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## “A Kindred Sigh for Thee”: British Responses to the Greek War for Independence

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Morrison: British Responses to the Greek War for Independence



*The Revolution of 1821. Wikimedia Commons.*

Paper

# “A Kindred Sigh for Thee”

## British Reactions to the Greek War of Independence, 1821–1824

Susannah Morrison

### Introduction

The Greek War of Independence, spanning from 1821 to 1832, was one of the bloodiest anti-imperial conflicts of the nineteenth century, fought by Greek insurgents against their Ottoman Turkish overlords. Unfolding in the direct aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the political and military drama in Greece was eagerly followed in newspapers across Western Europe. But from the first reports of the outbreak of war in 1821, the fight for Greek independence commanded the particular attention and sympathy of the British middle-class as had few other international crises before.

Late Georgian England conceived of itself as the natural civilizational heir to the artistic, cultural, and political legacy of ancient Greece.<sup>1</sup> Viewing the Greek Revolt as a modern-day continuation of the quasi-mythic wars of ancient Greece, educated British on all sides of the political spectrum saw the revolution through the lens of the archetype of classical warfare: a clash of civilizations between the enlightened Occident and the barbaric Orient. A flood of well-educated and predominantly aristocratic volunteers, including Lord Byron, travelled from Britain to Greece to physically take part in the revolt, but

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1. Lucy Pollard, *The Quest for Classical Greece: Early Modern Travel to the Greek World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 157–158.

these extreme demonstrations of solidarity were also matched by an outpouring of popular domestic support.<sup>2</sup> Despite the public's avid interest in the situation, however, the post-Napoleonic British government was unwilling to risk involvement in another Continental land and naval war, and so adopted and strictly enforced a policy of neutrality towards the Greek War of Independence between 1821 and 1827.

This contrast in reactions—from the keen interest and support of the public to the stagnant hesitation of the government—forms a revealing juxtaposition. As reflected in newspapers from this period, British citizens from across the political spectrum were actively interested in and supportive of the Greek War. Belying the conservative political ethos of their age, the British public were inclined to view the Greek Revolt, not as an atheistic orgy of violence like the French Revolution, but instead, as a virtuous crusade in defense of Christianity. Confronted with reports of Turkish atrocities against Orthodox Greek belligerents and civilians, the British felt themselves “bound by every tie of religion and morals” to assist and alleviate the Greeks’ suffering through any means possible.<sup>3</sup> Ordinary members of the British public, confronted by their government’s refusal to engage, expressed their support through extensive private fundraising campaigns. Appeals for the British government to intervene were based, at least in part, on a shrewd political awareness; not simply driven by Christian compassion and civilizational solidarity, educated British persuasively argued that their government’s involvement in Greece was essential to ensuring Britain’s continued competitiveness in the ongoing Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry.

## Historical Background

In the 1820s, in the direct aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe held only a tenuous grip on peace. Under the direction of statesmen such as Austria’s Chancellor, Prince Metternich, and Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, the 1815 Congress of Vienna had reorganized the balance of power on the Continent in order to check the territorial ambitions of the Great Powers (France, Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia). The Ottoman Empire was not formally party

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2. The classic work on the Philhellenic volunteers of Western Europe is William St. Clair’s *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

3. “Greece”, *Morning Chronicle*, London, 26 December 1823.

to the Congress of Vienna, but its presence in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan Peninsula was considered essential to maintaining this tentative status quo, as Ottoman territorial claims blocked the advance of the Russian Empire into the Orthodox nations of the Balkans.<sup>4</sup> Taking place in the long shadow cast by the twenty-five-year-long juggernaut of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the Congress—and the culture which emerged therefrom—was explicitly anti-revolutionary, anti-nationalist, and pro-status quo. Therefore, the Greek Revolt posed an existential threat to the achievements of Vienna.

In spite of the geopolitical danger posed by the Greek War of Independence, it nevertheless enjoyed an unusually high degree of overseas support, particularly in Britain. This was due, in large part, to the philhellenism prevalent among the educated segment of British society. This emotional attachment to Greece was informed more by a sense of civilisational debt to the achievements of the classical world than by any interest in the realities of the modern country.<sup>5</sup> After all, the Greece of the nineteenth century bore very little resemblance to the idealized figment of Western imagination. Its classical heritage had largely been overwritten by 1,400 years of Orthodox Christianity, 1,000 years of Byzantine rule, and almost 400 years of Ottoman suzerainty; its culture, religion, and language owed a greater debt to medieval Byzantium than to ancient Athens.<sup>6</sup> The realities of the modern country, however, were of little interest to the vast majority of foreign commentators, except for when they supported the narrative of a pagan past and a Christian present which classically educated British found endlessly compelling. Public interest in the Greek Revolt hinged entirely on this sentimental and intellectual attachment to a mythologized version of Greece; after all, as other scholars have pointed out, other comparable anti-Ottoman revolts in the Balkans, such as the First Serbian Revolt (1804-1813), were essentially ignored in the West.<sup>7</sup>

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4. Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 224.

5. Terence Spencer, *Fair Greece, Sad Relic!: Literary Philhellenism from Shakespeare to Byron* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954), vii.

6. Theodore G. Zervas, *The Making of a Modern Greek Identity: Education, Nationalism, and the Teaching of a Greek National Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 11-15; David Roessel, *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.

7. See Lawrence P. Meriage, "The First Serbian Uprising (1804-1813) and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Eastern Question," *Slavic Review* 37, no. 3 (September 1978), 421-439.

A high degree of international sympathy, however, did not necessarily translate into international support. The most immediate source of foreign support for the Greek Revolution came from Russia, as a result of the intimate cultural bond shared by the two branches of Orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> Drawing upon a strong base of popular domestic support across all segments of society, Tsar Alexander I made extensive overtures to the Great Powers of Western Europe throughout the summer of 1821, offering an allied military intervention in exchange for a shared partition of a liberated Greece.<sup>9</sup> Such an intervention would interfere with an imperial power's sovereign right to handle internal dissent among its own population; it would, therefore, violate the principle of "moral restraint" which was supposed to maintain the balance of power in the post-Napoleonic world order.<sup>10</sup> Although France and Prussia both toyed with the idea of accepting Russia's offer, Britain refused to even entertain the possibility of a Russian coalition. Instead, British diplomats retreated to a position of absolute neutrality, keen to avoid any entanglement with "the destructive confusion and disunion" engulfing southeastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of any willing ally among the Great Powers, the Russians abandoned the venture, and Greece was, in turn, abandoned to its own devices.

Castlereagh's interest in maintaining neutrality was indelibly influenced by the profoundly conservative ethos in British politics at the time. Writing to the British ambassador to Constantinople, Lord Strangford, in the summer of 1821, Castlereagh reflected the enduring fear of revolution which embodied his political generation when he stressed the importance of keeping the Ottoman Porte "exempt from the revolutionary danger" which had plagued Europe for the preceding thirty years.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, regardless of Castlereagh's own personal sympathies for the Greek cause, it fell to him to develop a policy which would, he felt, preserve the balance of power in Europe.<sup>13</sup> He clearly took this bur-

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8. Theophilus C. Prousis, "Russian Philorthodox Relief During the Greek War of Independence," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 1 (1985), 32.

9. C.W. Crawley, *The Question of Greek Independence: A Study of British Policy in the Near East, 1821-1833* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973), 22-23.

10. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 79-84.

11. W.A. Phillips, "Great Britain and the Continental Alliance, 1816-1822," in *The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy, 1783-1919*, vol. II, 1815-1886, ed. A.W. Ward and G.P. Gooch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 43.

12. Castlereagh to Strangford, 13 July 1821, in *Foreign Office Turkey Papers*, 97, quoted in Crawley, *The Question of Greek Independence*, 20.

13. John Bew, *Castlereagh: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 533.

den of responsibility seriously, exhorting Strangford in Constantinople to put aside "the merits of the case" for Greek independence, and to instead, "awaken [the Ottoman Porte] to the necessity of asserting its power over an infuriated people."<sup>14</sup> To this extent, the moral rightness (or lack thereof) of the Greek cause was utterly immaterial.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Castlereagh would not give even token recognition of the Greeks as legitimate belligerents; instead, as reflected in his communique with Strangford, Castlereagh considered the Greeks a dangerous revolutionary contingent of agitated peasants, whose petty complaints threatened to topple the new post-Vienna world order. However, he was determined that, under his careful direction, Britain would remain impartial, respect the sovereignty of its allies, and ride out the storm, content in the knowledge that it was "impervious to all but cataclysmic upheavals."<sup>16</sup>

### "The Cross Against the Crescent": Pan-Christian Support

Such a non-interventionist view of geopolitics, however, did not appeal to the British public—particularly the religious segment of the population. Indeed, most of the newspapers' public appeals on the situation in Greece were addressed directly to Christian readers. A pointed announcement published in the Tory *Morning Post* in September 1823—"The religious communities . . . are bound by every tie, both as Christians and as men, to succour the Greeks and contribute towards their speedy restoration to the bosom of the European family"—may be taken as broadly representative.<sup>17</sup> Ignoring the fact that the religion practiced by the Orthodox Greeks was radically different from that practiced by the majority-Anglican British, this imagined Christian kinship was treated as the most compelling reason for the British public to care about their Greek counterparts.

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14. Castlereagh to Strangford, 5 August 1821, in *Foreign Office Turkey Papers*, 97, quoted in Crawley, *The Question of Greek Independence*, 20.

15. John Bew, "'From an Umpire to a Competitor': Castlereagh, Canning, and the Issue of International Intervention in the Wake of the Napoleonic Wars," in *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, ed. Brendan Simms and D.J.B. Trim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131.

16. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 96.

17. "Greece," *Morning Post*, London, 16 September 1823.

The religious brotherhood between the British and the Greeks was, by no means, a naturally existing tie. Indeed, it was actively fostered and developed in the newspapers, as editors sought to smooth over the depth of the doctrinal schism between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity, and to highlight the overriding importance of pan-Christian solidarity. “Much has been said against the Greek Clergy,” one radical Whig newspaper acknowledged, “and the Greeks have been represented as fanatics.”<sup>18</sup> This Orthodox fervour was not viewed favourably in comparison to the subdued religious sentiment of Protestant Britain, but the author of the article hastened to correct these misconceptions, claiming, “the Greek Clergy are not without their defects, but they have been confounded with the Monks.” Writing almost a decade before Catholic emancipation, the author reflected the anti-monastic opinions then-prevalent among the British public, blaming the influence of nefarious monks for whatever “defects” might be present among the Greek clergy.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, the writer deliberately noted that the Greeks felt no bigotry towards non-Orthodox Christians, insisting that, “in the greatest part of Greece, the discussions between the Greek and Latin Churches are forgotten.” The squabbles of medieval clerics should be meaningless to modern Europeans; instead, in the face of such overwhelming need, pan-Christian solidarity would be the only morally justifiable response.

An October 1821 editorial written by the Greek Committee, “to the British Public in general, and especially to the Friends of Religion,” likewise made use of this broadly Christian rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the Greek Committee—dominated by philhellenes such as Lord Byron, whose reputations for hedonism and radical politics earned them an unsavoury reputation among the conservative public—did not appeal exclusively to philanthropically-inclined Christians, but instead, broadened their appeals to all members of the British public who considered themselves kindly disposed towards religion.<sup>21</sup> Chris-

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18. “Greece,” *Morning Chronicle*, London, 22 September 1821.

19. See Rene Kollar, *A Foreign and Wicked Institution?: The Campaign Against Convents in Victorian England* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011). Although Kollar’s work deals directly with the backlash against nunneries, most of the concerns cited—including the perceived unnaturalness of celibacy, the suspect political loyalties of those in monastic life, and rumours of licentious practices taking place within convent walls—were equally applicable to both male and female monastic communities.

20. “The Cause of Greece: Appeal,” *Morning Post*, London, 30 October 1823.

21. Byron was, in fact, intensely religious and invested in Christianity—albeit not in a way recognisable to the dogmatism of mainstream nineteenth-century British religion. See



tianity was used as the most common denominator to draw interested readers into the Greek cause, invoked to create a sense of community and kinship between the authors and their audience. Indeed, the Greek Committee even explicitly disavowed their radical political associations, insisting that, "in their exertions . . . they have disclaimed . . . all other views than to co-operate in raising Greece, from her political and moral thralldom, to a place among the nations." They repeated their broad invitation to the British public, clarifying that "he who agrees with them only in this, they would consider as their friend and fellow-labourer." Using language generally reminiscent of Christ's exhortations to his disciples in the Gospels, the Greek Committee sought to create a Christian space for middle-class citizens to lobby the government for institutional action.

This shared Christian narrative was further explored in the Greek Committee's direct appeal to the British public. Indeed, the Committee situated the Greek Revolt within that Christian narrative, describing the Greeks as "[going] forth 'conquering and to conquer.'" This phrase, drawn from Revelations 6:2, is highly significant. Within its New Testament context, this phrase described a rider going forth on a white horse, interpreted in one of the most influential biblical commentaries of the nineteenth century as the archetypal "symbol of Christian victory."<sup>22</sup> When viewed in this light, the Greek Revolt became a biblically-prophesied event, a cosmically-significant moment in the unfolding of the last days. The Greeks themselves ceased to be foreign revolutionaries, but divinely-ordained agents in the dispensing of the great and terrible justice of God, taking possession of their very own promised land. Those who opposed the conquering Greeks—both the Ottomans and their tacit supporters among the Great Powers—stood in the way of the apocalypse, blocking the fulfilment of the will of "the Great and Omnipotent Being, to whom [the Greeks] so solemnly refer[red] their righteous cause." Almost precisely the same sentiment was expressed in a letter to the editor of the *Morning Post* a year prior in October 1822. The anonymous author here vehemently declared, "Surely Satan must have stood at the right hand of those Statesmen, whoever they may be, in whose evil counsels the system thus far practiced has had its origin."<sup>23</sup> In both these

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Gregory Olsen, "Byron and God: Representations of Religion in the Writings of Lord Byron," PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2010, 8–22.

22. W. Boyd Carpenter, "The Revelation of St. John," in *A New Testament Commentary for English Readers*, ed. Charles John Ellicott (London: Cassell & Co., 1878), 559.

23. "The Cause of Greece," *Morning Post*, London, 3 October 1822.

documents, there can be no room for interpretational ambiguity. In the minds of the British public, the cause of the Greeks was inseparably connected with virtue, justice, and the fulfilment of prophecy—and only the direct influence of the devil could be sufficient to blind a Christian to this self-evident fact.

In order to further underscore the depth of Christian suffering in Greece, British newspapers sought to portray their opponents—the Muslim Ottomans—in as foreign and alienating a light as possible. Turks were almost universally called by religiously-charged names, such as “Mahometan” and “Mussulman.” The atrocities committed by Ottoman forces against Greek insurgents were framed in religious terms, as shown in one particularly impassioned display in the *Leeds Mercury* in 1821: “One of the principles of the Turkish government is never to pardon revolted infidels! They think themselves bound by no promise, by no oath, to the Sovereigns who do not observe the laws of Mahomet, and whom they call *hogs and dogs!*”<sup>24</sup> The author breathlessly continued through a graphic catalogue of anti-Christian atrocities, including the desecration of churches, the massacre of clerics, the crucifixion of Greek villagers, and the gang-rape and mass enslavement of Greek girls.

The perspective taken by the *Leeds Mercury* was similar to other newspapers of the time, which all viewed the situation in Greece, not as a political revolution begun by the Greeks and fought with atrocities committed on both sides, but as a “war of extermination, in which about four millions of Christians are left to the mercy of the whole Ottoman Empire, that has sworn to destroy them.”<sup>25</sup> The blame for the crisis—and the human cost thereof—was shifted entirely to the Ottomans, leaving the Greeks to occupy the role of innocent victims and oppressed Christians in the eyes of the British public. The European press also simply failed to report the numerous documented instances of horrific violence perpetrated by Greek rebels against their Muslim neighbours, such as the slaughter of 15,000 Muslim civilians in the Peloponnese out of an overall population of 40,000.<sup>26</sup> Bowing to the anti-revolutionary ethos of mainstream nineteenth-century British society, newspapers overrode the anti-imperial

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24. “Greece,” *Leeds Mercury*, 10 November 1821. Emphasis preserved from original publication.

25. “Greece,” *Morning Chronicle*, London, 26 December 1823.

26. Lucien J. Frary, “Slaves of the Sultan: Russian Ransoming of Christian Captives during the Greek Revolution, 1821–1830,” in *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered*, ed. Lucien J. Frary and Maria Kozelsky (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 104.

actions of the Greeks with the anti-Christian actions of the Ottomans and, in so doing, presented a sanitized view of the conflict which would readily appeal to a wide cross-section of society.

## Private Support and Charitable Donations

In the nineteenth century, the British middle-class became a philanthropic people. Influenced by William Wilberforce's 1797 manifesto *A Practical View of Real Christianity*, middle-class British placed charity and good works—particularly on an international level—at the heart of their religious lives. As Victorian man of letters Edmund Gosse described, "Nowadays a religion which does not combine with its subjective faith a strenuous labour for the good of others is hardly held to possess any religious principle worth proclaiming."<sup>27</sup> Although Gosse was addressing a slightly later period in the nineteenth century, this same attitude is plainly reflected in the religiously-based appeals for British intervention in the Greek War of Independence. It was not enough to merely privately support the Greeks, or to limit one's response to "a kindred sigh" for their suffering.<sup>28</sup> Instead, with the government absenting itself completely from the conflict, it fell to the British people themselves to take concrete action, primarily in the form of financial donations.

These calls for concrete action were primarily sentimental, targeted to appeal to the reader's sense of compassion—or perhaps, more accurately, sense of guilt. One article painted a melodramatic picture of, "thousands . . . driven from their homes . . . either seeking a refuge from the knife of the Infidel among the crags of Olympus . . . or, if armed, bravely opposing the enemy in the passes of Thermopylae, without bread to eat or raiment to cover them!"<sup>29</sup> From a rhetorical perspective, this appeal is fascinating. The choice to highlight Olympus and Thermopylae—places which loom large in the heroic tradition associated with ancient Greece—was clearly deliberate, and intended to appeal to the reader's classical education. However, by invoking Crusader-era language in his reference to the "knife of the Infidel," the author also highlighted the

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27. Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (New York, 1907), 290, quoted in Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

28. Mrs. McMullan, "Original Poetry," *Morning Post*, London, 28 April 1821.

29. "Greece," *Morning Post*, London, 16 September 1823.

Greeks' Christianity. In essence, the modern Greeks were seen to be re-enacting the history of their ancestors, fighting for their freedom in a physical landscape which occupied a prominent place in the mental geography of the educated British middle-class. In a single historical moment replete with romantic appeal and poetic justice, the modern Greeks were uniting ancient paganism, modern Christianity, and the clash of civilizations between East and West that runs through both traditions. By answering the physical needs of the impoverished insurgents, members of the British middle-class had the opportunity to act as temporal saviors of the Greek nation—and, thereby, earn a glorious place in this grand historical narrative.

Despite the persuasiveness of this rhetoric, the actual generosity of the British public appears to have been somewhat lacking throughout most of the early phase of the war. Indeed, newspapers reflected a prevailing anxiety regarding Britain's failure to match the philanthropic contributions made on the Continent. At the beginning of the war in 1821, one editorial, noting the "great exertions" made for the Greeks by the French, Germans, and Swiss, nervously cajoled, "The people of England are surely not more indifferent to the cause of humanity and Christianity than the people of the Continent!"<sup>30</sup> Financial contributions to the cause of Greek independence, then, were not merely a matter of supporting the Greeks, or of feeding a sense of British exceptionalism—but also a question of keeping up appearances in a charitable competition with the Continent. Particularly given the government's position of neutrality, private donations were one of the key ways to express support for the Greek cause, and the British middle-class was profoundly embarrassed at having their expressions of philanthropy overshadowed by donations from the Continent. By 1823, the problem was far from resolved, as another article noted, "the pastors of Switzerland and Germany, who are indigent in comparison with the pastors of England, have been first and foremost in the sacred duty" to raise and donate money to the Greek rebels.<sup>31</sup> In other words, with the exception of a small minority, the British people were failing as much as the British government at showing solidarity and support for the embattled Greek cause.

With the middle class falling short in its donations, British philanthropists attempted to extend their fundraising into the working class. The most bizarre manifestation of this attempt to drum up cross-class support was in an extensive drive for farmers to immigrate to Greece. To this end, a short advertisement,

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30. "Greece," *Morning Chronicle*, London, 20 September 1821.

31. "Greece," *Morning Post*, London, 16 September 1823.

bluntly explaining how British emigration would help the cause of Greek independence and briefly outlining the price of available local farmland and farm animals, was printed first in London's Whig *Morning Chronicle* and then subsequently reprinted in a variety of provincial gazettes.<sup>32</sup> It is unclear exactly how successful these attempts to solicit emigration were—but, even so, they demonstrate an unexpectedly comprehensive nature of private support for the Greek Revolt within Britain. Provincial farmers were expected to be favorably inclined to plan their emigration around the needs of the cause of Greek independence. This demonstrates a clear general expectation that "no one should withhold" his support for Greece, "however small his means"—and therefore, in this way, "the expression of public opinion in England should be as universal as the sentiment itself."<sup>33</sup>

## Imperial Identity and Competition

In reality, the financial support of the British public, however generous, could not hope to be enough to turn the tide of the war definitively in favour of the severely outnumbered Greeks. Instead, the British people recognized that their government's official intervention would be necessary. From the very beginnings of the war, newspapers protested their government's position of neutrality, reflecting a general public opinion that this policy reflected poorly on the British public, and in no way represented the will of the people with regards to the benevolent role they wanted their country to play on the world stage. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the British saw themselves as the natural hegemon of Europe, with a responsibility to use their diplomatic and, if necessary, military superiority for good.

Indeed, the British public saw a strong link between their recent victory in the Napoleonic Wars and their obligation to intervene in Greece. As one letter to the editor of the Conservative *Morning Post* demanded in October 1821, "England . . . has just experienced a signal and Providential deliverance from the greatest danger that ever menaced her . . . Are not such blessings accompanied with many duties?"<sup>34</sup> This argument saw England as having been uniquely

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32. "Emigration to Greece," *North Devon Journal* (Barnstaple), 2 July 1824.

33. "The Spanish Cause: Legality of Transmitting Money and Arms to Spain and Greece," *Morning Post* (London), 7 July 1823.

34. "Important Considerations Relative to Greece," *Morning Post* (London), 30 October 1821.

singled out for deliverance in the recent Continental land war. By virtue of the “external security” now enjoyed as a result of this divine act of national salvation, England carried a special responsibility to act as a physical savior for other endangered nations.

The following year, in 1822, another editorial laid forth an even more explicit demand for action: “All we now ask is that the influence of this country may be exerted with her allies to prevent their interference in favour of the insolent and savage despot of Turkey.”<sup>35</sup> Crucially, the author was not demanding an active military intervention in Greece. Rather, he envisioned a comparatively moderate form of support, through the exertion of diplomatic pressure on the other Great Powers to not get involved in favour of Turkey. This writer conceived of Britain’s ideal role on the world stage as a primarily diplomatic, rather than military, strongman.

The advocates of British intervention in Greece did not rely on purely altruistic motives to make their case. Numerous newspapers speculated how an independent Greece would be uniquely advantageous to Britain’s commercial and imperial interests, particularly in the context of the uneasy peace on the Continent and the fear of Russian expansionism. The expectations of financial benefits were derived largely from the expectation of “rapid improvement” to Greece’s infrastructure and economy “which could not fail to take place under any Government, except a Turkish one.”<sup>36</sup> Ottoman rule had succeeded only in stunting and stagnating Greece’s economic development—whatever were to come next, be it independence or imperial partition, could only be an improvement, with the hypothetical benefits shared throughout the European economy at large. However, the lion’s share of those benefits would likely go to the Great Power to which “the Greeks owe[d] their liberation.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, if “enterprising, ambitious, and powerful” Russia were to choose to intervene in Greece before Britain did, then Britain hypothetically stood to sustain a “very seriously dangerous” blow to its “commercial and maritime interests.” As theorized by newspaper commentators, intervention in Greece could, in fact, end up being crucial for purposes of remaining economically viable in the high-stakes game of imperial competition.

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35. “The Cause of Greece,” *Morning Post* (London), 5 October 1822.

36. “Extract from the Allgemeine Zeitung,” *Morning Chronicle* (London), 1 October 1821.

37. “Policy of England at the Present Crisis with Respect to Greece,” *Morning Chronicle* (London), 29 October 1821.

However, the situation in Greece also had the opportunity to rewrite the political map of Europe altogether. Newspapers were hyper-aware of the Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry and enthusiastically embraced the notion that an independent Greece, established with British assistance, would ensure the presence of a friendly buffer state to block Russian "encroachments" into the Mediterranean.<sup>38</sup> Tsar Alexander I actually had no intention of taking action in Greece without the support of western allies, or indeed, of pursuing a platform of Mediterranean expansion; however, even so, the specter of unfettered Russian territorial ambition haunted British political commentators.<sup>39</sup> Russian expansion into the Balkans and Mediterranean—whether through the tsar setting up Greece as a nominally independent puppet-state or through an aggressive invasion and occupation of weakened Ottoman territory—would throw off the delicate balance of power in Europe entirely, and also threaten to end Britain's claim to hegemonic status. Therefore, as dangerous as the Greek Revolt may seem, active British support for it would actually be more conducive to European peace than any other course of action.

### "England, not Europe": Parliamentary Perspectives

While the British public enthusiastically debated, discussed, and advocated for the cause of Greek independence, the dangerous situation in the Mediterranean was, likewise, being discussed in the Houses of Parliament. In some ways, Parliamentary debates on the Greek War of Independence paralleled the debates taking place in the public sphere. For instance, members of Parliament borrowed extensive religious language in their descriptions of the situation in Greece, with the Turks, in particular, almost always called "infidels." Surprisingly, however, the Greek Revolt was not frequently discussed in either the House of Commons or the House of Lords, especially in comparison to other important issues of its day. For instance, a keyword search of the Hansard Parliamentary Archive database for the word "Greece" during the decade of the 1820s yields only 93 results, while a comparable search for the word "abolition" brings up 481 results. Clearly, as geopolitically sensitive and significant as the

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38. "Extract from the Allgemeine Zeitung," *Morning Chronicle* (London), 1 October 1821.

39. Alexander Polunov, *Russia in the Nineteenth Century: Autocracy, Reform, and Social Change, 1814–1914*, ed. Thomas C. Owen and Larissa G. Zakharova, trans. Marshall S. Shatz (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 34.

Greek Revolt was, it was hardly a key area of concern for lawmakers during this tumultuous period. However, the debates which did take place offer a fascinating comparative perspective on how those in positions of power were thinking of the situation in Greece.

Examining the records of Parliamentary debates, the reader is left with the sense that, on a personal level, members of Parliament, regardless of their orientation on the political spectrum, were wholly supportive of Greek independence. However, these same Parliamentarians felt that their hands were tied by their government's commitment to neutrality and by the demands of imperial governance—and so they struggled to avoid any hint of advocacy for British involvement in the crisis. For instance, the reformer Sir Francis Burdett echoed the opinions of the general public when he announced that “he wished heartily [Greece] was out of Turkish possession, and in the possession of the Greeks,” and that, “he was convinced that [an independent Greece] would be a great benefit to the Christian European world.”<sup>40</sup> However, Burdett gave no indication of supporting any kind of British intervention to bring this dream into the realm of reality. Indeed, as the Marquis of Lansdowne, a moderate Whig, claimed in a House of Lords debate, Parliament generally was of the opinion that, “it was not by direct interference that any good could be accomplished, or any progress made.”<sup>41</sup> No explanation was ever given within the debates as to why direct intervention in Greece would be inefficacious; the closest approximation to an explanation was given in the House of Commons, when Tory Joseph Hume observed that Britain “had always been too anxious to mix itself in the broils of other states.”<sup>42</sup> Britain's overeager involvement on the Continent in the preceding decade had carried a high price tag, with national debt skyrocketing to an estimated £834 million by 1815.<sup>43</sup> These pre-existing financial burdens—and the agitation of the liberal establishment against government spending on military expeditions on the Continent—must have played into Parliamentarians' eagerness to avoid interventionism in Greece.<sup>44</sup> Little wonder, then, that the vast majority of Parliamentarians were satisfied with vague, over-generalized expressions of support.

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40. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Address on the King's Speech at the Opening of the Session,” HC, 5 February 1822, v. 6, cc. 19–93.

41. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Address on the King's Speech at the Opening of the Session,” HL, 5 February 1822, v. 6, cc. 3–19.

42. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Ionian Islands,” HC, 14 May 1822, v. 7, cc. 562–96.

43. Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 376.

44. Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon*, 375.



There were, of course, voices of dissent from within the Parliamentary system, who echoed the inflammatory tone of the newspapers in their denunciation of the government's hypocrisy. Most prominent among these voices of protest was John Hobhouse, a friend of Lord Byron from their Cambridge days, who had accompanied Byron on his first voyage to Greece in 1809.<sup>45</sup> Hobhouse had served a sentence in Newgate Prison in 1819 as a result of his authorship of a highly radical political pamphlet, before experiencing a dramatic reversal of fortunes and being elected to the House of Commons in 1820.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Hobhouse was something of an outsider and an anomaly within Parliament, occupying a position of isolation which enabled him to speak more boldly than many of his contemporaries.

This boldness was clearly displayed in the same debate referenced above, during which fellow radical Sir Francis Burdett spoke so noncommittally about the cause of Greek independence. On this occasion, Hobhouse unleashed a torrent of abuse against Castlereagh's government, furiously denouncing its obsession with maintaining the "peace of the grave" achieved at the Congress of Vienna. Castlereagh and Metternich's carefully-enforced status quo "had served to destroy the independence of every state in Europe," constituting "a disgraceful invasion of the rights of man, not to be paralleled in the history of the civilised world."<sup>47</sup> Hobhouse accused his fellow parliamentarians of "supporting . . . a system of tyranny and oppression" and, in their hypocrisy, giving lip-service to the cause of Greek independence, but in truth, having "not a single tear to shed for Greece." Hobhouse's aggressive anti-government attacks place him in the ranks of the most radical of public commentators. However, his role in Parliament as a self-appointed voice of conscience was largely overshadowed by his more moderate, mainstream colleagues, all of whom insisted that, contrary to the claims of "those gentlemen who appeared to possess a peculiar system for the better management of foreign affairs," "every thing which . . . was in the power of [the] government to effect, had been done."<sup>48</sup>

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45. See Peter Cochrane, *Byron and Hobby-O: The Relationship Between Byron and John Cam Hobhouse* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 73–105.

46. Robert E. Zegger, *John Cam Hobhouse: A Political Life, 1819–1852* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 78–79.

47. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, "Address on the King's Speech at the Opening of the Session," HC, 5 February 1822, v. 6, cc. 19–93.

48. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, "Cause of the Greeks," HC, 15 July 1822, v. 7, cc. 1649–53.

To this end, Parliament seemed to expect the British people to accept the burden of responsibility to express their country's unofficial sympathy for the Greek War of Independence. As explored above, the British people unambiguously supported their Greek counterparts, publicly advocating and raising money for their cause. However, their action was ultimately stalled by the government's policy of neutrality; there was only so far that private individuals could advance their activism without official sanction and support. By contrast, multiple Parliamentary debates blamed the British people for their supposed lack of interest in the situation in Greece. Even in the context of debates sparked by public petitions brought before the House of Commons, members of Parliament still "heartily wished that there could be an expression of public sentiment . . . upon this Subject, which might convince the world that we were not indifferent to the great and holy war which the Greeks were now waging."<sup>49</sup> The majority of Parliamentarians felt themselves fundamentally unable to act—and so they shifted the blame for their own moral cowardice to the English people themselves, accusing their constituents of being self-absorbed and disinterested in the Greek cause.

Although the members of Parliament certainly felt an emotional tie to the Greek War of Independence, their enthusiasm was also tempered by their anxiety with regards to how the war in Greece was negatively impacting—and indeed, would continue to impact—British interests. The foreign policy of George Canning, who succeeded Castlereagh as Foreign Secretary in 1822, consistently prioritized the needs of Britain over the needs of Europe, and this policy was very much practiced in Greece.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the political commentators in the newspaper, who saw the Greek Revolt as a positive opportunity for Britain to further secure its role as the uncontested leader of Europe, Parliamentarians saw it as a threat to British territorial concerns. The Ionian Islands, a strategically-located island chain off the west coast of the Greek mainland, had recently come under British authority as a protectorate under the terms of the Congress of Vienna. Although these islands gave Britain a valuable territorial foothold in the region, as well as unchallenged control over east-west shipping lanes in the northern Mediterranean, it also dragged the empire into an uncomfortably close geographic proximity to one of the most notable anti-imperial conflicts of the nineteenth century.

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49. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, "Greek Cause," HC, 19 May 1826, v. 15, cc. 1271–5.

50. Harold Temperley, *The Foreign Policy of Canning, 1822–1827: England, the Neo-Holy Alliance, and the New World* (London: G. Bell, 1925), 324.

The policy of neutrality was stubbornly observed on the Ionian Islands. Given the unique tensions observed on the ground—with hundreds of Ionians deserting their homes to join the fight on the mainland, mainlanders fleeing to the islands for refuge from the violence, and rebel groups agitating for the revolt to spread to the islands—this was a near-impossible feat of imperial administration.<sup>51</sup> This untenable situation was discussed extensively in the House of Commons, as Parliamentarians struggled to articulate a policy which could calm the volatile situation in the islands, while not betraying any pro-Greek bias.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, the desire to maintain neutrality carried the day; Parliament approved the implementation of martial law in the Ionian Islands, and the wedge between the British administration on Corfu and the local population only continued to deepen.<sup>53</sup> As a result, members of Parliament were keenly aware of the fact that, should Greece gain its independence, the Ionians “would shake off [British] protection, in consequence of the . . . regulations with which it was accompanied.”<sup>54</sup> Although the Ionian Islands had only recently been incorporated into the empire, the prospect of losing this strategic piece of land to an independent Greece was a grim one—and perhaps further helped to fuel Parliamentarians’ ambivalence about furthering the cause of Greek independence.

## Conclusion

In April 1826, representatives of Britain and Russia signed a protocol which laid forth a plan for peace in the Mediterranean: Greece was to remain a part of the Ottoman Empire, but was to receive internal autonomy. This protocol eventually became the foundation for the 1827 Treaty of London, which demanded the consent of the Greeks and Turks alike to an armistice, enforced by a Russian, British, and French coalition force, and the establishment of Greece as

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51. Thomas W. Gallant, *Experiencing Dominion: Culture, Identity, and Power in the British Mediterranean* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 187; “Affairs of Greece,” *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh), 23 September 1822.

52. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Ionian Islands,” HC, 14 May 1822, v. 7, cc. 562–96.

53. Thomas W. Gallant, “Peasant Ideology and Excommunication for Crime in a Colonial Context: The Ionian Islands (Greece), 1817–1864,” *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1990), 488–489.

54. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Army Estimates,” HC, 7 March 1825, vol. 12, cc. 957–64.

a fully independent nation.<sup>55</sup> To this end, an allied fleet under the command of Admiral Codrington sailed to Navarino Bay, situated off the southwestern coast of the Peloponnese, under vague instructions to stop any further fighting. However, actual military involvement came about largely by accident when the Ottoman navy mistakenly opened fire on Codrington's becalmed fleet.<sup>56</sup> Under attack, the allied forces returned fire—and within a few short hours, the Ottomans' Mediterranean navy was destroyed, effectively ending the possibility of any further Ottoman resistance to the imposition of the Great Powers' plan.

Despite the British government's initial resistance to the prospect of intervention in Greece, Britain ultimately played the definitive role in establishing an independent Greece. Given the widespread support of the British people for Greek liberation, it would only seem fitting that Britain took the lead in initiating the diplomatic efforts which led to the 1826 protocol and 1827 treaty. However, Westminster's choice to get involved in Greece was not, in fact, as a result of public advocacy. Rather, it was a decision born out of geopolitical necessity; with the drawn-out war in Greece sapping Ottoman resources and destabilizing the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean, the threat of Russian unilateral action in Greece and the Balkans was simply too great to be ignored any longer. It was only when an independent Greece became expedient to British interests that the diplomatic and military intervention took place—revealing a particular interpretation of what the British Empire ought to be and what role it ought to play on the world stage in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. The foreign policy established by Castlereagh, and largely reinforced by Canning, was essentially isolationist with regards to Europe, drawing Britain's focus away from the Continent and towards its overseas empire. Members of Parliament during this period were eminently aware of this ideological shift, and so subordinated their own personal viewpoints to the demands of this "Britain First" mentality. The eventual intervention in Greece should not be taken as a betrayal of that policy—but rather, as a roundabout way to self-servingly protect Britain's overseas imperial interests.

The middle-class, however, conceived of their country's role in a very different light. They were disinterested in an isolationist empire; rather, they wanted a benevolent empire, one which was engaged in world affairs, and which was an unambiguous force for good. They expected the conscience-driven diplomacy

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55. Douglas Dakin, *The Unification of Greece, 1770–1923* (London: Ernest Benn, 1972), 54–55.

56. Bew, "From an Umpire to a Competitor," 119.

wielded in the "moral crusade" against the slave trade, for example, to be transferred to all aspects of foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> The public wanted Britain to embrace a role as the natural defender of Christian civilization—and so, in the absence of government action, ordinary British took it upon themselves to voice and demonstrate their solidarity with the Greeks. This long-overlooked public advocacy campaign reflects a dramatic dichotomy between the will of the people and the actions of Parliament—a tension which would eventually lead to the Great Reform Act of 1832. More immediately, however, British support for the Greek War of Independence offers a fascinating glimpse into divergent perceptions of the empire's duty on the world stage, at a crucial and vulnerable phase in its development.

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57. Keith Hamilton, "Zealots and Helots: The Slave Trade Department of the Nineteenth-Century Foreign Office," in *Slavery, Diplomacy, and Empire: Britain and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807–1975*, ed. Keith Hamilton and Patrick Salmon (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 20.