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978-1-108-07600-5 - The Greek Revolution: Its Origin and Progress, Together with
Some Remarks on the Religion, National Character, &c. in Greece

Edward Blaquiere

Excerpt

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THE
GREEK REVOLUTION,

&c.

CHAPTER I.

Historical Anomaly.—Contrast between the Turks and other Conquerors: their Motives of Action.—Capture of Constantinople.—Legitimacy of the Porte.—Treatment of the Greek People.—Karatch or Capitation Tax.—Effects of the Crusades.—Conquest of Greece never completed.—Measures of Precaution.—Klephtai.—Russian Influence.—Peter the Great and Catharine II.—War of 1769. — Treaty of Koutchouk-Kainardgi. — Persecutions.—Ali-Pacha.—Progress of Knowledge and Education among the Greeks.—Their Schools and Colleges.—Commercial Spirit of the Islanders.—Hydra Spezzia and Ipsara.—Origin of the Grecian Navy.

ALTHOUGH historians have attempted to account for the success which attended the Mahometan hordes who invaded the East of Europe in the fifteenth century, their being so long suffered to retain conquests made for the avowed purpose of extirpating christianity, will no doubt be regarded as one of the most extraordinary anomalies in the history of modern times. Nor is the astonishment excited by this circumstance diminished,

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when we reflect, that the barbarians who had so easily destroyed a christian empire, have been retrograding in knowledge during the whole period of their usurped dominion, whilst those who were bound to repel them, have boasted a no less rapid advancement in science and civilization.

In contemplating the fatal ascendancy of the Turks in Europe, it is impossible not to be forcibly struck by the contrast exhibited in their policy as conquerors, to that of all other nations, ancient or modern. While the victorious armies of Greece and Rome carried laws and the useful arts into conquered countries, the Goths, Vandals, and Tartars, gradually adopted the manners and religion of those whom they had subjugated; it was reserved for the followers of Mahomet alone, to wage an eternal war with knowledge and virtue. And if they have not recurred to the system of extermination pursued by the enemies of our Saxon ancestors, or that of Timour and Ghengis Khan in more recent times, it is because they hoped to profit by the labours of those who had the misfortune to become their vassals.

When the imbecility and dissensions of the Christian powers enabled the infidels to over-run the provinces which had previously formed the Eastern empire, it is undeniable that their only motive for not destroying the Greek population arose from the certainty of turning the talents and industry of the latter to a profitable account.

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BREACH OF FAITH.

3

This fact is, therefore, of itself sufficient evidence to prove that the barbarians were the first to establish the right of revolt on the part of the Greeks, whenever it could be effected with any prospect of success. An indisputable answer is thus given to all that sophistry and prejudice have urged to connect the present struggle with extraneous causes.

It is no longer matter of historical doubt that, although the capitulation which preceded the fall of Constantinople, when it surrendered to Mahomet II. in 1543, guaranteed the protection of life, religion and property to the Christians, yet were they given up to indiscriminate slaughter; and so far from there having been a subsequent compact entered into either by the victors or the vanquished, both parties have continued in a state of perfect separation ever since; while that of the Greek people has been embittered by a slavery more galling and degrading than ever fell to the lot of any nation. Well, therefore, may the Greeks of the present day, found the justice of their insurrection on the very nature of the conquest, and the treatment which has invariably followed in its train.

In reply to those, for such there are, who have gravely descanted on the legitimacy of the Turkish dominion over Greece, it has been very justly asked whether a professedly anti-Christian system of government, and a despôt whose most solemn

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obligations, religious and political, forbid him from regarding the followers of Christ in any other light than tributary slaves, can pretend to a right, supposed by those who have conferred it on the Sultan, to emanate from the Divinity? It might also be demanded, whether those who advocate the legitimacy of a system founded on fraud and violence, are not establishing maxims pregnant with danger to the stability of the governments they would fain uphold?

If these facts left any doubt on the unprejudiced, as to the justice of the cause in which the people of Greece are engaged, or on the absurdity of attempting to draw a parallel between them and the struggles of cotemporary nations; we need only look into the page of history, and reflect on the treatment experienced by the Greeks during a captivity of four centuries, a treatment which has been unchanged and unmitigated under every succeeding tyrant, no matter what may have been the modifications of his character or power. Considered as a degraded caste in every sense of the word, without one solitary guarantee either for life, religion, or property, the only hope held out to those who wished to escape from this intolerable yoke, was in apostatizing from the faith of their fathers; nor is there a single Greek living, who has attained the age of manhood, under the iron sway of Turkey, that has not also felt the rod of Mahometan oppression.

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SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT.

5

While the establishment and continuance of the Karatch or capitation tax proves, that their lives have been subjected to a yearly ransom, thus paying as it were for leave to exist, it is a fact of incontrovertible notoriety that no bond of fidelity, or oath of allegiance, was ever exacted from the Greek vassals of the Porte. In alluding to the general system of government, a native writer has thus expressed himself. "Have not thousands of my countrymen been sacrificed to gratify the vindictive spirit, or capricious folly of our tyrants? Have not Pachas, who purchased the right to govern through bribery and corruption, gone among the devoted people for no earthly object, but that of spoliation and plunder? Men, under whose rule the possession of property was a crime, and a few thousand piastres, the earnings of a long life, frequently tantamount to a sentence of death. Have not whole communities been deprived of the right of public worship, on the most frivolous pretence, or until some exorbitant demand was satisfied, while many a Christian has been forced to become an apostate on the evidence of a Turk, who had heard him say, he meant to change his faith? And when vengeance was to be satiated for some imaginary crime or alledged resistance, have not pestilence and famine been brought to the aid of the scymetar and bow-string?"

It would indeed be an endless task to repeat all the grievances brought forward by the Greek

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people, in justification of their efforts to be relieved at any price, from a yoke that had become insupportable; and when it is considered that the millions of human lives sacrificed in the crusades, should have produced no other effect than leaving the descendants of those who had given knowledge and civilization to the rest of Europe to their melancholy fate, the manner in which the effort to throw off this dreadful yoke has been met by the christian world, must ever be a source of the keenest regret to all the real friends of religion and humanity.

Such are a few, and only a few, of the permanent causes which led to the present struggle, and to prove that the conquest on which their oppressors ground those pretensions of supremacy so frequently put forth since the contest has commenced, was never completed, the Greeks point with pride and exultation to the resistance made by Souli, Maina, Olympus, Candia, and other places, whose unconquerable sons have never acknowledged the dominion of the infidels since their unprovoked invasion in the fifteenth century. With respect to the charges of degeneracy and corruption so inconsiderately made against the Greek people, though this may not be the place to refute them, it is yet of importance to observe that, however they may have deplored the succession of calamities commencing with their conquest by the Romans, through the degradation that followed the transfer of the capital to Byzantium, a

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PRECAUTIONS.

7

degradation which the introduction of christianity did not diminish, down to the last fatal scene that reduced them to a galling and hopeless bondage, the Greeks never lost sight of their imprescriptible rights, or of their former glory.

With these sentiments, and such multiplied causes of discontent, the least of which would justify an appeal to the sword in the most despotic country of Europe, no wonder that hatred should have been engendered on one side, and distrust on the other. Thus it was, that while the poor christian slave panted for the hour of retribution and deliverance, his infidel master, who at best only considered himself as the temporary occupier of the land, lived in a state of incessant disquietude and alarm. Convinced from fear and tradition, that an explosion was inevitable, the Turks always looked with the utmost jealousy and suspicion on the Greek vassals, while scarcely any apprehensions were entertained from the christians of Armenia, whose manners and habits bore a striking resemblance to their own. Among other measures of precaution adopted in European Greece, whenever any rumour of insurrection was circulated, it was customary for the Turkish proprietors to abandon the open country, and shut themselves up in the fortresses. If the empire happened to be engaged in foreign war, the christians were forced to deliver up their arms. These arbitrary acts were, however, far from insuring

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tranquillity, as numerous bands of the hardy and enterprising mountaineers occupied the fastnesses of the woods and inaccessible heights with which the country abounds, and carried on an unceasing warfare under chiefs called *Capitani*, but who adopted the native appellation of *Klephtai*, or robbers, deeming it honorable to accept any designation, rather than live in a slavish submission to the enemies of their faith, and the oppressors of their country. Several of these chiefs, who now lead the soldiers of Greece to victory, make it their proudest boast, that their ancestors never submitted to pay tribute, and that as they have themselves never done so, the pretended right of conquest advanced by the Porte is a mere delusion.

Next to the injustice of mixing up the Greek contest with those efforts which have been made by the people of Spain and Italy, to acquire the blessings of freedom, evidently put forth to justify the anti-christian policy of the Holy Alliance, may be ranked the notion that Russian interests or influence had any share in stimulating the Greeks of Epirus, the Morea, and Archipelago to rise. When experience had taught the people of Greece, that the expulsion of the Venetians, and degeneracy of the knights of Malta, left them no hope of sympathy or support from those two powers, * they

* The failure of the Venetians and knights of St. John, to make head against the Turks, might be attributed to various causes, but to none so much as their jealousies, and that tendency to degenerate,

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[More information](#)

PETER THE GREAT.

9

naturally cast their eyes towards a nation professing the same religion, and there were many circumstances connected with the events which ushered in the last century, that seemed highly favourable to a more intimate connexion. It will however be seen, that with the most ample means of succouring her ill-fated co-religionists, the interference of Russia has been a source of infinite calamity to Greece.

Peter the Great, having subdued his Swedish opponent, turned all his attention to those who had ever been regarded as the bitter enemies of his power, and although no very effectual measures

which led to their ultimate extinction. Scarcely less superstitious and bigotted than the infidels, their general treatment of the Greeks is said to have been very little better.

It is true that the love of gain, and ambition of conquest, frequently gave rise to acts of gallantry, both on the part of Venice, and the Knights, as instanced in the defence of Rhodes, Valetta, and during the war of 1684, conducted by Morosini, and which ended in the conquest of the Morea. When, however, the Greeks saw no hopes of freedom for themselves, they were not very likely to sympathize, or make common cause, with the new conquerors.

It was after Europe had been exhausted by the war of succession, in which Venice contrived to remain neutral, that the Turks succeeded in wresting the Morea from her hands, and, agreeable to the old system, this was carried on as one of extermination. Corinth and Napoli di Romania, which were taken in 1715, made a most spirited resistance, and when captured, every soul, both of the garrison and inhabitants, was put to the sword.

Although the treaty of Passarowitz concluded in 1718, left the Venetians in possession of Prevesa, Vonizza, and one or two points in Dalmatia, these were never turned to account.

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could be adopted for carrying his designs into effect, during a reign in which he was occupied in laying the foundation of a power now become so colossal, it is not to be doubted that the plan of driving the Turks out of Europe originated with the above monarch.

While in pursuance of the grand object which first prompted the invasion of Europe, the Turks omitted no opportunity of attacking Austria, as the readiest way to extend their conquests in Christendom; the Russian cabinet never lost sight of its own plans with regard to Turkey. The astonishing progress made by Russia, under the fostering administration of the Tzar, whilst his Mahometan rivals were fast sinking into that weakness and decrepitude, which has since overtaken them, was highly favourable to his views; and the whole reign of Catherine proves how sedulously that extraordinary woman followed up the system traced out by her great predecessor. No sooner, in fact, had she seized the reins of government, than the favourite project, drawn up by the celebrated Marshal Munich,* some years before, was revived; and had her intentions been more ably supported in the war of 1769, there is every reason to believe, both the Peloponessus

* This plan, in which the restoration of the eastern Empire was formally proposed, led to a partial rising of the Greeks, who were, however, abandoned to their fate in the peace of 1739.