

CONTENT AND FUNCTION OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS IN THE IONIAN ISLANDS (1780 - 1817)

G. N. LEONTSINIS*

In this paper I will attempt to present and analyse the structure, content and function of the revolutionary phenomenon in the Ionian Islands of Greece (later Heptanesos - Heptanese, Seven Islands) approximately during the period 1780 - 1817. That period more or less coincides with the final phase of the Neohellenic Enlightenment (1785 - 1821) and presents a revolutionary dynamic, which is directly connected with the activities of the age of Enlightenment that led to the shaking up of the old regime's structures. After presenting the historical background of the period, the analysis will focus on the social conflict and the designation of its kernel.

Historical background.

The Ionian islands [Kerkyra (Corfu), Kefallinia (Cephalonia), Zakynthos (Zante), Lefkas (Santa Maura), Ithaki (Ithaka) and Paxos (Paxi) together with their out - lying islets, collectively known later after about 1800 as "Heptanesos - Heptanese, Seven Islands] acquired consciousness of a kind of geographical unity, which came as a result of the coincidence of a series of successive western European sovereignties in this area (about 1207 - 1863). This unity also included four mainland appendages, the small but strategic towns of Parga, Preveza, Butrint (Butrinto) and Vonitsa, scattered along the Greek coast, opposite the islands¹. The island of Kythera, the seventh of the Seven Islands was not, either historically or geographically, a part of the Ionian chain. Situated off Cape Maleas, over 180 miles from Zakynthos, Kythera was joined administratively to the Ionian Islands after Venice had been dislodged from Peloponnesos (Treaty of the Passarowitz in 1718)². Historians tend to compare the history of these areas with that of other unities of the Helladic territories/lands and examine the particular characteristics of the local national civilization, called "Heptanesian", as well as the social and political problems that arose in this very area during that period; the features of the Ionian Islands' cultural unity were given shape mainly during the last two centuries of foreign rule (18th - 19th c.), and the name "Heptanesos" can be traced back to the beginning of the period of the Russian - Turkish Protection in the Heptanese (Administration of the Russian admiral Ushakov, 1799 - 1802)³.

*National and Capodistrian University of Athens, Department of Education, Section of Humanities 20 Ippokratous St., 10680 Athens Greece.

The unified political framework of Heptanesian society and its better organised political existence was undoubtedly formed during the Venetian period (about 1363 - 1797), whereas the realisation by the Ionian population of this geographical place as a particular unity full of historical perspective was to take place during the period of the Russian - Turkish Protection (1799 - 1807). In the course of the long Venetian administration, which led its possessions in the Ionian area into a political, social and cultural unity, the "state" structuring of the society of the old regime was completed and its ideological foundations were formed. These were composed of materials of various historical periods, resulting from the combination of Byzantine institutions, local customs and feudal elements as well as from the data of the new social political realities of the Venetian period. The introduction, on the other hand, during the 18th century of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in the Seven Islands contributed to the development of a revolutionary ideology among the local population. This ideological dynamic, however, was also reinforced by the direct contact of the Heptanesian area with the French (period of the Republican French in Heptanese 1797 - 1799), whereas the ideological content of the Enlightenment was used as the material which gave form

to the social struggle.

The termination of the old regime in the Heptanese may be dated between the period of the French administration (abolition of the Venetian sovereignty, 1797) and the beginning of the the British Protection (1817). In fact, since the second phase of the Russian - Turkish period from 1803 the imposed elements which separate the old status quo from the new forms of administration can be clearly distinguished. Under the circumstances of that period, however, there had been pursued procedures of restoring the old regime. Indeed some of those elements dispensed with on the arrival of the French in the Ionian islands were to come back, though this may not be taken to mean necessarily that the distinction between the new and the old regime is not discernable. With regard to the revolutionary activity during the long period of the foreign sovereignty in the Heptanese (1363 - 1863), one way argue that this line can be drawn during the period between the period of the French administration (1797 - 1798) and the beginning of the British Protection (1817)⁴.

The deepest crisis of the old regime in the Ionian islands is characterised by an obvious chronological starting point, the civil - agricultural movement of 1780 in Kythera. The events which follow however are related to a generalised expansion of the revolutionary activity mainly from the Republican French period in the Ionian islands (1797). They mark a transient period whose features are the diffusion of ideas and the cultivation of a new conception of life, man, social services and administration. It is the period during which a dynamic dissolver is spread in the horizon of heptanesian society, which leads -to great extent - to the holocaust of privileges of the old status quo as well as to the formation of its basic characteristics, and, in particular, of the nature and character of the social conflicts in the Heptanese (1780 - 1817 approximately). Around the middle of this period (turning of the 18th to the 19th century) the demands acquire universality, the townsmen and peasants of the islands get into action whereas at the same time the establishment of the Heptanesian State (1800 - 1807) is realised together with the formation of a national Heptanesian spirit and consciousness. Then and while the national demand for an independence of Hellenism is put forward, the revolutionary activity of the Heptanesian population also acquires a national content, following the general revolutionary spirit of Hellenism since the acquisition of national independence. As a characteristic feature of the social revolutionary activity of that time is considered the gradual development of national consciousness, whereas it is estimated that the crisis of the social and political structures of the Venetian regime in the Heptanese during the same period was the reflection of a more general European crisis of the old regime.

The social conflict and its kernel (about 1780 - 1817)

One could say that the society of the old regime is pushed towards a crisis because of two basic factors. The former has to do with the decline of the structures of the landowning aristocratic class and its feudal combination; the latter with the acceptance by the local population of the radical programme of French Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The Enlightenment's ideological dynamic and the repercussion of the French Revolution led the Heptanesian population to external appearances and practical processes which, as was the case in France, aimed at structuring a new political order, in which however some of the social groups tended to be included, as they would benefit by pursuing the conservation of the enforced social and political regime. These events in combination with a latent revolutionary crisis, which was preserved in the interior of the old regime and was also present the main centers of Western Europe, provided the opportunity so that the local sources of the revolutionary impulse as well as the local susceptibility to the revolutionary idealism and propaganda could flow. The existing crisis of the old regime and the fresh evaluations of life led a wide range of social classes to express themselves in terms employed by the Enlightenment and to adopt the very movement they visualised that it would lead them

to regeneration of life; for this reason they considered their obligation to share this necessity and to support it radically. This regeneration would undoubtedly assume a metaphysical character but the islanders' visions were realistic and aimed at institutional, social and political changes.

Zakynthos' "Rebellion of the Popolari" of 1628 is considered as the first middle class rebellion of Modern Greece and was the result of the social competition between the aristocrats and the middle classes in the town of Zakynthos. The political dynamic of the revolutionary phenomenon in the Heptanese, however, has taken a different dimension since the second half of the 18th century, spreading in all the islands of the Ionian sea and taking place throughout the final phase of Neohellenic Enlightenment (1785 - 1821). It is a period during which a new frame of rhetoric and revolutionary activity appears. A number of political and social subjects, which dominated during all this period, led to the ideological foundation of every revolutionary act. A wide spectrum of demands and radical movements was related to reforms which referred to aspects of social and political life whose regeneration was sought after. The list of the things required, through the revolutionary activity resulting in social and political changes, was wide. They had as their starting point a massive revolutionary activity of the population of the Ionian islands; the latter was strengthened and found outlets of ideological expression and revolutionary breach on the occasion of the presence of the Republican French in the Islands (1st French occupation, 1797 - 1798). International developments, which coincided with the fall of the Venetian Republic, brought back this period in the Ionian Islands, after one hundred years of stragnation, to the whirlwind of the direct influences of international political scene. What is more, the social and political movement which appears from the last quarter of the 18th century is characterised by its European dimensions. From the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718), according to which the Peloponnese was handed over the Ottoman Empire while Venice retained the Ionian Islands, until the period of the French occupation the Heptanese had not been enlisted among the direct interests of the Great European Powers of the times.

The enthusiastic, full of radical practices, welcome of the French Republicans will succeed, after about twenty months of occupation; the favourable and - in many cases - armed participation of the population will ensue, quite often assisted by the Russians, in the expulsion of the French from the Islands. This reaction against the French did not come as a consequence of a loose conscience of the population as far as questions regarding its loyalty to the principles of Enlightenment and the French Revolution were concerned. On the contrary, it arose within a framework of a social struggle, propaganda and reaction on the part of the traditional aristocracy of the island towards the sought social and political reforms as well as of the innate weakness of the French administration to keep its promises and satisfy the financial demands of the population. The rebellious movement of the inhabitants of the islands against the French was in general connected with the standard ideological position of the population, which had also realised the strategic importance which the geographical unity of its place had as well as the interests which the Great Powers handboured for the area⁷. This realisation meant adherence to the basic principles of the social and national claims; it also meant that the relevant problems be dealt rationally by lots local and foreign administrations. However, the revolutionary activity during the period of the Russian - Turkish Protection (1797 - 1807) marks two phases. The former is traced back to 1802. The latter begins on the very moment that Russian troops were invited by the political authorities of the Heptanese to return in order to contribute to the required reestablishment of political stability in the area from 1803.

One year before the Russian - Turkish troops had withdrawn from the islands, thus enforcing the conditions of the treaty of 1800 and on the basis of the political coincidence which obliged the allied armies to withdraw from the area. A period of about two years of revolutionary struggle on the part of the inhabitants against the local political authorities of the Heptanese had passed; they had supported the "Byzantine constitution" of 1800 putting aside the basic articles of the provisional constitution of 1799⁸, attempting to provide conservative solutions to the state problem of the

Heptanese and forcing back the government into procedures and functions which were in the past defined by the "aristocratic - Venetian" regime, as during that period the islanders called it disapprovingly. The revolutionary movement of this period goes on presenting a dynamic, which is characterised by the persistence of the inhabitants in the realisation of a reforming programme, which was conceived from the very beginning and referred to the political and social solutions of Ionian Islands local society's problems, as well as of the Heptanesian continental appendages⁹.

It can also be argued that the indigenous feudal aristocracy of the Heptanese constituted a restraining factor for the liberalisation of the regime, the different character of which in the other Balkan countries perhaps favoured the continuous succession of liberal institutions. The liberalism which the admiral Fedor F. Ushakov displayed on all the islands, is generally connected with the course which liberalism had followed in Russia. It is worth noting that when the admiral Ushakov was given command to act beyond the Russian frontiers, [as in the period 1829 - 1834 command had been given to general Kiselev in Rumania and much later in 1879 to the prince Dondukov - Korsakov in Bulgaria], as he was sensitive to the local treaties and intended to contribute to the political practices of reinforcement of liberalism on the islands, he proceeded basically to implement political experimentations¹⁰. Therefore, Ushakov established in the Heptanese a kind of representative government based on the right of franchise, which could be compared in so far as experiences were concerned to those of the European countries for two generations and defended the constitutional institutions as best as he could against the reactionary aristocracy of the islands with the solid structures of the old regime.

The inhabitants themselves could succeed in securing their political existence under the required conditions, only after a prolonged and successful radical political organisation and change would be effected in the area. Ushakov provided the initiative and offered the main motive to the inhabitants of the Ionian islands towards the right practical course. However, the Russian official policy, which was expressed in the area by means of its ambassador in Constantinople, Vasilii S. Tomara, imposed a different policy from that of Ushakov¹¹, misleading the inhabitants of the Ionian Islands, by causing delays and retrogressions in the liberal course which had been determined. Especially from the moment when a minority of dissenters, a body of conservative aristocrats in the Ionian Islands could concentrate the foreign support in order to satisfy their own purposes, it was impossible for these political institutions to take deep roots and remain healthy and steady¹².

However, if Ushakov had not conquered the islands in 1798 - 1799, the Russians would not have been asked back to Kerkyra in 1802. During the second phase of the Russian occupation from 1803 the politics and the constitution which Ushakov imposed in the Heptanese were justified, when the fourth composed constitution of the Heptanesian state adopted eventually the principles of the first¹³. Nevertheless, the two years of political instability in the Heptanesian State, a situation which was due to the conservative solutions of the "Byzantine constitution" of 1800 and the policies of the conservative aristocrats to pursue the recovery of what was lost during the French revolution, literally meant a constant loss for the islands and the liberal course of the government in them precisely because these very years were crucial for their political future.

No doubt, the background of a new order of things started taking shape slowly but steadily at the very root of the two foreign sovereignties, the brief French administration (1797 - 1798) and the Russian - Turkish Protection (1799 - 1807). The revolutionary activation of the population, although it is shaped in relation to the political coincidences and the populations' reactions to foreign sovereignty, its core however remains imperishable, while the main thing at issue is the liberalism in the organisation of the social and political life. The constitutional support of the new government in accordance with the models of the Western European countries remains eventually the main feature of the new regime.

The British Protection (1809 - 1863) following after occupation by the French Emperors (1807 - 1809), will not be able to ignore this political experience of the Ionian people. The constitutional regime of the British Protection has undoubtedly its own characteristics and the peculiarity of its starting point; the British, however, had made sure for many reasons to get informed concerning the reaction of the inhabitants during the periods of political and social movements on the islands as well as the structures and the function of the constitutional government during the period of the Russian - Turkish Protection in the Heptanese¹⁴. The history of the constitutional regime in the Heptanese from the beginning of the 19th century to the end of the British Protection (about 1799 - 1863) is written down on the basis of the attempts of the population to secure human rights. Leading members of the Heptanesian society, however, with the aid and choices of the foreign intervention would make sure that there would be certain basic limits in this pursued securing and that it would receive a constitutional investment with conservative devices. However, the constitutional function of the Heptanesian State had, in comparison with other Balkan countries in the 19th century, acquired a liberal character and could be considered as an example of a government of a liberal democracy in the wider area of the Balkans¹⁵. However, for the Greek cause in particular the political maturing of the Heptanesian society during this period will be advantageous. The following course of the political history of the Heptanese would definitely be determined by the experience of the past (1780 - 1817). The national and social activity of the population during the Greek Revolution, the radical movements for the unification of the islands with the body of the freed section of insular and mainland Greece and the particular features of Heptanesian civilization may be traced back to the critical period we have been examining. What is more, it constitutes the trunk of national Heptanesian history.

NOTES

1. J. McKnight, *Admiral Ushakov and the Ionian Republic; the Genesis of Russia's First Balkan Satellite*, Ph. D. Thesis, The University of Wisconsin, 1965, p. 1 - 2.
2. G. N. Leontsinis, *The Island of Kythera: A Social History 1700-1863* (Ph. D. Thesis, University of East Anglia, 1981), ed. National and Capodistrian University of Athens, Faculty of Arts, S. Saripolos' Library, Athens 1987, σ.19 κ.ε., and Id. *Ζητήματα επανησιακής κοινωνικής ιστορίας (Studies on Heptanesian Social History)*, ed. Tolides, Athens 1991, p. 35 - 42.
3. C.O. 136, 294, Papers relative to Russian Protection, 1802 - 1805, and G. N. Leontsinis, *Studies on Heptanesian Social History*, *op. cit.*, p. 36 - 37.
4. C.O. 136, 294, papers relative to Russian Protection, 1802 - 1805, and G. N. Leontsinis, *Studies on Heptanesian Social History*, *op. cit.*, p. 445.
5. W. H. Sewel, "Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case", *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), σ. 62 - 66.
6. J. McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 977.
7. *Ibid.*, p.100 ff.
8. G. E. Mavroyannis, *Ιστορία των Ιονίων Νήσων αρχομένη τω 1797 και λήγουσα τω 1815 (History of the Ionian Islands, beginning in 1797 and ending in 1815)*, pp. 262 ff, 294 and 383.
9. K. H. A. (Kythera Historical Archives), Revolutionary papers of the period 1797 - 1803 (unclassified); C F. G. N. Leontsinis, *Studies on Heptanesian Social History*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
10. J. McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
11. *Ibid.*, p.9 - 48.
12. C. O. 136, 294, Papers relative to Russian Protection, 1802 - 1805.
13. J. McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 245 - 252.
14. C. O. 136, 294, Papers relative to Russian Protection, 1802 - 1805.

Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 191 ff.