

An attempt to outline the life and work of Ioannis Kapodistrias

The formation of his personality

Ioannis Kapodistrias was born in Corfu on February 10, 1776. His father was Antonios Maria Kapodistrias and his mother was Diamantina Gonemi of Cypriot origin. He was the sixth of nine children in the family (four girls and five boys). Both parents belonged to the local aristocracy, as it had been shaped in the social, political and administrative framework imposed on the Ionian Islands by the dominant Venetian rule.

The young Kapodistrias acquired his basic education in the family environment and more specialized knowledge, mainly from Western clerical tutors, since only Catholic monasteries provided the opportunity to educate a child of the nobility in Latin, Italian, French, etc. His command of written Greek was limited, so later, in Russia, he would attempt to improve it and throughout his life he continued to write his official and private documents in Italian and mostly in French.

In his general formation, the intense religiosity of his close and wider family environment, which included priests (two clerical uncles), nuns (two aunts), and two of his four sisters were nuns, was of particular importance. Throughout his career, he consistently emphasized his deep faith in the Eastern Orthodox Church, his trust in its spiritual and educational role, and his absolute conviction that divine providence governs human affairs.

Like many other sons of aristocratic families, he was sent to the University of Padua for higher studies. His student life began in the autumn of 1795 with his enrollment at the university, **in the artistic department, where the subjects of medicine and philosophy were prominent. He devoted himself to his studies and in less than two years (June 1797) he obtained his diploma, the dottorato.** He immediately left for Corfu.

In the Ionian State (Septinsular Republic)

In the Ionian State which was established during the **Russian occupation of the Ionian Islands (1800-1807)**, he would be appointed Secretary of State for Foreign

Affairs, Naval Affairs and Commerce, an important position, though not a prime-ministerial one, as it has sometimes been described. From this position, however, and other similar posts, Kapodistrias participated in many of the state's activities and gained valuable experience, particularly in the field of foreign relations. He also played a decisive role in the drafting of the constitutions of the Ionian State.

Kapodistrias was sent in June 1807 to defend the island of Ithaca from the threat of Ali Pasha of Ioannina. Despite having no military experience, he showed significant organizational skills: he coordinated the available Russian forces with the Greek chieftains and the fighting Ionians, built a protective wall with everyone's help, and inspired optimism and determination.

In the Russian service

He refused to collaborate with the French when the Ionian Islands passed to their control with the Treaty of Campoformio in 1807. Instead, **he accepted the offer to embark on a career in the Russian Empire.**

Kapodistrias built his career through sacrifice and persistent effort. He avoided easy and tempting proposals that would have solved his financial problems at an early stage, with a rich marriage in Russia or an administrative position, and would secure an enviable position in the circles of the Russian aristocracy. He wrote to his father: "I have been offered two opportunities so far to make an important marriage. There was a happy confluence of all the desirable conditions: Birth. Upbringing. Prestige. Money. Wealth. Expectations. Entrance to the Court, **since both are ladies of the Court.** I declined both those proposals. The only reason I put forward has to do with my principles. **It would be like selling my freedom for a high price...**"

He vigorously sought an active position in the Russian diplomatic service, and when it was given to him, he quickly demonstrated his abilities: exceptional intelligence, erudition, ability to identify the essential in the issues under consideration, ease in spoken communication and great fluency in written expression, hard work and systematic study, disarming personal charm. In pursuit of his goals, he was hard on himself, sacrificing the pleasures of his personal life. **Only one woman seems to have moved him, Roxandra Sturtza,** but it is, in my view, excessive to attribute the failure of a possible marriage solely to a sacrifice for "patriotic goals." In difficult times, he drew strength from his deep Orthodox faith and the ideas his father had inspired in him. The constant communication with

him for about 11 years shows the extent of his father's influence. This correspondence allows us a psychological portrait of Kapodistrias and a multifaceted picture of his everyday life, so that we do not remain limited to his diplomatic and political activities.

At the side of the Emperor Alexander I of Russia

He was fortunate enough to be noticed by Emperor Alexander I **and appointed as his trusted associate**. At his side, he found himself at the center of the most important developments of the period 1814-1822 and, with his ideas, advice and interventions, he helped shape crucial decisions affecting the fate of post-Napoleonic Europe. He took advantage of the emperor's "liberal" tendencies for a time to resist **the reactionary effort of Metternich and of his like-minded to nullify the major changes brought about by the French Revolution in the political and social organization of many European states**.

He himself retained certain elements of the liberalism of his time, as a system of ideas and political practice, mainly its humanistic side, **but rejected its democratic demands**. He abhorred and feared revolutions, which he considered destructive. However, he understood well that the ruling class, to which he himself belonged as the scion of an aristocratic family, could not remain in power, without upheaval and the use of violence, if it did not make deliberate and controlled overtures from above towards sections of the middle class that possessed property and education. For him, a moderate constitution, which would be granted by the will of the ruler and not by his coercion, was the desired combination of the existing political reality with the new demands that had arisen in the meantime.

He also realized that the rights and claims of peoples for some form of self-determination could no longer be ignored, especially those **of** ethnicities whose distinctiveness was being tested or even endangered in multinational state entities. The fate of the Ionian Islands and the rest of the areas inhabited by Greeks was a vivid and at the same time painful illustration of this problem.

Because of these views, he came into sharp conflict with Metternich and Castlereagh, the English Foreign Minister, who used every means, often of dubious honesty, to undermine the confidence of the Russian Emperor in Kapodistrias. They achieved this by taking advantage of Alexander's conservative turn after 1820, who ultimately believed that anything that threatened peace had to be prevented because it ultimately served the revolutionary leadership in Paris, which incited

uprisings everywhere against established regimes. It was in this light that he came to view the Greek revolution.

His contribution to European events

Let us mention two of his major interventions in the European events of this era:

1) The manner in which he handled his mission to Switzerland and its successful conclusion clearly demonstrated his special diplomatic abilities. The solution, which he persistently helped to impose, ensured the unity, independence and neutrality of the Swiss. The constitution that was drawn up was a model of a careful balance between the interests and views of the traditional aristocracy and those of the rising bourgeois elites, although with a tendency to favour the former. Something similar had been attempted, on a smaller scale, in the Ionian State. And we cannot rule out that he would have wanted something similar for the Greek State when he assumed its governance. But in revolutionary Greece the political and social reality was different.

2) Among Kapodistrias' most important contributions at the Congress of Vienna, which **was** concluded in Paris, **were**: his active participation in the completion of the Swiss issue with the ratification of the constitution of the Federation; and the prevalence of the Russian position that France should remain a great European power **and Louis XVIII, who was** restored to the throne, should govern his people on the basis of a constitutional charter, over those - Prussia in particular - seeking to punish France.

The Filiki Eteria

Kapodistrias refused the leadership of the Filiki Eteria and tried to prevent the outbreak of a revolution, especially since he knew that the emperor would not support it, as indeed proved to be the case. Kapodistrias believed that the timing of the revolution was not right. He first wanted education to be extended to a large part of the population and their living conditions to be improved, and that at least some European powers should be favorably disposed towards a demand, that he did not exactly define as a revolution but as emancipation from the Ottoman yoke.

But when it broke out, he tried to exploit the Turkish massacres of innocent Greeks and especially the hanging of Patriarch Gregory V to make Russia the arbiter of developments. Despite his insistence that Russia **should** not allow its allies to

have a say in its relations with the Ottoman Empire, he was not listened to. He watched in pain as the emperor succumbed to Metternich's suggestions and refer the Greek question to yet another Congress of the Great Powers. Ultimately, his insistence on adopting his own positions would displease Alexander and their separation became inevitable.

His election as Governor of Greece . His government plans

He eventually accepted his election by the Third National Assembly as Governor of Greece, after having previously secured his resignation from Russian service and after the three powers had officially decided on their involvement in the creation of a Greek state entity.

According to Kapodistrias, Greece in 1828 was not yet ready for a constitutional regime. The country's liberation, its international recognition and the establishment of secure borders, the moral and spiritual improvement of the population, and the distribution of land to the landless, to free them from the socio-economic constraints that forced them into dependence on powerful patrons, had to come first. When these conditions were realized – mainly the international recognition of Greece and the formation of a strong class of small farmers – state paternalism could be combined with a form of constitutionalism (provincial councils at first, national representation later). He therefore **differentiated** the future regime, which he never denied would have a constitutional character, from the temporary regime he established upon his arrival. He even believed that the latter had to be centralized, to protect the people from the arbitrariness of the leading groups and to ensure, through the lack of internal conflicts, the continued support of the leading Powers during the transitional period.

The revolutionary governments had enacted legislation or taken decisions concerning administration, education, health, the economy, as well as other sectors of public life. Although these laws or decisions were not implemented in several cases due to emergency conditions and other reasons, the views contained in the relevant texts show the extent to which new ideas had permeated the thinking of their authors. With the arrival of the Governor, almost everything was planned anew with specific goals. His aim was to build a new society.

Some aspects of Kapodistrias' governmental work:

1. *Relief measures for widows, orphans and refugees:* Kapodistrias set their care as the main objective of his policy so that they could gradually emerge from the miserable situation they had fallen into due to the consequences of the long-term war. He even wanted to force the wealthy to contribute to meeting the immediate state needs for the relief of thousands of poor people, mainly children and women, who in the first months of his rule were in danger of dying of hunger. His concern, especially for children, was continuous and he constantly sought resources from Greeks and foreigners to meet at least their basic needs. With the establishment of the Aegina Orphanage, he offered warmth and education to many hundreds of unprotected children.

2. *Public education:* Emphasis was placed on elementary education with the creation of many mutual – teaching schools in all regions of the liberated country. In these schools, because of the lack of enough teachers, the students of higher grades, or the best students of a class, were teaching the students of lower grades, or the other students of their class, under the supervision of a teacher. By early 1831, more than 100 government mutual-teaching and Greek language schools were operating throughout the country, with approximately 9,000 students. Another 5,000 students were taught by private tutors. Efforts to educate girls were very limited.

3. *Health:* Strict measures were taken to deal with the plague and generally to protect Greek regions from epidemic diseases.

4. *Justice:* Courts of first and second instance were established and in general, efforts were made to ensure that civil disputes and all forms of offenses be resolved on the basis of the laws and by judges. Prisons were organized.

5. *Ecclesiastical policy:* Kapodistrias would not fail throughout his career to emphasize his deep faith in the Eastern Orthodox Church, his trust in its spiritual and educational role. However, he maintained absolute control of the Church and did not allow the clergy to interfere in politics.

6. *Economy:* Rationality and strict **economizing** were imposed in the management of public money through the Economic Committee. The Financial Bank was established and the first Greek currency, the phoenix, was minted.

7. *Agriculture*: The calm that prevailed in the country was the most important thing that the Kapodistrian government offered to farmers: they could plant and harvest safely.

8. *Registration, rental and distribution of national lands*: The systematic registration of public and private lands was sought through the appointment of special committees so that taxation on production would not be arbitrary and so that the Government would have the necessary information before seeking to distribute the national land. The planning of the distribution was attempted, but Kapodistrias postponed it until, the large loan he expected, but never received, would make it possible for the benefit mainly of small farmers.

9. *The Press*: The Governor was particularly concerned about the image that foreigners, and especially the three protectorate Powers, would form of the country and of himself. With the argument that, if this image were negative, the interests of the country would be harmed, he systematically sought to control what was printed in the newly formed state. He saw to it that the newspapers that were in circulation at the time of his arrival were either closed down or placed under government protection, together with their respective printing houses, and prevented or suppressed any attempt to publish an uncontrolled newspaper.

Much could be said about other areas of government work such as the reconstruction of cities and urban planning, the organization of the army and navy, etc.

The brief, indicative, list of what was achieved or attempted is indeed impressive. However, Kapodistrias' insistence that almost everything be planned and monitored by him, to be part of an already formed plan, prevented other opinions and approaches that certainly existed from bearing fruit in certain areas.

The political and state issue. Anti-government reactions

Let's return to the political and state issue. Despite all of Kapodistrias' intentions for some future and conditional constitutional concessions, the sincerity of which could hardly be questioned, **in Greece of the 1828-1831**, power was concentrated and exercised by one person, with all the positive and negative consequences that this solution entailed. In place of a political pluralism, as is reasonably testified by the meetings of the revolutionary collective bodies, the national assemblies and the legislative bodies, the opinion of one person, no matter how enlightened it was,

was imposed on the small and large issues of the state under formation. The democratic principle that had been established through the constitutions throughout the Revolution, despite the fact that it often functioned to serve the interests and aspirations of individuals and groups, had become established as a reality in the minds of almost all active citizens. Its suspension could be, and was, tolerated, due to **the** extraordinary circumstances, for a short period of time, but it could not be extended until the political and social conditions that the Governor considered necessary for its implementation in practice were established.

Therefore, in the reactions to the centralized system imposed by Kapodistrias, it would be very limiting to detect only the marginalization of individuals and the interests that were affected, and to overlook a real disagreement about the form that the country's political organization was taking, different from what many considered to be in line with the goals of their revolutionary effort.

On the other hand, if we focus only on the truly conservative political choices of Kapodistrias and do not see the important work he accomplished or tried to accomplish for the organization of the Greek State, we would give a partial picture of a complex reality. For the first time, the power of government acquired real prestige, which Kapodistrias defended with dignity and determination even in the face of strong external pressures. He also defended, although it seemed to contradict his centralized government, the sovereign and constitutional rights of the Greeks when the **Great** Powers attempted to impose, in their absence, a monarchical regime. This was something that his opponents did not do when they came to power in 1832.

This picture would be even more incomplete if we did not also see the motivations and practices of many of those who disagreed with him, opposed him, wanted his removal at all costs, and of those who murdered him. To ensure his removal from power, they did not hesitate to accept without protest any decisions of the **Great** Powers, to assist the continuous English effort to undermine the Governor, to resort to unfounded accusations and slander. They also tried to integrate their anti-Kapodistrian polemic into the ideological confrontation between the Western powers and Russia, especially after the July Revolution of 1830 and the Russian intervention against the Polish revolution. An engagement, which according to Kapodistrias was disastrous since it would transfer the conflicts of the Powers to Greece.

The assassination

It seems that there was no direct connection between the anti-government leadership which had been gathered in Hydra and the Mavromichalis family who murdered him. However, their act of revenge for the neglect and persecution of their family took on a different meaning within the spirit of tyrannicide that the opposition had formed. There was also no evidence of any foreign involvement in the crime. The assassination relieved those who feared any form of extension of Kapodistrias' power, but it plunged the country into civil war and disrepute, which perhaps only he still had the ability to prevent, by making some concessions.

The image of Kapodistrias in our time

The dichotomous image that is still attempted by many today does not help us to place Kapodistrias in the historical realities of the era in which he lived and acted. The beautification, sometimes idealization, that justifies all his governmental choices and ignores or simply condemns any opposing opinion or action does not improve but rather damages his historical image. On the other hand, any unsubstantiated and unilateral criticism of his authoritarian or other choices without understanding the conditions that prevailed when Kapodistrias exercised power is unhistorical.

There are also some strong stereotypes here that historical discourse tries in vain to mitigate or even overturn. By historical discourse I mean that which is expressed or written with certain conditions, with certain resources and is not improvised and arbitrary. In the celebration of 200 years since the start of the Greek Revolution, there was no shortage, for various reasons, of these hasty and superficial events, speeches and writings to ensure a certain participation in current affairs. Fortunately, at the same time, responsible and thoughtful speeches were planned and began to be delivered at conferences or on other occasions, research programs were drawn up, noteworthy studies have already been published, and others will soon follow that utilize new evidence, they reassess what was already known, propose new interpretations. And perhaps most comforting, several new researchers became involved in the history of 1821 that had been ignored in Greek historiography in recent decades.

Recently, a very poor film about Kapodistrias reproduced the most dichotomous stereotypes in the worst possible way, and the large presence of people in movie theaters to see it and their positive reactions show the great deficit of substantial historical education among today's Greeks.

The Greek Revolution, to which the Kapodistrian period is naturally included, is a very serious matter and we need to approach its study with the necessary knowledge and responsibility.