

# Greece's Fight for Independence Was Part of a Global Revolutionary Movement

BY

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Today marks 200 years since the beginning of the Greek Revolution. The uprising secured Greece's national independence — but also expressed the anti-imperialist and democratic vision carried by a global revolutionary movement, from France to the black Jacobins in Haiti.

In January 1822 Haiti's president Jeanne-Pierre Boyer sent a letter to a group of Paris-based intellectuals working to rally support for the Greek Revolution. Boyer connected the Haitians' recent successful struggle against colonial tyranny with the Greeks' own fight against slavery and despotism. In the revolutionary Greeks, Boyer saw “the descendants of ancient Hellenes,” the children of Leonidas, and the heirs of Miltiades. He registered his intention to offer monetary assistance — while also noting the financial restrictions placed on newly independent Haiti.

The Haitian letter of support has, a little inaccurately, often been seen as the first formal recognition of the Greeks' fight for independence. One myth still circulating in Greece even claims that Haitian soldiers joined the pro-Greek “philhellenic” legions. Yet Boyer's references to the ancient world, and the parallels he drew between Greece and Haiti point to two key features of this moment: the mobilizing role of a particular version of classical antiquity and the wider transnational revolutionary context in which both events may be understood.

The Greek Revolution was far from a singular event. It accommodated different and, sometimes, conflicting political languages associated with Western, Ottoman, and indigenous political traditions. The revolutionaries' ideas blended secular and Christian ideals; some even saw this as a redemptive millenarian battle in which the end of Ottoman control would coincide with the restoration of the Byzantine empire or — in more extreme versions — the Second Coming.

For a long time, historians regarded the Greek Revolution as essentially a story of the spread of ideas and practices from the center of the European enlightenment to the periphery. But in

recent years, this paradigm is beginning to change. The Greek Revolution is now regarded as part of a wider global revolutionary context — the moment of the “liberal international.”

## Philhellenes

The emergence of the “Greek question” in the 1820s mobilized public opinion across Europe. The mythologized ancient traditions of Hellas that Boyer invoked appealed to all manner of “philhellenes”: Christian humanitarians, abolitionists, Romantics, post-Napoleonic freedom fighters, and the radical followers of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, to name but a few. Every such group saw Greece as the land of opportunity for the materialization of *their* political and aesthetic ideas.

Conversely, for those fighting on the ground, the European and, indeed, the global interest in the Greek cause legitimized their struggle ideologically and materially. The framing of the war of independence as a Christian struggle also became a means of entry into the European “family of nations.” The aid the Haitian president couldn’t offer was to be secured in the markets of the City of London in the mid 1820s. By then, the Modern Greeks, who mostly referred to themselves as Romioi (Romans — members of the Ottoman Rūm millet, or Roman nation), had come to be seen as unworthy inheritors of the Hellenic past.

Writing to Latin-American revolutionary Simón Bolívar in 1825, Bentham summed up his own involvement as a constitutional adviser to the Greeks, emphasizing the sympathy toward their cause:

When the Deputies from that Country came ... I not only received them upon a hospitable footing; but at their instance, maintained for a length of time a copious correspondence, in the course of which their language to me as well as that of their constituents, was that of children to a father. At their solicitation, I endeavoured, but in vain, to keep them upon good terms with their generous benefactors here — the Greek Committee as they are called, by whom the first loan for them was procured.

Yet, Bentham continued, keeping them on “good terms” had been harder than expected:

But from first to last, their behaviour, I am sorry to say it, has been such as to render it impossible. Such a compound of ignorance, groundless suspicion, insincerity, faithlessness, incivility, negligence, quarrelsomeness, weakness of judgment, pride, vaingloriousness, frivolity, and in the whole together incapacity for political business, I could not have conceived unless I had witnessed it ... a guerrilla warfare seems to be all they are fit for. They have been perpetually quarrelling with one another, as well as giving to everybody who has come to them with assistance from other countries, but too much reason to complain of them; so that nobody can so much as conjecture how this contest with the still more incapable Turks will end.

Bentham would live to see the outcome of the Greek fight for independence. Indeed, in 1830 a protocol signed in London formally recognized the independent existence of a Greek state. The diplomatic breakthrough relied on the earlier successful allied blockade and destruction of the Ottoman Egyptian fleet in the Bay of Navarino in 1827 — an event that scholars regard as an instance of humanitarian intervention.



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*The Naval Battle of Navarino* (1827) by Ambroise Louis Garneray. (Wikimedia Commons)

Yet, the politics of humanitarianism and the attainment of human rights do not evolve in linear ways. While the Christian public sphere was not keen to discuss it, the forces fighting for Greek independence also targeted Muslim and Jewish populations, in the Peloponnese and elsewhere. And even then, the Greek state that emerged in the 1830s was far from homogenous.

Greece's formal independence marked the beginning of a protracted cycle of dependencies within the international system, as Russia, Britain, and France became its "guarantor powers." The country's political life coalesced around political parties bearing their name (the "Russian party," the English party," etc.) and its heads of state were drawn from Europe's courts. During the reign of Greece's first king, the Bavarian prince Otto, in the 1840s, it transitioned from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, and embarked on a project of territorial expansion.

One of the first independent states of the post-Napoleonic period, Greece exemplified the limitations of the concept of "sovereignty" — and the workings of imperialism in the European "family of nations." In the nineteenth century and deep into the twentieth, it continued to be the site of foreign interventions. Famously, it was in response to a late 1840s quarrel with Greece over indemnities owed to British subjects that British foreign minister Lord Palmerston pledged to guarantee the protection of imperial subjects across the world.

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A few years later, during the Crimean war, British and French forces jointly occupied Greece's ports to force its neutrality; by the end of the nineteenth century European financial controllers roamed Athens assessing the finances of an expanded, but bankrupt state.

# Nationalist Projects

For these reasons, it is tempting to see the emergence of modern Greece as a laboratory of sorts: a laboratory of ideas about Christianity, liberty, and antiquity in the early nineteenth century, and of techniques of international-imperial governance for most of the two centuries that followed.

The territorial boundaries of the Greek kingdom in the 1830s were a fraction of Greece's current territory. The expansion of the state in the course of the nineteenth century is a complicated story — one driven by geopolitical realities, economic necessities, and national-imperial motivations. But World War I was especially decisive, and in 1921 the centenary of the Greek Revolution could be celebrated in Asia Minor (today, the Asian landmass of Turkey).

Through astute diplomacy and opportunism, Greece emerged from the war as a victorious power and was rewarded with a temporary mandate over a region around the Ottoman city of Izmir (Smyrna). It presided over Orthodox and Muslim populations on the other side of the Aegean Sea, in lands coveted by Greek “irredentist” projects.

Yet, this project of national-imperial aggrandizement proved short-lived. The ensuing military conflict with the Kemalist Turkish-nationalist forces rapidly turned the dream into a bloody nightmare. The state that had emerged in the crossroads of liberal and national ideals projected to the world the consequences of territorial nationalism: misery, destruction, and population transfers. More than a million orthodox Greeks from Asia Minor settled across Greece in a tense political and cultural landscape.

The leading philhellene of the day was Henry Morgenthau, an American diplomat and president of the postwar refugee resettlement committee. He recounted the situation on the ground as he traveled to inaugurate an orphanage in the new Athenian borough of Vyron (a settlement named after Lord Byron):

The streets of Athens were transformed by the surging multitude that now invaded them. The city had been almost somnolent before this eruption. It had been living the staid life of an orderly small capital, where business had grown into established channels, and where life had settled into an easy and familiar routine. Overnight all this was changed. Now the streets were thronged with new faces. Strange dialects of Greek assailed the ear. The eye was caught by outlandish peasant costumes from interior Asia Minor.

Despite the large-scale destitution it brought, the Greco-Turkish exchange of populations became, in the eyes of some commentators, a curious “success story.” Liberals invested in minority protection pointed to the easing of tensions between Greece and Turkey in the 1930s

to argue that forced displacement could solve nationalist conflicts; Fascists and Nazis regarded it as workable precedent for their own ethnic cleansing initiatives; imperial administrators viewed the refugee resettlement efforts in northern Greece as offering a template for partitions and settler colonial projects.

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Greek nationalism’s failures prompted a fresh return to an idealized version of antiquity, also coinciding with the emergence of Greece (and its ruins) as a tourist destination. Greece’s interwar version of fascist authoritarianism basked in the glory of an imagined Christian, Hellenic tradition and attempted the creation of a “Third Hellenic Civilization” — a synthesis built on a racialist reimagining of the conceptual links between antiquity and Christianity.

Eventually this regime was felled in 1941, following a failed Italian invasion and then an imposing Wehrmacht offensive. The Axis powers’ occupation regime brought dilapidated cities, hundreds of thousands of dead, and devastated livelihoods. Many Greeks did fight back, in a resistance spearheaded by communist guerrilla forces. Yet today there is no formal commemoration of the end of the great patriotic war. With the helping hand of the British forces, a brutal civil war erupted and the partisans who risked their lives against the Axis occupation found themselves deprived of their rights in forced exile across eastern Europe or rotting in Greek prisons.

Deprived of its progressive political forces, and its flourishing Jewish community, the Greece of the 1950s and ’60s was a Cold War fortress on the edges of the West — an anti-communist

battleground marking the transition from British to American imperial hegemony. As President Harry Truman put it in his famous 1947 congress speech, “Greece must have assistance if it is to become a self-supporting and self-respecting democracy.” The imposition of a military junta in the late 1960s brought the country closer to its southern European and Latin American counterparts. It also revived a grotesque version of Helleno-Christian ideas and practices harkening back to the Greek Revolution and to their interwar fascist iterations.

## Restored Democracy

The restoration of democracy in the mid-1970s followed a more predictable script: the rehabilitation of progressive politics, a homegrown version of social democracy, and occasional arguments with Turkey over Cyprus and the Aegean Sea. The pursuit of Europeanization became the holy grail of Greek political elites — and they were largely successful in it. By the early 1990s Greece exuded the aura of a seasoned European partner: a pillar of stability and peace in the region.

It only took a few months after the collapse of communism in neighboring Yugoslavia for the aggressive display of idealized remnants of classical antiquity to reappear in the country’s northern border. The so-called Macedonian question (a diplomatic conflict stemming from North Macedonia’s claim to self-determination) became a landmark of a decade of culture wars and open racism against eastern European migration. This new populist nationalism continued well after the dawn of the new millennium. The 2004 Olympics marked the peak of this newfound confidence of a modernized European country ruled by centrist forces.

But once again, Greece was proclaiming its historical agency just when it lacked it. By 2010 the “Greek question” returned to the forefront of European and global politics: the failing Greek economy raised debates about European solidarity and responsibility. Hit hard by the sovereign debt crisis, Greece became once more a site of economic intervention and experimentation.

International debate mobilized all available tropes to describe the new politics of emergency, from Bentham’s paternalistic language to humanitarian and philhellenic precepts. Crucially, many progressives across the world turned their gaze toward Greece, regarding it as a laboratory for practices confronting the violence of neoliberalism. For them, the cradle of democracy and the bastion of freedom had now turned into a bulwark of resistance to capitalism.




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A protester burns a Syriza party flag in front of the Greek Parliament during a rally against new austerity measures on May 18, 2017 in Athens, Greece. Milos Bicanski / Getty Images

That was not the course things took; and Greece today celebrates its bicentenary in a COVID-ridden, post-austerity setting. This is a largely symbolic event, managed by a political elite in search of a sense of purpose, spending money it doesn't have. The state is planning a series of commemorative events spearheaded by a military parade in the presence of representatives from its former guarantor powers: France, Britain, and Russia.

The dominant political forces are creating pedestals for their respective “heroes.” The complex and contradictory lives of nineteenth-century figures are reduced to simplistic narratives of bravery and freedom, of “us” versus “them,” “civilization” versus “barbarism.” But now is not the time for pedestals. It is a time to pause and hear all those voices lost in the course of Greece’s modern history — to explore the plural threads that constitute “our” modern Greek identity.

If the spirit of the Greek Revolution lives on today, its heroes are those who continue to regard Greece as their home despite being deprived of basic human rights and suffering decades of racist abuse for not being white or “Greek enough.” Such is the story of Giannis Antetokounmpo — the son of Nigerian immigrants who grew up in Athens in the 1990s and spent most of his life under *de jure* statelessness.

Despite his harsh treatment by the Greek state, Antetokounmpo never lost his courage and sense of civic duty. This day belongs to him and others like him. Antetokounmpo’s Greece is not Europe’s Mediterranean border guard. Rather, it is a space of openness and freedom of movement. It upholds the anti-racist and emancipatory legacy of the Greek Revolution — the same spirit that traveled across the Atlantic and resonated with the black Jacobins.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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