

# 25th March

## FAITH and a FIGHT for FREEDOM



March 25 is a date not only of religious significance but of political importance as well, allowing the Greek Orthodox to commemorate God's message to Mary and the independence of Greece on the same day.

### The Religious Significance

The 25th March is the day the Greek Orthodox and other Christians celebrate the feast of the Annunciation. More than two thousand years ago, The Virgin Mary was chosen from all the women in the world to be the Mother of Jesus Christ. It was in the town of Nazareth, not far from Jerusalem, where Mary was drawing water from a well, when the Archangel Gabriel

appeared to her and brought her the momentous message from God that she had been blessed with a holy child. Mary must have felt a solemn pride, but at the same time a troubling



*Photo of the well of the Annunciation in Nazareth*

apprehension at the prospect of this great responsibility. Assured by the Archangel, Mary's answer to him was a simple: "Let it be according to the will of God," and thus began the history of Christianity.

### History of the Hellenes fight for Freedom

The celebration of Greek Independence Day on March 25th draws inspiration from one of the holiest days in the Orthodox Calendar. On this day in 1821 the Bishop of Patras, Germanos, in an act of defiance against the Turks, seized the opportunity to raise the banner of the revolution at the monastery of Agia Lavra near Kalavrita in the Peloponnese, an act that marked the beginning of the war of Independence.

Most of Greece with the exception of some islands came under Ottoman rule in 1453 following the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Empire.

The Greek people somehow managed to keep their faith and language alive through secret meetings, hidden underground or cave schools and all the while planning for the day that the next generation would be the ones that would live in a free Greek state.

During this time, there were some revolt attempts by Greeks to gain independence from Ottoman control in Ipiros and in other parts of Greece.

In 1814, a secret organisation called the Filiki Eteria ( the Friendly Society) was founded with the aim of liberating Greece. The Filiki Eteria planned to launch revolts in the Peloponnese, the Danubian Principalities (current day Romania) and in Constantinople and its surrounding areas.

The first of these revolts began on 6 March 1821 when an army of 4500 Hellenes lead by General Alexander Ypsilantis, a Phanariot from so-named district of Istanbul, a member of the Filiki Eteria, invades hoping to encourage the local Romanian peasants to revolt against the Turks. But they were soon put down by the Ottomans. The events in the north urged the Greeks in the Peloponnese into action and on 17 March 1821, the Maniots

declared war on the Ottomans. This declaration was the start of revolutionary actions from other controlled states against the Ottoman Empire.

On the 25th March, Bishop Germanos raises the flag in the presence of freedom fighters at the monastery of Agia Lavra to the cries of Zito Ellas ( Long Live Hellas) and Eleftheria I Thanatos ( Freedom or Death) .



Twelve days earlier the first of the flags of the Revolution is raised on the island of Spetses by Laskarina Bouboulina, an extremely rich, twice widowed mother of seven who owned several ships.

Fighting begins to break out all over with massacres committed by both the Greeks and the Turks. On the island of Chios 25,000 Greeks are killed. While in the Peloponnese the Greeks kill 15,000 of the 40,000 Turks living there. The Chiotese had enormous privileges under the Ottomans even to the point of dominating the Ottoman admiralty. It was the role of the Chios 'navy' in the revolt that was seen as an act of treason by the Turks.

On April 3, Spetses revolted, followed by the islands of Hydra and Psara with a total of over 300 ships between them. Bouboulina and her fleet of 8 ships sailed to Nafplion and took part in the siege of the fortress of Palamidi. Her later attack on Monemvasia managed to capture the fortress of this once Byzantine state. She took part in the blockade of Pylos and brought supplies to the revolutionaries by sea.

Bouboulina became a national hero, one of the first women to play a major role in a revolution. Without her and her ships the Greeks might not



have gained their independence.

The Greeks, led by local heroes like Theodoros Kolokotronis from Mani, capture Peloponissos and form a provisional government, electing Alexandros Mavrokordatos as president.

On April 26, the Greeks attack Athens and the Turks of the city are forced to flee to the Acropolis. They Turks residence are rescued in August by Turkish troops but finally surrender the city in June of 1822. By mid July, about half had been massacred, others died of disease, over the next months the rest of the five hundred and fifty were evacuated by foreign diplomats.

Tensions soon developed among different Greek factions, leading to two consecutive civil wars. In European cities, intellectuals and poets like Lord Byron embrace the Greek cause and sway public opinion. Many, including Lord Byron volunteer





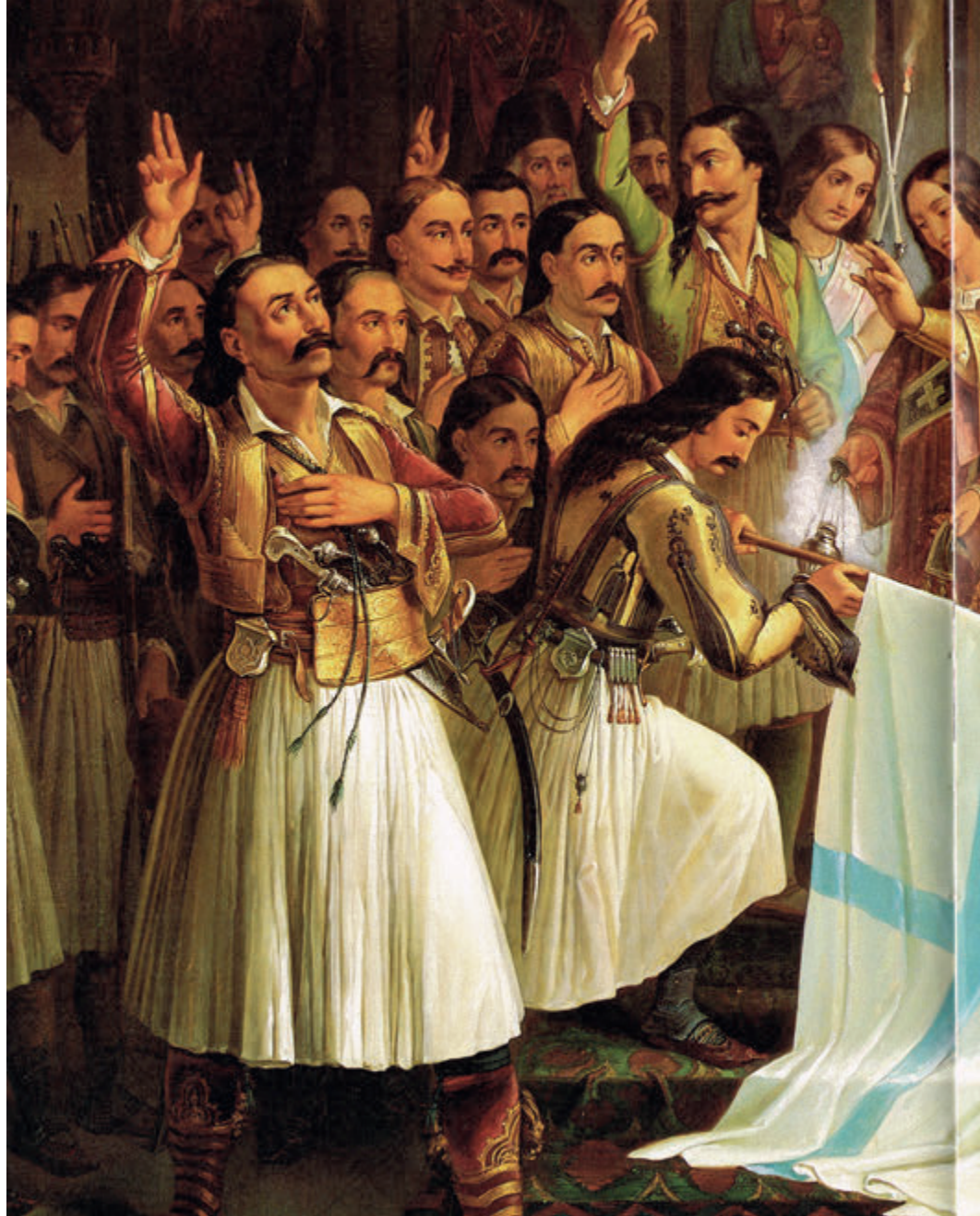
to fight and become leaders and heroes of the revolution, known as the Philhellenes (friends of the Greeks). Byron died of a fever in the town of Messolonghi in 1824.

Messolonghi, a western Peloponnesian port, was put under siege three times by the Turks from 1822 and fell in April 1826. In 1823 Dionissios Solomos looking across the water from the free hills of the then British occupied Zakynthos, was so moved from by the visions and noise of the battle raging in Messolonghi, he sat down and wrote a poem of 158 stanzas "Hymn to Freedom". In 1865 it was put to music by Nikolaos Mantzaros and the first two verses became the Greek National Anthem.

Meanwhile Ottoman Sultan negotiated with Mehmet Ali of Egypt, who agreed to send his son Ibrahim Pasha to Greece with an army to suppress the revolt in return for territorial gain. Ibrahim landed in the Peloponnese in February 1825 and had immediate success. In 1826 the Peloponnese is back in Turkish hands and Athens is one of only a few cities controlled by the Greeks.

When the Turkish army returns a major battle takes place and on June 5th the Acropolis is surrendered. Among the fifteen hundred Greek dead are 22 of the 26 Philhellenes. By 1827 the Turks have all of Greece with the exception of Nafplion and a few islands.

The Treaty of London, backed by Britain, Russia and France, declares that the three great powers can intervene 'peacefully' to secure the autonomy of the Hellenes. In October of that year the British, French and Russian show the power of peaceful intervention when they destroy the Turkish-Egyptian fleet in the bay of Navarino (Pylos) in what may have been the world's biggest and most fatal 'misunderstanding'. Whether by



accident or not, when an Egyptian ship fires on a small boat filled with British sailors, all hell breaks loose. When the smoke clears the entire Turkish-Egyptian fleet is at the bottom of the bay, (where



*Battle of Navarino, 20 October 1827, Heath National Historical Museum, Athens.*





*'Freedom or Death' Bishop Germanos proclaims the revolution 25 March 1821. Theodore Vrysakis. National Art Gallery, Athens.*

## Kythera's role in the fight for freedom

As mentioned previously the Peloponnese, the mainland and some islands including Spetses were under Turkish rule for close to 400 hundred years. In 1770 there was a Russian backed revolt which was to be the precursor to the Greek War of Independence It became known as the Orlof Revolt.

The Russians wishing to weaken the Ottoman hold and establish a pro Russian Greek state, went to Mani in the mid 1760s to make a pact with the representatives of Greece's strongest military force at that time. Daskalogiannis a shipping magnate from Crete was also contacted and a fleet of 14 ships left the Baltic Sea making its way down to the Mediterranean. The fleet reached Mani in February 1770. This sparked an uprising by the Maniotes. Russian soldiers remained to help fight alongside the Greeks while the fleet sailed on to the Aegean Sea.

Initially there was success , liberating large parts of the Morea (southern Peloponnissos) and with the help of the islanders, the Russians had a major victory against the Turkish navy in Chios.

they can still be seen). It is the most one-sided battle in the history of naval warfare.

In 1828 Count Ioannis Capodistrias of Corfu is elected the first governor of Greece by the assembly of Troezen as the Turkish-Egyptian army leave the Peloponnese once and for all. The Greeks draw up a constitution as a republic and on March 31 1833 the Turkish troops who have been occupying the Acropolis leave.

That final act ended four hundred years of tyranny and oppression by the Ottoman Empire over the Greeks.

The uprising in the eyes of the Russians was a success, leading to the signing of the Russian – Turkish treaty of Kuchuk-Karinari .

However from a Greek view point it was very different. The reality was that the affair had failed with a huge numbers of lives lost throughout the uprising, but more so in the Turkish reprisals that followed through the Peloponnese , Spetses , Crete, other islands and other parts of Greece.

To escape these war ravaged places there was a mass migration of refugees to Kythera, notably from the island of Spetses, as Kythera at that time was under French rule. The majority of Spetseotes settled in the then mostly uninhabited new town of Karava in the north of Kythera and near the town of



Milopotamos . This fact is evident as a census of the that period shows many names appearing that are not typically Kytherian. In 1772 the majority of the Spetseotes returned to their island.

While the fight for freedom was being fought around Greece , Kythera was going through a very turbulent times as well. From the late 1700's Kythera was administered by the Turks for a short period, then liberated by the French who brought their values of equality to the population of Kythera and ordering symbols of the past Venetian rulers such as The Lion of Saint Mark to be chiselled off the walls at the Castro in Hora.

As Kythera then went through the Russian – Turkish rule, and the democratic way of life under French rule was soon overturned. The invasion commenced with a battle taking place in Avlemonas damaging the Castella. The Russians left Kythera in 1800 and in 1803 the Ionian Democracy begun administration of Kythera's affairs. The French returned for a brief time and in 1809 the British took hold of Kythera until May 1864 when Kythera became part of the Democracy of Greece.

After the Orlof uprising, the defiance of the Maniotes remained and a band of freedom fighters was formed who put the wheels in motion towards a war of independence. Minor battles raged on and off until the declaration of war in 1821.

The most famous of all was Theodoros Kolokotronis who was their leader and referred to as the old man of Morea. Kolokotronis escaped Mani seeking refuge after suffering an embarrassing defeat and worse, disloyalty of his people in 1809, it is believed under an assumed name as he was a wanted man. He found a safe hiding place in Potamos, from here he wrote

***"Eventually at last we went to Cerigo – Kythera after a great storm found anchorage near a town called Potamos".***

He lived in Potamos and was at ease here amongst the citizens who were very sympathetic to his cause and provided him with shelter. Always on guard just in case British Authorities were to find out , he dressed as a peasant and armed himself with ordinary guns. He was warned by locals not to go to Hora as it was dangerous for him and he remained in Potamos. During his stay he visited the Monastery of Agia Moni. From there he could see Peloponissos . As he looked around the monastery he noticed it was in ruins and the roof was overgrown with vegetation after it had been attacked in earlier years by the Turks. He prayed and asked for divine help to overthrow the Turkish tyrants and vowed he would come back and rebuild the church. A promise which he did uphold after the War of independence was over.



A monument of his bust now stands at the turn off from the main road leading up to the monastery.

*Sources: Kythera a history by Peter Vanges, The Greeks, their struggle for independence by Peter Paroulakis , The island of Kythera A social History by George Leontsinis.*