The Greek Vision of America during the Greek War of Independence (1821-1830)

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1. “Discovering” America

1 In November 1827, Henry Post was in charge of distributing humanitarian aid in Peloponessse on behalf of the committee of Philadelphia. He was hosted in Mani, homeland of Petrebeys Mavromichalis, in the tower of a local chieftain called Vassilis. While having dinner, the aged father of Vassilis had a lot of questions for his strange American visitor. He asked him how far America was; farther than Constantinople, or even Russia; How many women Americans were allowed to have; who their king was. In view of such outpouring of questions, Henry Post felt obliged to relate a brief history of the United States. When he mentioned that only 50 years before, during the American Revolution, his country numbered 3 million people and that now they were over 12, governed not by a king but by a democratically elected government, the old man stood up and replied: “12 million and not a single king! I don’t believe you. And left the room frustrated” (Post 112).

2 A few months earlier, in May 1827, George Jones was serving as a teacher and a priest in the flagship USS Constitution of the American Mediterranean Squadron. In the port of Aigina, many Greeks gathered to admire the heavily armored frigate with the 44 canons. Some women boarded the ship and wandered in the areas where the sailors slept. There, on a wall, there was a portrait of George Washington. Instantly, all women started shouting “Washington! Washington!” and they kneeled and kissed the picture as if it were a portrait of an orthodox saint (Jones 280).

3 These stories constitute the whole spectrum of the Greek understanding of America during the years of the Greek Revolution which spanned from complete ignorance to sheer admiration. Nevertheless, all Greek people were eager to learn more about this
peculiar and wonderful country on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and upon this knowledge to build their own myths, aspirations and visions about the United States. When the Greek War of Independence broke out in 1821, America had already been established as a universal symbol of freedom and democracy in the Greek imagination. This powerful symbol was incorporated into the Greek vision of liberty. By taking up arms, after almost four centuries of Ottoman rule, the Greeks were seeking political reaffirmation of their national existence and the international recognition of their independence. That is why, from the very first moment, they sought recognition of the Revolution’s legitimacy by the European Powers and the United States, while also eliciting some support. At the same time, in their effort to organize political institutions, they expanded their search to the entire spectrum of available political and constitutional models. One of those models was the American democratic one. It can be safely argued that it was the Greek Revolution’s political needs and goals that determined the way the American democracy was perceived by the Greeks.

The American Revolution and its “heroes” were not unfamiliar to educated Greeks (Filimon 70). It is indicative that throughout the revolutionary period, there was an ongoing search for an equivalent “Greek Washington, Franklin or Jefferson” who would take charge of the nation and lead it to freedom. The defenders of Messolonghi had named one of the ramparts after Benjamin Franklin (Trikoupis 2nd ed. vol. 3, 270). Some even envisioned that the leadership of the Filiki Eteria (“Society of Friends”), the secret society that prepared the outbreak of the Revolution, was based in the United States (Sakellariou 63). The easily drawn parallels and similarities between the American Revolution of 1776 and the Greek Revolution of 1821 made the American example an ideal point of reference for the Greeks. Thanks to their heroism and patriotism, the Americans had managed to overcome a superior military opponent—the British Empire. They had based their ideology on the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment: equality, fairness, rule of law, justice and tolerance. They had established a model democratic and liberal state with enviable institutions, which was socially progressive but lacked the extremes of the French Revolution. Their democratic system, as the Americans themselves proudly boasted, was inspired by the principles of the ancient Greeks, and modern Greeks were perceived as their heirs and descendants.

All the above American achievements were desirable to Greeks. That is why the American democracy was at the centre of Greek public discourse and became a basic argument among those liberal Greeks who advocated an uncrowned republic as the most suitable political system for Greece. However, the notion of a republic as the ideal regime for Greece appealed only to a minority, for reasons that had to do, on the one hand, with the predominance of the monarchical institution on a European level, and, on the other, with the political immaturity of the Greeks. Nevertheless, it had its own dynamic expression and was represented by few liberal voices that used the American democracy as their main point of reference. Those Greeks who spoke with admiration for the American political system were indirectly advocating for the adoption of similar liberal and democratic institutions for the newly born Greek state. Therefore, it is important to note that when we study the American imprint in Greek public discourse, we trace the very origins of democratic political thought in Greece.
2. Building Bridges

In an effort to internationalize the Greek War of Independence and to secure any possible assistance from abroad, various Greek political organizations and revolutionary leaders sought to establish contact with the US government. On 25 May 1821, Petrobey Mavromichalis, president of the Messenian Senate, a political institution born out of the fire of the Revolution, sent an appeal, a “call for help” to the American people, thus building the first bridge of communication between the two peoples. The route of this letter is well-known. Through the envoy sent abroad, Dr Petros Ipitis, and other prominent Greeks of the Parisian community, the letter reached scholar Adamantios Korais. It was translated into English and was forwarded to American philhelle Edward Everett, who agreed to publicize it in America (Daskalakis 470). Everett had been on friendly terms with Korais since 1818 (Soulis 397-407, Arnakis 149-159). Another copy was forwarded to US Ambassador in Paris, Albert Gallatin (Tozis 418-439). The letter could not have been written by Mavromichalis, despite the fact that it bore his signature. The content indicates that it was more likely to have been written by someone with a broad, cosmopolitan education and knowledge of politics on the other side of the Atlantic (Hatzopoulos 35-98).

This appeal to the American people was exceedingly important. Not only did it open a channel of communication with the United States, but it also crystallized the fundamental symbols and political stereotypes with which the Greeks would thereafter look upon the American democracy. It created a symbolic triangle of Ancient Greece-America-Modern Greeks, indicating that the two peoples shared common values that made them “friends, fellow citizens and brethren.” The United States was recognized as the place where “Liberty has fixed her adobe” and the Americans were described as “just, humane and generous,” the only people in the world who cherished freedom as much as the ancient Greeks. So, it was natural for Modern Greeks, as rightful descendants of the ancients, to turn to the Americans for assistance. Such assistance would serve as proof of the moral superiority of Americans over Europeans, thus repaying “the obligations of the civilized nations” and avoiding “the long ingratitude of some of the Europeans,” who did not support the Greek cause. In speaking the language of diplomacy—or rather, of common interests—the letter closed by mentioning that potential assistance would result in “advantages” for the Americans, implying that a free and democratized Greece would be a dependable ally for the United States in the Mediterranean (Anonymous 414).

On 1 January 1822, in a deeply emotional atmosphere, Greek representatives from the rebelling areas approved the “Constitution of Epidaurus,” the birth certificate of the Modern Greek nation (Rotzokos 202). This first Revolutionary Constitution was drafted under the influence of the political ideas of the Enlightenment and the liberal constitutions of the two major democratic revolutions of the 18th century: the American and the French (Svolos 20, Kaltchas 34). Though the influence of the French constitutions was more apparent, the American influence was present in the Preamble of the Constitution. The “Greek Declaration of Independence” (as we may call it) had many similarities to the American Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776 (Saripolos, The First National Assembly 9). The natural human rights and the legitimacy of the right of rebellion against an oppressive power constituted the common ideological basis of the two texts (Billias 174).
All the Greek historians and constitutionalists of the 19th and early 20th centuries have admitted the influence of the American Revolution on the early political acts of the Greeks (Saripolos, System 34). But how well did the Greek representatives understand the workings of American political system? Were they aware of the text of the American Constitution and to what degree could they interpret it correctly? Nikolaos Dragoumis, in his memoirs, commented that “it was doubtful whether they had ever read it and even if they had, they certainly had not understood it” (Dragoumis 4). Since only a few were educated or had adequate knowledge of political and legal science. So, the influence of American democracy on these first Greek political acts should not be overestimated. The democratic nature of the first Greek constitution did not emerge as an imitation of American democracy, but was rather the result of conflicting internal interests and the mutual mistrust amongst the various local powers (Koliopoulos 109, Vogli 347-365). The majority of the Greeks agreed that, at some point, the country should call for a king (Trikoupis 3rd ed. vol. 2 109). Unavoidably, the American democratic example would only function as a symbol and less as a true basis for organizing the Greek political system.

Nevertheless, this symbolic inclusion of American democracy in the Greek political thought was of major importance. It reflected the universality of the Greek Revolution’s political message, which could combined the most human-centric lessons of the European Enlightenment with the radicalism of the French Revolution and the liberalism of the American one, as well as the realistic limitations of the prevailing European institution of monarchy. The American democracy, despite being inapplicable to the Greeks, was particularly appealing to the exponents of liberal thought in Greece. This became apparent six years later, in the third Revolutionary Constitution of Troizina in 1827, one of the most liberal and democratic Constitutions of its era, which clearly used the American Constitution as a model. However, this Constitution did not enter into force and was repealed as soon as governor Ioannis Kapodistrias came to power, proving that democracy was not ripe for Greece.

3. Utopian Expectations

The Greek perception of America was also influenced by the diplomatic position of the American government towards the Greek War of Independence. The Monroe Doctrine, as delivered by President James Monroe on 2 December 1823, considered any attempt by the European Powers to interfere in the domestic affairs of the American continent an act of aggression against the United States. It also made it clear that the United States would stay out of Europe’s internal affairs, thus establishing the political framework in which the Greek issue would be handled (Kaplan 1-21, Repousis 25). Such an attitude might be regarded as an expression of American isolationism. However, isolationism did not necessarily mean indifference to European affairs. The Americans may have rejected the idea of immediate political or military intervention in European matters, but they were searching for alternate routes to promote their interests, through economy and ideology. In other words, they were promoting a free trade policy that would allow their economic interests to develop unchecked while also appearing as the bearers of a democratic ideology that appealed to those people living under despotic/oppressive regimes.
Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, was in favour of keeping strict neutrality towards the belligerent Greeks and the Ottomans (Earle 44-63, Cline, Lazos, Pappas). But, this did not prevent him from maintaining a dual policy. On the one hand, Americans secretly approached the Ottoman Porte in the prospect of signing a commercial Treaty, aiming at protecting and expanding American commercial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, the State Department was keeping a low-profile approach towards the Greek side, so as not to displease the Greek revolutionaries or their American supporters, who were steadily growing in number through the American philhellenic movement. This low-profile approach was manifested in the discussions about the potential creation of an American naval base on one of the Greek islands. Moreover, the American fleet in the Mediterranean protected the humanitarian aid sent by the American philhellenic committees (Field 58, Walther 33).

Within this framework of delicate diplomatic balances, the Greeks tried to formulate their own position towards the American factor. Various political and military figures developed contacts with the Americans, seeking a more meaningful Greek-American approach. The Phanariot Alexandros Mavrokordatos (who was mostly in charge of foreign affairs) believed that relations with the United States would be “truly beneficial for Greece,” as long as contacts were kept secret, so as not to upset Britain (Dragoumis 326). Mavrokordatos considered that at the beginning of the Greek Revolution, attachment to only one European power would be harmful for Greece. The involvement of an extra-European power, such as the USA, seemed a safer choice (Lignos, vol. 1, 38). Panagiotis Sekeris, leading member of secret society Filiki Eteria, also favored the United States as an alternative, if support of Britain was not achieved (Sekeris 534).

In 1823, the Greek government attempted to place Greek-American relations on a more realistic basis. On 20 February, Andreas Louriotis, the Greek envoy to London, sent a memo to American Secretary of State, John Adams, on behalf of the Greek government. He made an official request to initiate official diplomatic relations between the two countries, offering as incentive the prospect of concluding beneficial commercial treaties. In the summer of that year, the Phanariot scholar and diplomat Panagiotis Kodrikas, while in Paris, suggested to Mavrokordatos that a trade agreement should be signed with the US government, in order to apply pressure to the British to follow their example. As the economic needs of the Revolution grew, the United States was seen as a possible place to seek a loan (Dragoumis 4). The Greek Delegation that was negotiating a loan in Britain (Ioannis Orlandos, Andreas Louriotis and Andreas Zaimis) established friendly relations with American ambassadors Rush and Gallatin in London and Paris, respectively (Booras 163). In their correspondence they appeared very optimistic about the prospect of obtaining an American loan. Louriotis was convinced that the potential recognition of Greek independence by the United States would be enough to persuade Great Britain as well (Xatzianargiros 311). The issue of dispatching an official representative to the United States and the particular traits such a representative should possess occupied several political figures until the spring of 1825 (Lignos, vol. 3 54, 311-313, 318, vol. 4 207-208). The Greek Provisional Government even discussed the idea of funding a military corps of American philhellenes (Parliament 145, 153, 197). Ultimately, neither was a delegate sent to the United States nor was any organised military unit sent to Greece. However, all these contacts and plans fostered an
optimistic (though utopian) belief that the Americans could play an important role for the Greeks’ benefit, outside the machinations and inertia of the European Powers.

Every time the American naval squadron of the Mediterranean, under Commodore John Rodgers, sailed into a Greek port, the Greeks believed the Americans had come to liberate them. Similar illusions about the “American liberators” are identified frequently throughout the Revolution (Osten 422, Spiliotakis 153-183). In September 1825, after passing through Hydra, Aegina, Salamina and Poros, Rodgers sailed the flagship USS North Carolina into Nafplio, the seat of the Provisional Government (Manikas 341-343). Instantly rumours spread among Greeks: it was said that in an effort to appoint an ambassador in Constantinople, the Ottomans refused and the Americans opened fire, that in Smyrni, they had killed many Turks and were now in Nafplio, where they would land 4,000 troops to fight the troops of Ibrahim, the Egyptian invader (Richards 119). It was all “fake news” and wishful thinking. Nevertheless, it proved that in the Greek mind, the United States had already been registered as a global superpower with the ability of military intervention in the region. Rodgers met with representatives of the Provisional Government Mavrokordatos and Spyridon Trikoupis and discussed the issue of consigning Naoussa of Paros as a naval base for the Americans (Loukatos 174-210). The discussions were not kept secret and were commented on by the foreign and Greek Press. The Greek newspapers were filled with articles full of praise for American democracy (Ellinika Chronika 12 September 1825, Geniki Efimeris 12 December 1825). Although Greek-American contacts eventually led nowhere, the leaks to the Press served the purposes of both sides. The Americans could use them to exert pressure on the Porte to sign a trade agreement, and the Greeks on Britain to implicate it further in the Greek cause by leveraging its fear of the American presence. It was not by chance that the talks in Nafplio were held a few months after the Greeks had requested protection from the British (Dakin 161). The Greek government’s refusal of the American proposals was prudent. It was necessitated by the need to maintain and reinforce the British factor, while rejecting the American one, which, due to its distance, would be almost impossible to play a decisive role in the Greek cause.

4. Adamantios Korais’ America

The most zealous admirer of American democracy and its capacity to function as a political model for the rebelling Greece was scholar Adamantios Korais (Kitromilides, Adamantios Korais 213-223, Kitrolilides, Enlightenment 260-290). His knowledge of a broad bibliography on all American matters, his familiarity and correspondences with significant figures of the American political life, such as Thomas Jefferson and Edward Everett, and even his life in Paris, which more than any other city felt the impact and charm of the American Revolution, made Korais the most reliable voice for the American vision in Greek political thought. American democracy was a constant point of reference in Korais’ writings and was spread to the Greek society through his extensive works and correspondence. His knowledge of American affairs was truly impressive. The references in his work testify it. He often cited the work of Frances Wright, Views on Society and Manners in America (1821), James Fenimore Cooper, Notions of the Americas (1828), David Bailie Warden, A Statistical, Political and Historical Account of the United States of America (1819), and the collective work of Alexander Hamilton, James
Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (1788). He was very familiar not only with the American constitution, but also with constitutional texts of the individual states and the work of Benjamin Franklin, *Plan for Attaining Moral Perfection* (1784). These readings, combined with his eagerness to offer his fellow Greeks a tangible example for their moral and political rebirth, helped him shape an idealised, almost utopian image of American society.

Korais' intense interest in America began almost at the same time as the outbreak of the Greek Revolution, when his contemplative pursuits turned to the issue of how to organise the liberated state. He believed wholeheartedly that the American nation had based its moral, cultural and political rebirth on ancient Greek values. Through Korais, the American political achievements could return tested and improved, in the form of a “counter-loan,” to their land of origin. According to Korais, the Greeks had embarked on the Revolution prematurely and were now lacking in political vision and experience. The successful example of the “Anglo-Americans,” as he called them, made the democratic solution a feasible political option for the Greeks. Korais' vision of modern Greece was one of a democratic, non-monarchical state, built upon the theoretical principles of the Enlightenment and the practical example of the Americans, the most radical and liberal example of his era. That was the most radical phase of Korais' political thought: the republican period.

In his *Notes on the Provisional Government of Greece* (1822) (Kitromilides, *Notes* 11-60), Korais wrote: “It would be most fortunate... if the Greeks could draft their future constitution... by following in all things the political system of the Anglo-Americans, a system which has been demonstrated by all political philosophers and by experience... to be the most flawless amongst all well-governed states” (Notes 38). In his correspondence with significant political figures in Greece, he never stopped advocating in favor of the American model (Korais, *Correspondence* vol. 5 34). In a letter sent in 1825 to the president of the Provisional Government, Georgios Kountouriotis, he wrote: “In Greece's present situation, the only political constitution in the Greeks' best interest is that of the Anglo-Americans... choosing another type of government would be like wanting to continue to eat acorns even after the invention of bread” (192).

In 1823, Korais established contact with former American president Thomas Jefferson. His aim was to urge the aged American politician to apply pressure to the American government to send a delegation to Greece and officially recognize the country (Chaconas 64-70, Horton 323-329, Diamantidis 587-602, Constantelos 155-173, Evrigenis 157-181). Jefferson's response left no room for optimism in that regard. He merely sent a personal letter to Korais, a sort of brief political treatise, in which he laid out the key principles upon which a liberal system should be founded. Although the practical objective of the correspondence had not been achieved, this political dialogue enhanced Korais' admiration for American democracy and created a special bond between the two men. Subsequent references to American democracy in Korais' works are a direct reflection of the influence of this correspondence.

Two years later, in 1825, Korais, sensing the “tight entanglement” between the Greeks and Britain—which had begun with the British loans of 1824-1825 and peaked with the infamous request for protection from Great Britain in July 1825—thought they would be catastrophic for Greek freedom and conceived of an “American plan.” He appealed once again to Jefferson (letter of 30 January 1825), begging him not to allow the Greeks to be abandoned to the discretion of the British (Korais, *Correspondence* 183). In November of
that year (shortly after Daniel Webster’s failure to secure the American government’s recognition of Greek independence), Korais reassured Everett that the Greeks would happily abandon the British if they could rely on American aid. His fear was that the British would impose a conservative and freedom-limiting monarchy on Greece. He even suggested that Americans should send war ships to Greek waters, if they truly wished to maintain their prospects for free trade in the Aegean, as well as “one or two legislators” so “they could become lawmakers or even dictators” (274). Such was his fear of the British policy, that he would even accept an “American dictator,” meaning a person with extraordinary powers who could rescue Democracy much like a Roman Dictator did, when the Roman Res Publica was under threat.

This was the first time the United States had been promoted so explicitly by a Greek thinker, as a potential protector of Greece. In contrast to scenarios of foreign protection that were rolled out by various Greeks, sometimes with the Russians on the receiving end, at other times the French or the British, and seeing the Greek Revolution straying from its proclaimed democratic objectives and becoming enmeshed in more conservative solutions, Korais formulated an alternative proposal: the strong intervention of the United States, an extra-European power with a democratic and liberal political system that was not trying to prevail with the force of weapons but with the power of the economy, trade and its ideas. Korais viewed the United States as a new variable in the complicated equation of the Eastern Question. If we are to judge the feasibility of Korais’ “American plan,” taking into consideration the minimal influence of the United States on European events and the predominance of monarchies in Europe, we would certainly describe it as utopian, independent of both the will of the Provisional Government in Greece and that of the American government. He was even accused by his countrymen of being “excessively democratic.” But Korais was not a politician. He was a political thinker. That is why we should view his “American plan” not as the utopian delirium of an aging mind, but as part of a broader political vision that was driven by his deep faith in the principles of democracy. Korais was the first person of his era to bring America closer to the Greeks. His words provided an insightful glimpse into the future of transatlantic relations, where the ocean was not a boundary, but a point of contact. His was a cosmopolitan perspective that understood the “open-door” policy of the Americans in their relationship with Europe and the Mediterranean. It is impossible not to admire the prophetic nature of his words which, in the early 19th century, could foresee what would become reality a century later: the rise of the United States as a global, economic and military superpower.

5. Proponents and Opponents of American Democracy

The American vision of Korais was advocated only by a few, but distinguished liberal voices who shared his democratic views and referred directly to the American democratic model. One of those voices was Anastasios Polyzoides, a liberal intellectual who had studied history and law at the universities of Göttingen, Vienna and Berlin (Gardika 23-52, Peonidis-Vogli). In 1824, he printed in Messolonghi the first Greek Constitution, in a joint edition with the American constitution and British “Magna Carta” (Polyzoides). It was the first time the American Constitution had been translated into Greek, just 4 years after the outbreak of the Revolution. In comparing the two systems, the British and the American, Polyzoides claimed that the former presented

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aspects that were not advantageous to the Greek case, such as the system of nobility and privilege. Thus, the author determined that “under our present circumstances, it is much more advantageous and appropriate to follow the Wise Americans” (5).

23 The same opinion was shared by the newspaper Ellinika Chronika [Hellenic Chronicles], published in Messolonghi by the liberal Swiss philhellen Johann Jacob Meyer, a newspaper sympathetic to Mavrokordatos. On 16 February 1824, the newspaper wrote that it would be propitious for Greece to “emulate the wise legislation of the Americans,” and on 21 May of the same year, it reiterated that the United States had the best system of governance because it was founded on simple laws that could be understood by all (Ellinika Chronika, 16 February 1824 and 21 May 1824). The newspaper Geniki Efimeris tis Ellados [General Newspaper of Greece] proposed the adoption of the presidential system of the United States, with two legislative bodies that would mitigate fears of a potential concentration of all powers in the hands of one president (Geniki Efimeris, 27 January and 10 February 1826). Ioannis Kokkonis, a famous educator, believed that only American democracy was capable of ensuring social equality, justice and popular sovereignty (Kokkonis vol.1 402). Kokkonis believed that American communitarianism had a lot in common with the Greek local communitarian system, a tradition which helped Greeks retain their ethnic identity during the Ottoman occupation (Kokkonis vol.2 321).

24 Other democratic voices along the same wavelength could also be found in the Press and writings of the era. Nevertheless, most Greek thinkers of that period did not have a positive view of the Greeks’ capability of adapting to the American model. They thought that American democracy, though excellent in theory and worthy of admiration, was not appropriate in Greece’s case, because of the political immaturity of the Greeks. Instead a constitutional or even an absolute monarchy would be more advantageous. A Greek newspaper wrote: “To apply the American regime in Greece, we must first transform Greeks into Americans” (Geniki Efimeris, 25/2 February 1827). Another proponent of the monarchical system derided the Greeks’ tendency to “want to become Americans” (Geniki Efimeris, 1/17 February 1826). The author of the article “Which governance is best for Greece,” published in the newspaper Filos tou Nomou [Friend of the Law], questioned the United States’ ability to remain free and democratic (o Filos tou Nomou, 13 November 1825). Physician and writer Athanasios Vogoridis believed that even freedom of the Press was “not ripe” for Greece and that “The British and the Americans could enjoy it,” but the Greeks were not ready (Sathas 79). Similarly, Ioannis Nikolaidis Levadeus, a doctor and later head of the Ministry of Education, saw American democracy as the only “true democracy,” superior even to that of ancient Athens, and he recognized Benjamin Franklin as the “Socrates of America.” However, conditions in Greece could not yet allow a democratic system and he believed that as long as the nation is corrupt, it needs a despot (Levadeus 16). The idea that the Greeks were lacking a Washington, a Franklin, a Jefferson or an Adams, a capable and righteous leader to guide them was very common in Greek public discourse. Ioannis Makriyannis, in his memoirs, blamed Governor Kapodistrias for not being able to become the “Washington of Greece” (Makriyannis 299).2

25 Thus, there were two discrete notions amongst Greek political and intellectual circles as regards the United States. The first, more liberal and radical, sided with Korais in believing the American route to be a realistic prospect for the newly formed Greek nation. The second and more prevalent one, though acknowledging American
democracy as an excellent of governance, deemed it inappropriate for the Greeks because of their political immaturity. If indeed we assume that the Greek people at the time of the Revolution were politically immature, then the position of Korais and his circle is placed on the fringes of political utopia. Nevertheless, the vision of democratic America was registered in the collective consciousness of the Greek people as an unfulfilled desire and re-emerged repeatedly in public discourse over the following decades.

6. American Philhellenism: An Indelible Tribute

The Greek vision of America was also influenced by the American philhellenic movement. The “Greek Fever,” as it was called, captured the hearts and minds of many Americans (Laskaris, Dakin British and American Philhellenes, Zimmerman 181-210, Hatzidimitriou, St Clair 299). It fluctuated in intensity and was manifested through a great variety of initiatives and actions. Philhellenic sentiment was largely based on the classical education and humanitarianism of many prominent Americans who led the movement. The Americans assigned a religious dimension to the Greek struggle, as they interpreted it as the battle of a Christian people against Muslim barbarianism. The American people’s devotion to liberal and democratic ideals also played a role, as the Greek Revolution was seen as a struggle to ensure freedom against totalitarianism. It is worth noting that American philhellenism was a popular movement and did not represent the official governmental policy, which persisted in the idea of neutrality. In this sense, it was a counterbalance to the government’s stance, which it tried to influence.

Committees were formed in some of the major cities, mainly in the north-eastern states (New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania), public events with talks, theatre performances, dances and church services were held to raise funds, supplies were sent to Greece for the Revolution and later for humanitarian purposes. A few American volunteers arrived in Greece and offered their services to the cause. Orlandos wrote to the Kountouriotis brothers of the manner in which American volunteers should be received: “Welcome them properly and be hospitable, because this free and good nation is entirely on our side, and there is great enthusiasm in America in favour of Greek affairs” (Lignos vol. 3 319). Of the Americans who came to Greece, the cases of George Jarvis (Arnakis–Demetrakopoulou), Jonathan Peckham Miller and Dr Samuel Gridley Howe (Trent 29) stand out for their selfless character and the extent and duration of their contribution. Even orphans were adopted and sent to the USA to be saved (Daniel 1, Repousis The Cause 333-363). Meanwhile, significant figures of American political life, such as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, William Crawford, Edward Everett and others, tried to challenge the official policy of neutrality, without much success.

President Monroe, in three speeches, made positive references for the successful outcome of the Greek Revolution, but did not alter the decision of his government to remain strictly neutral. Nevertheless, the Greeks never saw American neutrality in a negative light, as they did in the cases of other European Powers. On the contrary, Monroe was one of the most popular and beloved figures in Greece. The newspapers always translated his speeches and celebrated them as a preface of the United States’ intent “to recognise Greece and enter into diplomatic and trade relations with it” (Ellinika Chronika, 16 and 27 February 1824). The newspaper Filos tou Nomou was
fervently optimistic about Webster’s views when the Greek issue was discussed in Congress in January 1824 (O Filos tou Nomou, 20 February, and 28 March, 1824). Even after realising America’s neutrality, Ellinika Chronika reassured readers: “Greeks can rest assured that every American supports the Greek cause with the greatest zeal” (Ellinika Chronika, 14 May 1824). The slightest favorable reference by some American on the Greek issue was interpreted as an act of philhellenism and helped cultivate the myth of Americans as liberators. On 17 April 1825, a call for help was addressed to the philhellenes of Europe and America, written by Epanthia Kairi, sister of philosopher Theofilos Kairis. While Kairi was critical of the ingratitude of European governments which had chosen to remain neutral on the Greek issue, there were no negative comments on American neutrality. On the contrary, she only praised the charitable actions of the Americans.

Even though the Americans diplomatic factor played a lesser role on the Greek case than the British, French or Russian, it was the Americans who were the object of admiration and praise by the Greeks. The reason for this attitude was the strong mark that the American humanitarian aid had left in the hearts of the Greek people. As of 1827, there was a notable shift in the assistance coming from the American committees. It was oriented not so much towards reinforcing the military operations, but towards providing humanitarian aid for the impoverished and malnourished civilian population. This shift was due to the experiences of the American volunteers, who realized that material assistance was causing friction amongst the Greeks and was not always directed towards those who truly needed it: the starving people. As a result, American agents assumed exclusive control of the distribution of supplies. This caused tension amongst some Greek military officers, who believed that assistance to the soldiers was more essential to the success of the Revolution. Kolokotronis, who in 1826 had personally called for the American humanitarian aid, complained strongly to Everett about being excluded from the process of controlling distribution (Filadelfeus 466, 528). The same displeasure was expressed by Petrobey Mavromichalis to Henry Post in December 1827, though the previous year, one of Mavromichalis’ ships had looted the American brig, Cherub (Public Documents vol. 3 101).

Nevertheless, the humanitarian aid provided by the American people was truly impressive in magnitude. Within two years (1827-1828), eight shipments were made with food and necessities, valued at about 140,000 US dollars, while from the start of the Revolution, it is estimated that the American aid amounted to more than 220,000 US dollars (Miller 226). Hence, the National Assembly of Troizina on 3 May 1827 felt the need to send “thank-you letters” to the US President, expressing their “affection to the American nation” (Mamoukas 44, 66). The acknowledgement of the Americans’ charitable contribution by the ordinary Greek people was even more sincere and spontaneous and constituted a “capital of gratitude” (Post 86). The word “philanthropists” accompanied the Americans throughout the 19th century in Greek public discourse. This gratitude was also expressed poetically by Dionysios Solomos, the Greek national poet, in the 22nd stanza of the Hymn to Liberty (to become the National Anthem of Greece) (Terzakis 5). Referring to the news of the Greek Revolution reaching America, he wrote:

Γκαρδιακά χαροήθη και του Βάσιγκτον η γη,
Και τα σίδερα ενθυμήθη ποι την έδεναν και αυτή.
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NOTES

1. The fragmentation of power in many local assemblies, the need to reconcile the interests of different social, political and local groups and the suspicion of the “centralization of power” imposed the “democratic state” as a means of balancing opposing tendencies and factions. On the other hand, the representative system ensured the maintenance of the ruling elite in power, as they could control the process of electing representatives, through their influence on the local population.

2. Although nowadays the work of Kapodistrias is recognized as the most important for the rebirth of Greece, at that time he was accused by many Greeks of excessive centralism that led to tensions among the Greeks and finally to his assassination.

ABSTRACTS

When the Greek War of Independence broke out in 1821, the name “America” had already been standing for a symbol of freedom and democracy throughout Europe for nearly 50 years. This powerful symbol of liberty was integrated in the Greek vision of freedom. The United States of America instantly became a point of reference in the Greek public speech and the political discourse of the educated Greeks. The Greeks tried to legitimize their Revolution by making comparisons and finding similarities with the American Revolution. Moreover, the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the American Constitution of 1787 influenced the Greek political thought and the formation of the Greek revolutionary constitutions. American democracy became a basic argument among those liberals who wanted to advocate in favor of an
uncrowned republic, as the most suitable political system for Greece. The most prominent of them was Adamantios Korais, who discovered in the perfect function of American institutions an inspirational political model. On the other hand, there were many who considered that the American version of democracy was too premature for the newly born Greek nation-state. These are the main subjects of this article, which is also focusing on the formation of the Greek image of America within the framework of the needs, hopes and dreams of the Greek War of Independence.

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Keywords: United States of America, Greece, Greek War of Independence (1821-1830), Korais, image of America

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