How did the world of nation-states come about? What happened to the world of empires that preceded it? How did the transition take place and how inevitable was it? These may seem (and indeed are) old questions. According to conventional accounts, the transition was inevitable, and originated in the democratic revolutions (American and primarily the French) and the ways in which their ideas spread to the rest of the world. Recent scholarship on transnational and global history has severely criticized these teleological and Euro-and-Western-centric accounts. By enlarging the geographical scope of study, this literature has shown that the process of transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states was not uniform; nor was it simply the result of the diffusion of some liberal ideas from Western Europe to the rest of the world. Although much of this literature has focused on extra-European developments, historians of Europe have also shown that, although the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars destabilised the continent, they did not just inaugurate a world of nation states. What they did was to stir up tensions and conflicts over boundaries, identities, rights, institutions, political organization and so on and so forth. The form and the outcome of these conflicts depended to a great extent on historical contingencies, regional frameworks, and local conditions.

Kostantina Zanou’s fascinating book contributes to this literature by looking at the Mediterranean and, in particular, at what she calls the post-Venetian Adriatic. This last term is not descriptive. The author uses it to show the open-endedness of what came ‘after Venice’, when the region became a battlefield between old and new imperial powers (French, British, Russian, Habsburg) and emerging nationalisms and nation-states (Italian, Greek, Ionian, Albanian). In other words, she reads the period against our familiar meta-geographical categories, defined as these are by the world of nation-states that came later. And she explains how we got there.
In doing so, the author combines a macrohistorical with a microhistorical level of analysis, the last one in the form of historical biographies. This allows her to understand transnationalism at a personal and intimate level. Thus, all the chapters tell the stories of men (and a few women) of letters and politics, who lived along the shores of the Adriatic during the first half of the 19th century, and who were confronted with the emerging vocabulary of nationalism, much of which they themselves created. The cast is impressive. It includes a number of Ionian, Dalmatian, Greco-Italian, Greco-Russian, Italo-Albanian intellectuals, politicians, and activists (among others). Some became part of the national narratives—some as ‘fathers’ of nations. Others failed to pass the test of posterity. In contradistinction to standard national narratives, the book treats these people as figures oscillating between the world of the former imperial Venetian realm and the world of nations that was dawning; between empires (the Napoleonic, Ottoman, Russian, and British) and nations (Greece and Italy); between two or more patriae (the Ionian Islands, Venice, Greece, Italy, and Russia), as well as languages and cultures (Italian and Greek). The aim of the book is to set the historical record straight by recovering these people’s hybrid identities, and the multiple forms of patriotism (some forgotten) that they professed.

Thus, the book is a testament to the bigness of small stories, to the power of intimate narratives to speak to something much larger. Most of these narratives start on the Ionian islands and reflect their turbulent history—after a brief period under Napoleon (1797-99), the islands were made into the semi-independent Septinsular Republic under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire and the protection of Russia (1800-1807), passed back to Imperial France (1807-1810), and became a semi-independent British protectorate (formally) from 1814 and until 1864, when Britain ceded them to Greece.

But then the setting always opens up, not least because, as boundaries were shifting, people were moving—either because they wanted to, because they had to, or because a career opportunity pushed them to. The movement was extensive: depending on the case, it included the Italian peninsula, parts of the Ottoman Empire, and later Greece, the Russian Empire, and the Black sea, spanning also the British and Habsburg Empires, France, and Switzerland. The author shows how, because of this movement, people were re-inventing themselves, changing in the process their political and cultural allegiances. And Zanou interprets these processes by locating them in a number of political and intellectual contexts, some of which are novel, or employed in a novel and thought-provoking way. In so doing, she criticises conventional Greek and Italian historiography, offering a fascinating account in which people, boundaries, and civilisational frames are in flux.

The book is grouped into four sections, each departing from a different perspective and reflecting different lines of argument, but also different spatial experiences. The first section focuses on three poets born on Zante, who were going to become the ‘national poets’ of two different countries: Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) of Italy, and Andreas Kalvos (1792–1869), and Dionysios Solomos (1798–1857) of Greece. Zanou uses their cases to flesh out all the themes (and the ironies) that drive her book. She shows, how, contrary to conventional national myths, these poets were oscillating throughout their lives between patriae, languages and cultures. Ugo Foscolo (born Nikolaos and not Ugo) was probably the most complex of all, probably because, being the oldest, he experienced more deeply the loss of the Venetian world. In fact, it was in Venice and upon the coming of the Napoleonic armies that Foscolo—the little Greek guy, according to a Venetian report on him—would discover Italian patriotism (p. 41). In light of the Restoration he would come to cultivate a sense of nostalgia for his native Zante and the Ionian patria. It wouldn’t be long before this engagement would lead him to discover his Greekness, courtesy of the Greek revolution (1821-28). But Foscolo would never find Greece (even if he did try to go and fight for the Greek cause). Death found him first and sealed his italianità.

That was not the case with the other two figures. Both bicultural and bilingual (although both more
Italophone than Grecophone), Kalvos and Solomos would become mesmerised by the Greek revolution, during which they would actually write their great Greek poems. Kalvos (born Andreas Kalbos) even came to Greece to fight, if only for two months, before moving to Zante (1826) to teach Italian and never to write a piece of poetry again. As for Solomos (born Dionisio Salamon), he never went to Greece (he was afraid, as he has been quoted saying). His becoming a Greek poet seems like a conscious decision (to an extent seeking ‘national glory’), which he took in 1823 while witnessing the Greek revolution from Zante. He thus changed his name and his prose. Changing the latter was not easy. Struggling with his Greek, Solomos would write a first draft in Italian, and then replace it with more and more Greek verse. Ironically enough, one of these poems would become the Greek national anthem.

Thus, in place of three ‘national’ poets, what we have here is three transnational patriots who suspended their loyalties between or across Venice, Italy, the Ionian islands, and Greece—hence the concept of ‘stammering’ (inspired by Foscolo). This was a sort of patriotism that was formed through incompletion and defeat. But the gist of the argument is that it connoted a transformation of the concept of patria, from a cultural and local community into a political and national entity, and of language from an attribute of social mobility to one of national identity.

The second section opens up the spatial perspective by focusing on a vast geographical and cultural zone: one that spans the Ionian islands, the Danubian principalities, Russia, and the Ottoman-Greek world of the Southern Balkans. It reveals that there was, in this zone, a trend of thought that was deeply religious and counter-revolutionary, but that was, at the same time, devoted to philhellenism and to the Greek revolution. The crucial link here is that of Russia—that omni-present force in all things Mediterranean, at least in its Eastern part, from the late 18th century onwards. Although formally a military and diplomatic factor in the region—not least as a one of the protectors, first of the Septinsular Republic, and later of the kingdom of Greece—the role of Russia was an effect of what was a much larger political, cultural, and religious presence. Ironically enough, the only thing that matches the presence of Russia in the region is its historiographical absence (with important exceptions of course).[1] Zanou joins these exceptions.

The main protagonist of this fascinating section is none other than Ioannis Kapodistrias (1776–1831)—among other things, Secretary General in the Septinsular Republic, Minister of the Tsar, and first Governor of Greece from 1828 until his assassination in 1831. But he is not alone in this chapter. He is joined by several other intellectuals, political ideologists, diplomats, and civil servants such as Giorgio Mocenigo, Spyridione Naranzi, Bishop Ignatius (among others), who were first connected to the Russian administration during the short-lived ‘Septinsular Republic’ (the importance of which as a political laboratory the author could have explored more, as it is an extremely understudied subject). Many of these people would later find refuge in the tsarist court and its diplomatic service, where they would be involved in a circle of people with Phanariot and Boyar backgrounds from the Danubian Principalities that included, among others, Alexandre Stourdza. This was the context within which these people would acquire a more solid sense of patriotism that transcended the Ionian space, thereby becoming more broadly ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Greek’.

This proto-nationalism and proto-liberalism bore for Zanou some distinctive characteristics. It held that that the Greek Revolution was compatible with the restored order of post-Napoleonic Europe and that philhellenism could be built on conservative and religious grounds. It supported the ideas that the Enlightenment was religious in nature and that the Greek nation could exist politically within the Christian ecumene and the traditional world of empires. In fact, as the author highlights a number of times, for people in this period, nation and empire were not mutually exclusive; nor were religion and liberalism. Self-rule could very well be compatible with acceptance of an overlordship, insofar as, of course, civil and political rights were guaranteed. In order to make sense of these
ideas, the author locates them in a number of political and intellectual contexts, such as the Russian Adriatic, and the ‘Septinsular’ or the ‘Orthodox’ Enlightenments. These are very important arguments, not least because they offer a more polycentric account of the origins of Greek nationalism, liberalism, and statehood than conventional Greek intellectual historiography has done. Indeed, Zanou criticizes time and again the still-dominant scheme of the ‘Neohellenic Enlightenment’, which uses a diffusionist framework of analysis focusing on the Paris-based Adamantios Koraes and his entourage.[2]

The third section works as an interlude. It tells the stories of two intellectuals from the Ionian Islands, based on their unpublished autobiographical memoirs. One is Mario Pieri (1776-1852), a scholar of Greek things, a poet, essayist and philhellen of some repute. His life story is one of perpetual exile and of suspended loyalties between Italy and Greece. The other is Andrea Papadopoulo Vretto (1800-1876), a doctor and man of letters and later Greek consul in Ottoman Bulgaria and Italy. His story, from Naples to British Corfu and from Athens to Odessa, Varna and Venice, represents for Zanou a different phase of the changing political realities and movement of people in the Mediterranean and the Balkans. The themes ring a bell. These are two more cases of men of letters that shared their lives between different patriae (Greece and Italy) and divided their loyalties between multiple empires (Venetian, Ottoman, and Russian). But the author argues that, whereas most other chapters are about people who somehow managed to re-invent themselves, the stories of Pieri and Vretto are about those who failed to adjust. Be that as it may, if compared to Foscolo, Kalvos, or Solomos the distinction does not make much sense. These last ones were also left suspended in-in-between, liminal spaces. The difference I think, is that Pieri and Vretto just failed to pass the test and enter the ‘national pantheon’. But, as was the case with those who passed the test, that was despite of themselves.

The final section (which connects better with the third section) looks at efforts by a number of diasporic scholars to develop a canon of works on Greek history and culture, with special attention to post-classical continuities. The key person here is Andrea Mustoxidi (1785–1860), a leading figure of Greco–Italian letters, the first minister for culture and education in Greece, and among the first historians to contribute to the construction of Greek national history (and a forgotten figure today). But again, this is not a Mustoxidi story. It is a story of a post-Napoleonic generation of intellectuals, who lived in an in-between state, and who formed an ambitious programme aiming at the regeneration of Greek letters. The author assesses the distinctive features of this intellectual environment—in particular its emphasis on the historical ‘continuity’ rather than ‘revival’ of Greece—and its impact on the shaping of Greek national ideology, again showing how obsolete the ‘Neohellenic Enlightenment’ scheme is.

The book closes with the story of Mustoxidi’s clash in the 1850s with Niccolò Tommaso, an Italo-Dalmatian intellectual living in exile on the Ionian Islands. The clash was about the gradual replacement of Italian with Greek as the official language of the Ionian Islands, which Mustoxidi supported. For the author, this conflict marks the end of the ‘transnational patriotism’ moment, and the passing to an era of more distinct and solidified national consciousnesses.

To say that this book makes significant contributions to a number of historiographical themes is probably an understatement. The fact that it has won three prizes—from two ‘national’ associations (the Modern Greek Studies Association and the Society for Italian Historical Studies) and from The Mediterranean Seminar—speaks volumes to its wider resonance and raises questions about scholarly boundaries. Indeed, by joining forces with recent works that have significantly reassessed the history of the region, the book shows how much our understanding of the transition from empires to nations will be enhanced if we look at the intermediaries who crossed boundaries—cultural, social, linguistic, civilizational, geographical—especially in places such as the Mediterranean, where different political and cultural traditions met and conversed.[3] Such a focus
suggests different genealogies as far as the history of nationalism, liberalism, and revolution are concerned—and of modernity in general. Thus, Zanou subscribes to the ‘multiple modernities’ approach and is very critical of the two conventional narratives through which historians have told the history of the region: ‘modernization’ theory and cultural imperialism (although her attack on the latter is more indirect) (p. 25).

That said, I am not sure that the framing always does justice to the book. By constructing the history of the modern age as an order of analogous and space-specific cultural processes—which did not draw upon the West—the ‘multiple modernities’ framing tends to obfuscate the global interactions and the contingencies that made the modern world possible. It also sometimes reduces local transformations to an indigenous prehistory of the modern, thereby introducing teleology from the back door. To be sure, the book does a brilliant job in recovering the complex global conditions and the transnational interactions that led to the nation in this part of the Mediterranean. But some parts of the book, in particular the closing Mustoxidi-Tommaseo episode, seem to leave aside a lot. I wonder, for example, whether Mustoxidi’s stance on the language question had anything to do with the earlier tirades of Koraes and his group against Kapodistrias’ cultural program in Greece (1828-31) and against Mustoxidi personally, as its responsible minister. It seems to me that the intellectual context of this this was much larger—and it was one that worked as a face-off for several enlightenment currents. The same goes for the political context. When assessing the 1850s, one cannot but take into account the Crimean war, not just in and of itself as the author does, but as a reflection of the attempt by imperial powers to accumulate power in the region—a move that posed an existential threat on both the Ionian state and the Greek kingdom, and put Greek nationalism on the defensive. In short, much more seemed to be at stake here than just a clash between Mustoxidi’s change of heart and Tommaseo. And one final point: the author argues that the episode illustrates the passing to a new era of nation-states—which would be sealed later when the islands were ceded to Greece (1864). But does it? Could it be that we are sometimes too quick to accept the periodization of conventional political history when assessing the formation of nation-states? Wouldn’t it be better to explore nation-building as a process and, indeed, as one that was yet-to-be determined?

But these are minor critical questions for a book that has transgressed a number of scholarly boundaries and that has already become a reference book for the history of the region. This work is useful not just for specialists in the field (and for relevant university courses), but also for all those who want to enhance their knowledge of modern Europe, and of the processes through which the modern world emerged.


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