

Universität Thessaloniki


The bicentenary of the outbreak of the French Revolution was marked not only by festivities and celebrations, but also by a variety of events of a more academic nature: conferences were organised, history periodicals issued special editions, and a number of independent studies of this historic event were published. The most important scholarly event in Greece was the conference organised by the National Research Institute’s Centre for Modern Greek Research, the proceedings of which were published in a weighty volume entitled La Révolution française et l’Hellénisme moderne, Athens 1989.

So Professor Kitromilidis’ book is a timely one, though, needless to say, by no means merely opportune. Despite his youth, he has conducted fruitful research into a variety of subjects, notably theoretical ones, relating to the modern Greek Enlightenment. Having specialised in political science and subsequently researched and taught the history of political theory, he is in an excellent position to deal with the many and varied aspects of the profound social and cultural changes which transformed the Hellenic world between 1750 and 1821, and which we usually refer to as the modern Greek Enlightenment. However, as the title indicates, the purely Greek aspect of his book is far outweighed by the historical dimension: the study embraces the whole of South-Eastern Europe, including the Serbian provinces of Austro-Hungary, western Asian Minor, Cyprus, and the Orthodox communities of Venice and Trieste.

The author has organised his material, his comments, and his conclusions in three chapters: 'The Forging of the Revolutionary Mentality' (pp. 17-69), 'Liberal Criticism of the French Revolution' (pp. 71-108), and 'Balkan Radicalism' (pp. 109-38).

The first chapter pinpoints the main centres from which democratic and revolutionary ideas were disseminated eastwards: the French-occupied Ionian Islands and 'Illyrian provin-
ces’ mainly, but also various urban centres in the Balkans where French consular officials, merchants, and special agents engaged in considerable propaganda activity (Gaudin, Hortolan, Parant, Konstantinos Stamatis, the Stephanopoli brothers, and others). Their call to revolution met with no response from the masses (to whom, anyway, it was not directed), but it did strike a chord with small dynamic groups of merchants, scholars, and students, and even a number of restive boyars. Objectively, the situation held little to alarm the political establishment; but in the long run, as Professor Kitromilidis observes, the replacement of political and religious values and symbols (which had hitherto held the multinational Orthodox flock together) by new secular ideals and models shook the foundations of both the Ottoman state and the Orthodox Church. Hence the Oecumenical Patriarchate’s unexpectedly violent reaction, which was much more violent, indeed, than that of the Turkish authorities.

The second chapter presents an in-depth analysis of Koraïs’ critical attitude to the successive phases of the French Revolution. Following, on this, as on so many other issues, a via media, Koraïs’ sympathies lay initially with the Girondins and later with the Idéologues. As Professor Kitromilidis points out, his divergences from this moderate line in more radical directions were occasional and short-lived. But it is also worth noting that: i) Koraïs never expressed his censure of Jacobinism, the Terror, and, later, Bonapartism publicly, but only in private letters; and ii) he published his militant pro-democracy and pro-French texts under a pseudonym.

The ‘Balkan Radicalism’ of Chapter Three is represented mainly by Rigas Velestinlis and the anonymous author of the Elliniki Nomarkhia, but also by a number of lesser scholars, aspiring revolutionaries, and members of various secret societies. Translating Montesquieu and Rousseau, repudiating kings and sultans as tyrants, and issuing calls both timely and inopportune to their enslaved compatriots to rise up and take arms, these romantic revolutionaries may have remained in the margins of history; yet in a way they marked the historic transition between the political, social, and cultural prolonged Middle Ages in which the Balkan societies had hitherto lived and the cosmogony of the nineteenth century, the century of liberation struggles and nation states.

As he himself explains, it is not Professor Kitromilidis’ intention to collect in this book all the evidence of the French Revolution’s repercussions in South-Eastern Europe. He merely wishes to describe and discuss the main channels, the transmitters, and the receivers of the revolutionary message and the democratic ideas and symbols issuing from France from 1789 onwards. Though the new teachings met with little response in the Balkan societies of the time, they filtered through nonetheless, and were later embodied in the constitutions, the legislation, and the organisation of the newly-established Balkan states.

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Srpska Književna Zadruga (The Serbian Literary Community) published in its series of anthologies a collection of poems in modern Greek, selected and translated by the Serbian