminds us, the age of revolutions is associated with the rise of liberalism. The emphasis on political equality and egalitarianism, the commitment to the constitution and the rule of law, the protection of individual freedoms, especially life and property, the protection of freedom of speech, and the condemnation of despotism were characteristics of liberalism in this period. After 1848, liberalism changed its character: it became more conservative and was imbued with nationalism and elitism. Sotiropoulos, who studies the writings of 19th-century jurists, argues, however, that in the Greek case "liberalism did not retreat, nor did it lose its critical edge" after the 1840s (p. 3). Greek liberal jurists continued the revolutionary tradition even after the establishment of the kingdom, although they had to readjust their thinking to the new conditions and make initial concessions to the monarchy, giving priority to the attempt to create a unified legal order under state control.

As Sotiropoulos shows, the most important reason for not severing the thread of the revolutionary tradition was the need to support the sovereign rights of the Greek kingdom against the Great Powers (Britain, France, and Russia). Othonian Greece was "poised between being a protectorate and an independent state" (p. 5). The kingdom had limited sovereignty, while the guarantor powers considered themselves as having a practically unlimited right of intervention. The question of who had the right to make decisions and exert government control was raised by liberal jurists at length, not only in relation to domestic politics but also in relation to Greece's international position. Formal independence was not enough to ensure the state's sovereignty, argued the eminent jurist Saripolos. Greece needed to be able to exercise its sovereign rights to self-preservation and self-government, and also be treated as an equal in the international arena.

The inferior status of the Greek kingdom and the interventionist attitude of the Great Powers was, of course, a consequence of the conditions under which it was founded. The Greek nation state, as Dialla points out (p. 19), may have emerged thanks to the struggle of the insurrectionists but owes its survival to a humanitarian intervention by the Great Powers and the Russo-Ottoman war of 1828-29, while the Greeks did not participate in the signing of their country's independence in 1832; the treaty of London was between Britain, France, and Russia. The recognition of Greek independence, even if with limited sovereignty, as Dialla persuasively argues, owes a great deal to Ioannis Kapodistrias and his circle in Russia. Kapodistrias and his collaborators managed, in concert with the insurgents, to present in the international arena the

uprising of 1821 not as a civil war, an internal affair of the Ottoman empire, but as a national struggle, a war of independence against the tyrannical Ottoman power that was not legitimized to dominate the Greek people. This permitted the differentiation of the Greek case from the other Mediterranean uprisings of that time, which were constitutional and liberal and were therefore judged as threatening to the status quo.

The Greek struggle was also able to benefit from the reconceptualization of Europe as a Christian community in the spirit of the Holy Alliance. Russia, with its leading position at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15, had already placed the Ottoman Empire on the margins of the European order. The Russian position, as DiIalla explains, was that Europe could not possibly include an Islamic monarchy that was by definition outside the sphere of civilized states (pp. 157-62). The repressive and vengeful measures of the Ottoman authorities after the outbreak of the Greek uprising, especially the massacre of Chios in 1822, confirmed pre-existing stereotypes and solidified the image of “Turkish (i.e. Muslim) barbarism.” DiIalla demonstrates the pivotal role of Russian public opinion in the spread of the philhellenic image of the Christian Ottoman subjects as slaves to the Muslims. This image was unhesitatingly adopted by public opinion in the rest of Europe and inspired the calls on European governments to intervene on humanitarian grounds in the spirit of abolishing slavery.

European public opinion in the 1820s viewed the Greek case as very different from other contemporary revolutions in the south of Europe and the Americas. On the contrary, current historiographical syntheses that adopt the perspective of the age of revolutions, discuss the Greek revolution alongside those of the Iberian and Italian peninsulas and Sicily.<sup>6</sup> There is no denying that the events of 1821 manifested a triple crisis of authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty in the Ottoman empire that can be rightly considered as part of the southern European or Mediterranean age of revolutions. The Ottoman territories were involved in the processes of historical change both as the object of competition between the Great Powers, three colonial empires that saw the Eastern Mediterranean as a new space of action, and as an imperial space shaken by internal crises which were triggered by diverse causes but were at the same time connected to broader developments. Starting with the last decades of the 18th century and until the introduction of the Tanzimat reforms in 1839, which demolished the Ottoman *ancien régime*, the Ottoman empire experienced successive crises of governance produced by the attempt to strengthen the central state and modernize the army. The effort to reorganize the administrative and military institutions to the benefit of the imperial center coincided with the reshaping of the European order, first during the Napoleonic Wars and then with the Concert of Europe. These two parallel developments form the background for the outbreak of secessionist movements by powerful Muslim provincial governors and for the uprisings of Christian populations in the Balkans, including the Greek revolution.

The case of Cyprus, studied by Antonis Hadjikyriacou, allows us to see another aspect of the historical processes of the age of revolutions, namely the changing significance of the island’s geography in relation both to internal dynamics of power and to its connection with the rest of the Mediterranean. Hadjikyriacou, who places space at the center of his analysis, defines this process as *respatialisation*, which revolves around revolts, internal political crises, and wider geostrategic events (p. 322). Before the age of revolutions, according to Hadjikyriacou, “Cyprus had no particular value” for the Ottoman Empire. But the developments of the period 1764-1841

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Maurizio Isabella, *Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

placed it anew and in different terms on the imperial map. In this process of respatialisation, the insularity of Cyprus came into the fore and became a major concern for the Ottoman state in terms of insecurity: the coastline made it difficult to defend the island. At the local level, on the other hand, insularity had its advantages in times of war because it enabled provincial officials to benefit from the opportunities for speculation and enrichment offered by naval operations.

Indeed, a major consequence of the respatialization of Cyprus during the Napoleonic Wars was that the changing conception of the island in the imperial center “upset the balance in the political economy of the country, greatly strengthening the position of those who could efficiently and rapidly mobilize monetary resources and basic products for the needs of the imperial army and its allies” (p. 311). The enrichment and the strengthening of the position of the Christian intermediaries before and after the Napoleonic wars was accompanied by a concentration of power that took on a competitive character and led to frequent crises. It also became the catalyst for episodes of sectarian violence that culminated in the events of July 1821, a watershed event for intercommunal relations on the island.

The recurrent unrest between 1764 and 1841 ran parallel to the geopolitical upheavals,<sup>7</sup> which “acted as catalysts at the local level, unleashing or creating dynamics that shifted the equilibrium of local economy and society” (p. 306). During this time, Cyprus experienced a serious crisis every five years or so, either due to grain famine, drought, locust raids or the frequent emigration of the inhabitants, especially the Christians. Hadjikyriacou regards this periodicity, which is not broken by the events of July 1821, as a reflection of the age of revolutions. In the case of Cyprus, he argues, the age of revolutions “did not bring about a radical upheaval but was a source of constant turmoil that transformed the spatiality of Cyprus in a wider temporal context, in the meantime redistributing wealth and power internally and bringing about changes in the political economy of the island” (pp. 65-66).

By bringing into the fore or shedding new light on a variety of developments, from the positioning of the Russian empire and the Greek nation in the international arena to the respatialization of Cyprus, from the Orlov revolts and the Greek revolution to the recurrent crises and outbursts of political and sectarian violence in Cyprus, and from the entanglement between Greek aspirations and Russian imperial designs to Greek liberal discourses of sovereignty challenging the tutelage by the Great Powers, the recently published books by Ada Dialla, Michalis Sotiropoulos, and Antonis Hadjikyriacou offer insights that enrich our understanding about historical change in the Greek world and help better situate the Eastern Mediterranean in the age of revolutions.

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<sup>7</sup> A very useful chronology of events can be found on pp. 21-24.