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BOOK REVIEWS

Apostolos E. Vacalopoulos, *The Greek Nation, 1453-1669*, translated by Ian and Phania Moles. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976. Pp. xiv, 457. Index. Selected Bibliography. Illustrations, Maps. Hardcover, \$29.50.

The year 1453 has served as a convenient turning point in history, marking as it does the end of one thousand years of Byzantine rule and the beginning of what Sir Steven Runciman calls the "unedifying and melancholy" story of Turkish rule over the Greeks (*The Fall of Constantinople, 1453*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. p. 190). In many ways the end of Byzantine rule meant the end of serious consideration of the Greeks as a people, subsumed as they were under the powerful and exotic Ottoman state. This dismissal is found in the observations of the European travelers who crossed the Balkans between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and who blamed the Greeks for the betrayal of their heritage and for their degeneracy. Thus, while western Europe was making its spectacular advances in the Renaissance, the Greeks had fallen off the map of Europe into an oppressed state.

Apostolos E. Vacalopoulos' book, which was originally published in Greek as Volume 2 of *Historia tou neou Hellénismou* (Thessaloniki, 1964; 2nd ed., 1974), is a substantial attempt to illuminate that dark era. As the title suggests, he rests his analysis on the strength and continuity of the Greeks as a people despite their

subjection. This is in keeping with the theme of his earlier book, *Origins of the Greek Nation: the Byzantine Period, 1204-1461*, which has also been translated from the Greek. He views the period from the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the submission of Crete to the Turks in 1669 as the low point of the Greek people, but also the crucial point from which they began their long struggle back to freedom.

The first third of the book is a careful examination of the various pressures that were placed upon the Greeks by the Turks. The peasant's lot was serfdom on the military land grants of the Turkish *Spahis* who, in alliance with the local administrators and judges, bled the Greeks dry. The legal taxation and the various obligations of service are described in detail. When this is combined with the excesses of the Turkish administration, the origins of the demoralization seen by travelers are clear. Indeed, with one eye on the carping of travelers, Vacalopoulos points out that the negative qualities were a necessary product of subjugation.

The weapons most often used to combat the conquerors were therefore equivocation, subterfuge, dissimulation, and outright mendacity. Indeed they were the only weapons which could insure survival in this atmosphere of terror, torment and persecution (p. 30).

The losses suffered by the Greeks due to the official policy of impressing children into the Janissary corps are examined as well, for the loss of the best children of each generation must be added to the economic deprivation of the Greeks. Estimates are given that up to one million children were taken in this way. One must also take into account the large numbers of converts to Islam. Though forced conversion was not a policy, the effects of the social and economic system made it desirable for many who wanted to escape oppression. Vacalopoulos suggests that the result of all these pressures was a general contraction of the Greek nation, plains dwellers withdrawing to the mountains where the Turks rarely went, islanders fleeing inland away from pirates and the Turkish fleet, and thousands fleeing to Italy and the islands controlled by Venice.

Most of the book is concerned, however, with the positive elements of national development that formed the nucleus of the Greek revival. In this early period a few institutions survived upon which the Greeks were able to build. First among these was the Orthodox Church, which alone of all the Byzantine institutions had survived intact. The author is quick to point out that the Church was anti-Catholic and deeply influenced by the monks, and as such was strongly conservative, and aimed at preserving a specifically Greek identity. Despite chronic poverty and corruption, it did stand as a bulwark against Turkish pressures. Some Aegean islands preserved municipal government under Greek leaders with Turkish approval and thus retained a sense of independence. At the other extreme the *klephts* of the mountains developed as freedom fighters and brigands rejecting Turkish authority altogether. They provided a Homeric example for Greeks everywhere as the many folk ballads indicate, and they preserved Greek fighting ability. The author attributes much of the gradual improvement to the development of a Greek moneyed class which was able to support the Church and improve local communities. Its trade connections with the West were the first openings for ideas and education which would have great influence in later centuries.

While the book is a very clear and detailed examination of each of these areas, some minor inconsistencies exist. For example, in attempting to explain the brutality of the Janissary troops towards the Christian population the author states that a

Janissary was "very likely a person of low intellectual caliber" (p. 38). But in calculating the loss to the Greek people when the children were stolen for the corps he says that they were "the most sound of mind and body" (p. 42). Also, in discussing Orthodoxy he states that the sense of being Christian blotted out the sense of nationalism among the peoples of the Balkans (p. 127). He neglects to point out, however, the serious struggles that existed between Slavic and Greek Orthodoxy for control of the local churches, a struggle that took on very nationalistic connotations.

The book is, however, an excellent review of the formative stage of the Greek nation. In addition to its clear organization, the book has excellent notes and detailed maps. It also has 48 plates, most of which are prints taken from the works of early travelers. These prints add a charming and evocative touch to this careful look at a sad period in Greek history.

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Larry E. West, *The St. Gall Passion Play*, translated with an Introduction and Notes. Brookline, Mass. and Leyden: Classical Folia Editions, 1976. Bibliography. Pp. 126. Paperback, \$11.50.

This English translation of the *St. Galler Passionsspiel* is to be welcomed, both as a sign of renewed interest in the German Passion play and as the first English translation of any German Passion play. As the author rightly notes, scholarly neglect has been unwarranted, since these plays do occupy an important position in the history of medieval German drama. Inasmuch as there are as many theories concerning the origins and development of the Passion play as there are scholars who have examined it, the entire field clearly requires further study. It is doubtless too much to expect that a translation alone could provide the impetus required; but hopefully this translation indicates an awakening of interest in this field.

Mr. West's translation is a good one. The student of comparative literature or theater arts whose German is not fluent will find it a handy aid linguistically, as well as interesting to read. For the Germanist, the actual translation is not very useful. Anyone fluent in modern German could easily read the exceedingly simple language of the text, even without ever having studied Middle High German. Germanists, however, could have trouble reading the play without a knowledge of Latin. The stage directions and the frequent Biblical quotations have been translated by Mr. West. In this respect, then, the translation can also serve students of German.

The style of the English translation is slightly archaic and stilted, but it accords well with the Middle High German text itself, which is written in rather stiff rhymed couplets. Mr. West, however, does us the favor of not trying to reproduce the rhyme in English. His translation is true to the Middle High German text without being too literal or clumsy in English. Compare, for instance, the following:

215 Be quiet, my sister, and let me have my fun.
 You may well be an old fool.