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978-1-108-02125-8 - An Historical Outline of the Greek Revolution

William Martin Leake

Excerpt

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HISTORICAL OUTLINE,

&c. &c.

THERE is no nation, as far as history has left us the means of judging, that has so little changed in a long course of ages as the Greeks. It may be sufficient, without adverting to the less certain indications of manners or physical aspect, to remark, that the Greeks still employ the same character in writing which was used in the remotest age of their history; that their language has received only such corruptions as cannot fail, for the greater part, to fall into disuse, as literary education and a familiarity with their ancient writers shall be diffused among them; that a great number of places in Greece, as well as of the productions of nature, are known by the same names which were attached to them in the most

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ancient times; and that this language and this people still occupy the same country, which was always peculiarly considered among them as Hellas, or Greece properly so called, namely, the south-eastern extremity of Europe from the Tænarian promontory to upper Macedonia, together with the islands and coasts of the Ægæan sea.

Nor are their eastern neighbours much altered, when we consider the state of Asia in comparison with that great change which civilization has effected in the human species, and on the surface of the earth throughout the greater part of Europe. The countries of western Asia are undoubtedly, like Greece itself, less populous, less opulent, and more barbarous than they were twenty or thirty centuries ago; but we find that, notwithstanding the vicissitudes which have occurred among the Asiatic nations themselves, the Persian of the present day closely resembles, both in features and dress, his ancestor, as represented on the walls of Persepolis; and that, although the predominant power in western Asia has passed into the hands of a different race of Asiatics, the strongest general affinity still prevails between the ancient and the modern inhabitants in cha-

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racter, in manners, and in customs, both civil and military.

The present contest between the Turks and their late subjects in Greece is probably the beginning of a new change in that preponderancy which has been alternating between south-eastern Europe and western Asia, since the earliest records of history.

By the successful resistance of the Greeks to the great Oriental invasion of that country under Darius and Xerxes, the invaded people raised themselves to as high a degree of glory, civilization, and intellectual enjoyment as it is possible, perhaps, for a nation to attain, deprived as they were of revealed religion, and of all the modern improvements in science. By their superiority in the art of war they were soon enabled not only to attack their former invaders, but to carry their victorious arms into the heart of Asia. From this height, they gradually and inevitably declined, as the sun declines from the meridian, until, having first lost their own military spirit and skill and then the martial discipline which they learnt in the service of their Roman conquerors, they became unable to contend with the ferocious valour of the people of Asia inspired by

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religious zeal and guided by the energy of the early Ottoman sultans, and at length fell under the attacks of the Asiatic barbarians, nineteen centuries after the former invasion. The situation in which the two people have been placed for the last 400 years has now produced a new revolution. While luxuries, chiefly borrowed from the conquered people, added to the effects of a general decline of Musulman enthusiasm, have led to the degeneracy of the Asiatic masters of Greece, their subjects have been so much improved by adversity, and by the light transmitted from Christendom, that the Oriental invaders are once more threatened with expulsion from Europe.

It is but a very few years since the Greeks had no higher views than the hope of witnessing the downfall of their oppressors, and of obtaining an easier yoke under the conqueror, often applying to themselves the humble language of the vine to the goat, in the elegant epigram of Euenus:—

*Κῆν με φάγῃς ἐπὶ ρίζαν, ὅμως ἔτι καρποφορήσω
"Ὅσσον ἐπισπεῖσαι, σοι, τράγε, θυομένῳ.*

But they now seem to think of sacrificing the goat themselves.

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While their mountaineers and seamen are asserting the cause of independence in arms, many a lettered Greek is undoubtedly engaged in noticing occurrences as they come under his immediate observation. Until these memoirs, together with those of a few European eye-witnesses, shall be collected, we can hardly hope to obtain correct particulars of a series of events, which are not less interesting from their scene of action, than from their singularity, compared with the common course of modern history: for as to those mixed compilations of truth and error called *Histories* or *Memoirs* of the Revolution, which have been published in several of the capitals of Europe, it is in vain that the reader attempts to extract from them any clear and connected description of the contest. Their obscurity is not a little heightened by the defectiveness and inaccuracy of the existing maps of Greece; as well as by the want of that authentic guidance to the truth which in civilized Europe is afforded by the official reports of military transactions, but which it is contrary to the custom of one of the contending parties to publish, and the other has not yet been in a state of government to attend to. And thus the inquirer, however diligent, is exposed, almost without re-

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source, to that torrent of exaggeration or misstatement, which, without any systematic intention of deceiving on the part of those really engaged in the war, is conveyed to this extremity of Europe from Turkey, the Ionian islands, Italy or Austria; and which, after receiving, perhaps, some further colouring in Paris, or in London itself, is poured forth in an unceasing stream from the daily press.

In the following pages, it is intended to give a brief statement of the origin and progress of the insurrection, and of the principal transactions of the war, to the latest period of which we have intelligence. No attempt will be made to enter into such minute details as cannot yet be obtained with accuracy. The author is acquainted with the scene of action, and with the customs of the two contending parties; and, although he has not been in any part of Greece since the contest began, he has had opportunities of collecting the facts from authentic sources.

As the causes of such an event as the present insurrection in Greece cannot thoroughly be understood without a reference to the previous condition of those who are engaged in it, it will be necessary to detain the reader with a few observations on this subject. It is remarkable that

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travellers who visit Greece generally return from thence with an unfavourable opinion of the people. But it is not difficult to account for this. From a real or supposed want of time, or in consequence of the disgust and impatience usually produced by the privations and inconveniences of a semi-barbarous state of society, travellers are generally contented to follow the beaten route of Athens, the Islands, the Asiatic coast, Troy, and Constantinople; their journey is concluded before they have acquired a sufficient knowledge of the language to form any impartial estimate of the national character; and they come chiefly into contact with those classes upon which the long subjection of the nation to the Turks has had the greatest effect, such as persons in authority under the government or otherwise in Turkish employ, servants, interpreters, the lower order of traders; and generally the inhabitants of those towns and districts in which the Turkish population has a great preponderance of numbers.

It is obviously not in these situations, but in the more unfrequented islands and on the continent of European Greece, where the Turks do not form a tenth part of the population, that the inquiry ought to be made whether any of the

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ancient talents and virtues of the Greeks have survived the four centuries of Musulman oppression, which supervened upon the debasement caused by Byzantine despotism, weakness, and superstition. In such an inquiry, it would be further necessary to distinguish between the inhabitants of the plains and those of the mountains; for these two classes have been placed in very different circumstances ever since the establishment of the Ottoman power in Greece.

As the chief strength of an Asiatic army consists in its cavalry, it was to the skill of the Osmanlys in the management of the horse and the sabre, added to religious enthusiasm; to the confidence inspired by former success and to their general superiority in courage and enterprize over the degenerate Greeks, that they owed the conquest of the Eastern empire of Rome. But the horse and the sabre are very imperfect instruments for the subjugation of mountainous districts; and after the first incursions of the Turks the mountaineers of Greece were not long in deriving new means of defence from the increasing use of fire-arms among them.

The consequence has been that the mountains of Greece have never been completely subdued

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by the Ottomans, and that, while the Christian inhabitants of the plains either retired before them, or became mere cultivators for the conquerors, who assumed possession of the lands by a grant from the sultan upon the feudal tenure of military service, the inhabitants of the mountains have retained possession of the soil, and, having been joined by many of the Christians of the plains, are still nearly as numerous as under the Byzantine empire. Meanwhile, depopulation, the effect of lawless oppression and of frequent visitations of the plague, has produced in many of the most fertile parts of Greece desolation and consequent unhealthiness of air, which would have been still more extensive had not a part of the vacancy been filled up at different times since the Turkish conquest by Christian migrations from Albania and Bulgaria, where local wars, Musulman persecution, or superabundant numbers in a very poor soil had occasionally caused distress greater even than that which had driven the Greeks from their native lands.

About two centuries ago, a large colony of Christian Albanians settled in Bœotia, Attica, and Argolis, where their descendants still speak the

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Albanian tongue: a small tribe of them, which passed over into the barren island of Hydrea, founded the community which has since been so conspicuous for its commercial enterprize and opulence.

Of the people of Greece Proper who have been driven from their native land by the effects of Turkish oppression, many have migrated during the last half century to Asia Minor, attracted by the mild government of the Turkish family of Kara Osman Oglu, under whom numerous Greek towns enlivened the vallies of the Hermus and Caicus, and had almost restored that country to the fertility which it enjoyed under the Pergamenian kings.

The nominal conditions upon which the Christian peasant of European Turkey labours for the Turkish proprietor are not oppressive: they were adopted by the Ottomans, among many other established usages of the country, and the practice is similar to that which is still very common in all the poorer countries of Europe. After the deduction of about a seventh for the imperial land-tax, the landlord receives half the remainder, or a larger share, according to the proportion of the