

PHILHELLENISM AND MESSOLONGHI

The term “Philhellene, friend +Hellene” is initially found in Herodotus who describes it as denoting “the friend of Hellenic civilization and classical studies.”

We find it also in Plato’s work “ a good Greek is a good philhellene” but in this case it has to do with patriotic Greeks who are interested in the promotion of their country and civilization. The contemporary form of philhellenism as an idea had originally begun to be cultivated during pre-revolutionary times, a direct result of observations made in diaries, letters and chronicles by the various European travellers to the ancient sites and temples of the land, enthusiastically describing the glorious past of ancient Greece and Greeks. This new-found interest in the country arose from the various travels during the 17th and 18th century, amply supported by the revolutionary spirit and liberal ideas of the times as espoused by the French Revolution. One dark underside of this awareness was, however the realization made by them, that the devastation of the country was a far cry from its ancient splendour and glorious past.

The struggle during the revolution of 1821 was catalytic in changing philhellenic sentiments from a passive love of antiquity to a more active form of identification with the Greeks and their fighting for freedom. This changing attitude becomes a rising wave of philhellenic ideas and sympathy spreading throughout Europe and United States.

A multitude of enthusiastic students, romantics, battle-hardened veterans of the Napoleonic wars flocked to Greece volunteering to fight alongside the Greek revolutionaries. Societies and committees were formed to handle the vast amounts of contributions for the war chest. It is surprising the high amounts of monies donated by societies and well-known personalities of the time. It is the first time that a revolution was preserved and supported materially and morally to such a high level by private initiative. It is certain that philhellenism, becomes the salvation and strength of the Greek Revolution. This identification with the Greek cause was not however, shared by the governments of the big powers of the time who initially maintain a hostile policy as espoused by the Holy Alliance. It is only due to pressure by public opinion that they are forced to change their stance.

The wake of events in 1821 transforms Messolonghi to the political and strategic center of the Revolution. As a strategic center the city becomes the citadel of western Greece and the outpost of rebellious Morea. As a political one it becomes the seat of the “Senate of the Western Lands of Greece” with Alexandros Mavrokordatos as head of its Administration.

It is in this political and military environment that the first philhellenes arrive in Messolonghi. In February of 1822, the German Major General Karl Albert Norman forms the first Corps of Philhellenes in Corinth and comes to Messolonghi taking part in the “military operations” of Mavrokordatos in Epirus. He distinguishes himself in the battle of Koboti, is wounded in the battle of Peta and dies in Messolonghi in November of 1822.

In the same year, the liberal Swiss John Jacob Mayer also arrives and participates in the organization of a hospital in Messolonghi and becomes the political communicator

of the revolutionaries. With the assistance of a printer from Thessaloniki, Demetris Mestheneas, he publishes the newspapers "Ellinika Chronika" and "Telegrafo Greco". In May of 1825, Mestheneas is the first to print in Messolonghi, the Hymn to Liberty of Dionysios Solomos. The publication of "Ellinika Chronika" continues throughout the second siege of Messolonghi stopping its operation on February 20th, 1826, when the printing shop is bombarded. During the night of the Exodus both Mayer and Mestheneas heroically fall in battle.

On December 12, 1823, Colonel Leicester Stanhope arrives in Messolonghi as the representative of the Philhellenic Committee of London bringing with him medicines and three printing presses. He meets with Mayer who had familiarized himself with the Greek alphabet and language and works with him in the publication of newspapers. In February, 1825, William Parry also arrives accompanied by eight armoury experts and the appropriate supplies to operate a gun manufacturing plant. They also bring educational material, books, and musical instruments.

Messolonghi is also the city of the most famous of Philhellenes, the English poet Lord Byron whose literary reputation and personality transcended the borders of his country. This living symbol of romanticism arrives with great fanfare in Messolonghi in January, 1824, as a representative of the London Greek Committee. For four months Byron chooses to live as a simple soldier showing through example his unwavering support for the Greeks and their revolution. Totally committed to the defence of his ideals and identifying his destiny with that of the besieged city, he leaves his last breath on April 19, 1824. His last words are about Greece: "I gave her my time, my fortune, my health - and now I give her my life". His early death has such an international impact that it awakens consciences and becomes the banner for the philhellenic movement in the Western world.

The sage of Weimar, the great Goethe, in one scene of Faust B, has Euforion, the hero who represents the spirit of courage and freedom, shouting in excitement in Messolonghi: "Always climb higher!" "Always look farther!" He exults in Lord Byron's sacrifice in Messolonghi transcending it to an ideal, an eternal act of courage and self-sacrifice.

The climactic moment in the history of the struggle of the Greek war for independence takes place in Messolonghi on April 10, 1826, the fateful night of the Exodus. The last act of the drama of the Free Besieged is not a daring act of bravery in the heat of battle, nor is it heroic rage of a brave man in a state of madness or despair. The Exodus is the pinnacle of a conscientious stand on life and struggle, fermented in the intellect, calmly and steadily in silence during a very long period of famine. It was cultivated in the soul and conscience of the starving armed and unarmed revolutionaries who remained steadfast to the end, to all that was sacred in their religion, nation, liberty and human dignity.

The ancient philosopher Plato has said that philosophy is the study of death. The marginal accomplishment of man to transform his death to an ecumenical act of freedom rarely happens in the world. Consequently, the Exodus at Messolonghi is not just another page of history; it is a major intellectual act which beyond admiration also demands philosophical contemplation.

When the torch of Christos Kapsalis shatters the darkness of struggling Greece, the twilight of its brightness impacts world communities. The tombs of the people of Messolonghi awaken consciences aiding in the rise of philhellenism, especially after the disappointments caused by internal conflicts. Messolonghi becomes the hearth of an incomprehensible wave of solidarity expressing itself in multitude ways of support and assistance.

When the French newspapers report the fall of Messolonghi, the liberal French press, as they call themselves, immediately react to the barbaric suppression in various ways. In a large and impressive demonstration outside the palace of King Charles I, they demand that he assist and support the Greek struggle.

On April 18, 1826 a concert is given at the Parisian hall Tivoli, in support of the Philhellenic Society with maestro Rossini conducting. The musicians have decorated their instruments with white and blue silk ribbons. The members of the Society receive the public wearing white and blue armbands. The ladies have attached white and blue badges to their gowns. The program ends with Greek songs and a collection in support of the Greek War of Independence.

After the fall of Messolonghi, Paris collects 1,630,000 francs in contributions, while the sum collected in 1825 and 1826 totalled 3,000,000. These events are ample evidence of how “the defence, the patriotism and the Exodus of Messolonghi, jolted, stirred and awakened the world.”

The Geneva Committee becomes another important philhellenic center gathering contributions, not only from Switzerland but from throughout Europe mostly because of Swiss banker Johan Gabriel Eynard who, as research has shown , personally donated 2,500,000 francs to the Greek cause.

Even in Berlin, the capital of authoritarian Prussia, when every philhellenic deed was prohibited since the outbreak of the Revolution, Dr. Hufeland, deeply stirred by the fall of Messolonghi, personally asks the king and the prime minister to be allowed to support the Greeks through various supportive events and contributions. Permission is granted and on the 25th of April, fifteen days after the Exodus, an announcement in the press is published signed by important personalities of the time. This immediate and earnest response raises the amount of contributions to 500,000 francs which are sent to Greece through the banker Eynard. Even Metternich, who despised the Greeks for their rebellion, was forced to communicate to the Sultan: “We can no longer assist you as before your Majesty because the fall of Messolonghi interceded.

A parallel fodder of philhellenism in Europe is literature and art. The death of Lord Byron in Messolonghi is catalytic for the romantic souls of Europe. The feats of bravery and self sacrifice become eternal verses, narratives, images.

The tragic events at Messolonghi were quickly reflected in drama. ‘The Annihilation of Messolonghi’ by Emil Souvestre, is written immediately after the event and accepted by the theater of French Comedy only to be rejected through censorship. Two years later, April 10, 1828, D’Ozanou’s drama. ‘The Last Day of Messolonghi’ is performed. Some of the lyrics were put into music by the celebrated Herold, while ‘The Song of a Fighter’ is sung by the famous Dupree.

The elegy of Camille Pagganel, 'Messolonghi Is No More' is especially significant in poetry. The poetical collection, "Oriental" by Victor Hugo, is momentous as he is one of the very important writers in Europe.

This collection is written between 1826 and 1828 and published in 1829. Of the 41 poems in the volume, 'the Heads of Seraglio' is about Messolonghi. Its first edition referring to the fall circulates in the popular form of pamphlets in June of 1828, immediately after the fall of the Sacred City. Hugo has the three separated heads of the fighters of the Revolution, Kanaris, for whom a rumor circulated that he was killed trying to help the besieged people of the city, of Marcos Botzaris, and that of the bishop of Rogon, Joseph, narrating the last moments of Messolonghi.

The German philhellene, the poet Wilhelm Muller, is also well known for the familiar couplet with which he begins and ends his 'Greece and the World':

Without freedom, what would you be Greece?

Without you, Greece, what would the world be?

In 1826, Muller writes four poems inspired by the holocaust of Messolonghi: 'The Citadel of Heaven', 'The Ascension of Messolonghi', 'Messolonghi Has Fallen', 'The New Messolonghi.'

Messolonghi dominates in the philhellenic painting and lithographic scene as well, increasingly becoming the major theme again in later years. Painters such as: Delacroix, Flandrin, Francois-Emile de Lansac, Colin, Ary Scheffer, Dupre, Louis Benjamin Devouze, Cheritiene, Plattele, Rossignon and many others immortalize scenes of the last moments of the besieged city and its inhabitants prior to the Exodus and the massacres which followed after the fall of the city. In their majority, these paintings are beyond the limits of historical depictions, they are more symbolic and represent the totality of philhellenic iconography of the struggle of Greece for liberty, a representation of the struggle of the two civilizations involved.

Historical writings also have their place in the philhellenic movement as much ink has been used in writing about Messolonghi. A distinguishing work is that of Augustus Fabre, "History of the Siege of Messolonghi" which was published in 1827 and translated for the first time in 1857 by the Messolonghian law student S.A. Zorba. A second translation, from the complete text of the volume was also undertaken in 1983 by another Messolonghian writer, a woman this time, Akakia Kordosis.

Intense philhellenic activity is also evident in the United States of America with the declaration and recognition of the Greek struggle for freedom by President Monroe in 1823, as the high point of public acceptance of the Greek Cause. Many other personalities of that time take the opportunity of offering their help, as the Everett brothers, especially Edward Everett, professor of Greek Literature at Harvard. It is Edward Everett who receives a letter from Adamantios Korais in 1821 asking him to help with the American government. Moved by philanthropic feelings, Americans, by the end of 1823, establish Committees in New York, Boston and Philadelphia, in addition to other cities. They collect large sums of money and send ships to Greece loaded with humanitarian aid, food, clothes and medicine.

Proportionally, such activities are also organized in Holland, Belgium, Denmark, even in Sweden. In Stockholm, "The Society of Friends of Greece," is established, with P.A. Wallmark, the journalist and newspaper owner as the secretary. In May 1826, he

undertakes a national collection campaign through the newspapers of his country soliciting funds for the Greek Cause. In other Swedish towns, artistic events and painting exhibitions are organized to financially assist the Greek War of Independence.

Russian philhellenism is also present, expressing itself with the pre-revolutionary founding and operation of The Society of Friends in Odessa. The Russians participate by organizing missions to Moldovlachia of volunteer corps and supplies. They also translate and circulate revolutionary manifestos and essays and contribute with their own philhellenic literature as the poet Alexander Pushkin's rousing work, "Arise Hellas", their most important representative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Philhellenism was without a doubt one of the most important supporting factors and contributor to the Greek War of Independence. Various other forces were also instrumental to its formation and development. Historical research however, has shown that the ultimate sacrifice by the people of Messolonghi had made it synonymous with liberty. This sacrifice served as a new impetus to the philhellenic movement, took it to its peak of popularity and played a definitive role in persuading European governments to help in creating a New Greek state.

In our days when human values are retreating because of globalization, living as we are trapped in the square logic of numbers, as prisoners of sensitivity we need to re-examine the miracle of Messolonghi so we can better understand Time, our World, our own Humanity. Those who hold peoples destinies in their hands can best serve by understanding that Messolonghi is a symbol of lofty values, much needed in our times. We should all identify with its high ideals and timelessness.

By Rodanthi (Rosa) Florou

President of the Messolonghi Byron Society

Translation: Professor Peter Myrian