

Provision of medical care to the 1821 Hellenic Revolution Fighters

Nikolaos G. Markeas¹, Ioannis V. Papachristos², Anastasios Daras¹

1. Athens Children's Euroclinic

2. Orthopaedic Department of General Hospital of Piraeus "Tzaneio"

ABSTRACT

The fight to free the enslaved by the Turks Greeks in the 1821 Hellenic Revolution was not only in battlefields restricted. The contribution of medical personnel to the wounded was equally invaluable leading to the final victory. Access to medical treatment proved extremely difficult. Existing public health conditions along the Turkish rule could be politely deemed from miserable up to unacceptable. Many young scientists, students or graduates from European medical schools preferred to remain in the attractive western world. Few of them motivated by their genuine patriotism returned to their homeland in order to offer their knowledge and skills. Practical doctors and to some extent doctors staffing the tactical army, mainly foreigners supporting Hellenic nation into its struggle to liberate itself (Philhellenes), carried out the duty for medical care in battlefields. Of course, during this destruction empiric healers and charlatans grabbed the opportunity to declare their exceptional healing skills!

KEY WORDS: Hellenic Revolution 1821, medical care, public health, empirical doctors, Philhellenism.

Introduction

Hellenic Revolution in year 1821 came as the inevitable effect of many factors' confluence. Historians never undermined the role of coincidence that enhanced the rise for liberation of the enslaved Hellenes. Gradual dissolution of Ottoman Empire had already started with the insurrection of Ali Pasha. In the interim, the scripts of Adamantios Korais and the passionate preaching of Rigas Phereos ex-

pressed the New Hellenic Enlightenment. At this atmosphere, the impact of Kosmas Aetolos' teaching was awakening the common conscience. At the same time, induction in the Society of Friends ("Philiki Eteria"), and the illusion for support by the czarist Russia, created hope for redemption from the long-standing Turkish rule. All these like a catalyst and through lots of mystery led to the idea of the birth of the Hellenic Nation, with distinct po-

CORRESPONDING
AUTHOR,
GUARANTOR

Nikolaos G. Markeas MD, PhD
Former Senior Consultant of 2nd Pediatric Orthopaedic Department
General Children's Hospital of Athens "P. & A. Kyriakou"
42 Sikelianou St., 122 43
Egaleo, Greece
tel.: 6975856940
E-mail: markeasn@otenet.gr

litical existence and definitely connected with Ancient Greece.

Despite all that, the reconstitution of Ottoman power, combined with Greek civil unrest, put the outcome of the Revolution in doubt even from its beginning. Austrian chancellor Klemens von Metternich was furiously attacking Greek Revolution at every instance. However, when Ibrahim's expedition failed due to combined effort of all Superpowers then Austrian chancellor was forced to change his mind [1,2,3].

In the collective consciousness, the 1821 Hellenic revolution is connected to specific people and events: with Kolokotronis in Dervenakia, with Diakos in Alamana, with Papaflessas in Maniaki and with Karaiskakis who fought and pushed Kioutachi Pasha out of Keratsini. Nevertheless, many historians support that eventually the heart of this fight belonged to the soul of the public and enthusiastic simple people [2,3]. At the same time, Philhellenism in Europe was growing fast especially after the civilian massacre in Chios island (**Fig. 1**). Telling are Victor Hugo's lyrics from the poem "Enthusiasm" which encourage his fellow citizens to fight next to the Greek rebels: "...for the sacred revenge/ for our Goddess Freedom".

The research for the causes that led to the eruption of the Hellenic Revolution in 1821 as well as the details who resulted in its final success does not end here. Medical care to fighters, for example, was never systematically approached, as someone would expect. Healthcare demanded combined attempts, which were not self-implied at that time during these bloodiest events. Public health was compromised and set up of any healthcare service was absent. Medical provision was mainly based on empirical practitioners and at a lesser extent on Greek and Philhellenes doctors belonging to the tactical army.

Public Health during the Ottoman rule

Gathering information from valid sources [4,5,6] it would not have been an overstatement that quality of life during the Revolution was clearly outstandingly poor. For the degraded public health condition, someone could blame the fighters who were

frequently changing places, congestion in urban areas without any decent healthcare provision (**Fig. 2**), longstanding siege of cities or fortresses and generally the frequent battles, which hindered any plans to improve the health status. And apart of all the above we should add sanitary problems, famine, humidity, special environment of Greek countryside where battles were taking place, as well as various sewage problems.

The first health outbreak after the declaration of the Revolution was noted in Tripoli; it had to do with rash typhus and caused the death of 3,000 people. A typhus epidemic was later on manifested in Nafplio but also in other cities under siege. Main diseases that infested fighters and their families were dysentery, cholera, plague, smallpox and malaria. Taking into account that Medicine's big progress took place in the second half of 19th century, and then, we will be able to justify this epidemic spread. Humanity would delay slightly more to reach the time point to recognize pathogens, to produce vaccines and to operate under strict aseptic rules. Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch and Joseph Lister were just born during the Hellenic Revolution.

Fighter's nutrition included mainly bread, wheat cracker and boiled corn. Meat and fish were available rarely. Wine and raki were supplementing their table. The only item that never lacked during the Fight was the olive oil. However, during siege like in Messolonghi, people sustaining the occlusion after the exhaustion of resources were resorting to whatever was amenable to be chewed (**Fig. 3**). In the begging, they were consuming domestic animals like horses, mules, donkeys, camels, dogs and cats and later on mice and animal leathers. At their despair in front of the upcoming death, they even reached the point to eat dead human bodies before disintegration.

We know today from valid sources that the water from wells was constantly contaminated. Dionysios Kokkinos wrote that suitable wells in Argos were exhausted and the minimum remaining water was poisoned by the oxidation of the household items abandoned by the inhabitants with the scope to retrieve them on their return [1]. In the Messolonghi



Figure 1. "Chios Destruction" by Eugène Delacroix (Louvre Museum).

hi Nikolaos Kasomoulis wrote that water from the wells was a peculiar mixture of brain, intestine, blood and heads [7]. Despite all this hardship, the Greek courage was never affected. They continued their fight despite being hungry, wounded, ill and exhausted, with perseverance, optimism and belief in the idea of liberation.

Medical scientists during the Revolution

During the Turkish rule, many young people from different areas across the enslaved Greece registered to European universities for studies, especially medicine. They usually chose Padova, Pavia, Pisa and Vienna. Many of these medical graduates gained authority in the Ottoman governmental hierarchy. Alexandros Mavrokordatos and Panagiotis Nikousios achieved to become Great Interpreters. Petros Ipitis organised philhellenic organisations across Europe. Adamantios Korais dedicated big part of his life to the Greek Enlightenment supporting the undoubted principles of education and language. Ioannis Koletis was also involved in politics.

It is remarkable that Rigas Phereos was surrounded and supported by the doctors Ioannis Emmanouil, Nikolaos Polizos, Dimitrios Nikolaides, and Petros Fragos and by the medical students Konstantinos Karakasis, Christophoros Perrevo and George Sakellarios. When due to treason the Austrian discovered Rigas Phereos' revolutionary plans, they arrested Perrevo who was eventual-



Figure 2. "Karaiskakis Military Camp in New Faliro" by Theodoros Vrizakis (National Art Gallery in Athens).

ly dismissed because Rigas offered a good excuse for him stating that he encountered Perrevo all by chance as he was coming to Trieste to study medicine [8].

Medical doctors were also participating in Philiki Eteria. Many others stood out as great financial donors contributing to the collective liberating fight (Apostolos Arsakis from Epirus, Delaportas from Kefallinia, Sakellarios from Kozani and Flevas from Naousa). Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first Greek governor, was a doctor graduate from Padova.

The only case of a Turkish doctor proving to be a selfless servant of Hippocratic Oath was that of Hasan Ali Kourtalis. He was living with his family in Atalanti working as empirical surgeon. After the Revolution outbreak, he saw his family being slaughtered by those whom will medically treat later on. In Acropolis siege, he treated General Makrigiannis and Odysseus Androutsos as well as many others.

Very few from the medical scientists chose to get actively involved and offer their services to the fighters (Fig. 4). Most of them treated medical conditions. Care for the wounded in the battlefields was based on foreign Philhellenes doctors and mainly on practical or empirical doctors.

Medical Service of Tactical Army

Law reconstituted the tactical army of the inde-



Figure 3. "Messolonghi Exodus" by Theodoros Vrizakis (National Art Gallery in Athens).

pendent Greek state on 1st April 1822. The first units were the Heavy Infantry Regiment and Battalion of Philhellenes. The first doctors who joined were coming from Germany, Denmark and Switzerland [4,5,8].

An extraordinary case was the one of Heinrich Trieber (**Fig. 5**). He was born in Meiningen of Germany in 1796, studied medicine in the Universities of Jena, Erlangen and Würzburg and was specialized in Surgery in Paris. Most information is obtained by his personal diary, which covers the timeframe from January 1822 when he first put his foot in Greece up to April 1828 when he undertook the management of the Military Hospital of Acronafplia. He took part in many battles and other military missions. He was given the unpleasant duty to perform Lord Byron's autopsy and some years later to write the coroner's report for the murdered Ioannis Kapodistrias [9].

Heinrich Trieber took part in planning of the first



Figure 4. "Death of Markos Botsaris" by Theofilos Chatzimichael (Theofilos Museum in Varis of Mytilene).

Military Hospital and of the Municipal Hospital. He founded the Military Pharmacy and became assistant professor of Surgery in the University of Athens. In 1842, he was appointed as King Otto's personal doctor. He introduced in 1847 anaesthesia with ether in Surgery, some months after its first application by William T.G. Morton in Massachusetts on 16th October 1846. In the 1854 cholera pandemic of Athens, he was proactive treating patients at his own risk. Eventually he became sick but managed to recover. When in 1864 he retired, grateful motherland awarded this humble scientist with many honours and prizes. He died in 1882 at the age of 86.

Medical graduates were coming to rebelled Greece from all over the world to offer scientific knowledge and foremost their own life. Samuel Gridley Howe, a graduate of Harvard University, left Boston led by romantic and philhellenic feelings and managed to reach Greece, where exhausted from his long journey wore his "foustanela" (Greek traditional skirt worn by males) and was appointed as surgeon in Mavrokordatos' army. He contributed to the setup of a temporary hospital and of a transport service for the wounded and he soon followed a small military squad where, as one of his fellows revealed, "He was becoming a surgeon when the battle was over". After his return to USA, Howe founded a prototype foundation for the blinds, the renowned *Perkins Institution*. Much later in March 1867, after the Cretan revolution, he transferred money and food for the refugees and citizens of Crete [4,5].

At the same time, Switzerland exhibited true acts



Figure 5. “Heinrich Trieber”. Oil on canvas (National Historic Museum of Athens).

of philhellenism. Johann Jakob Meyer published the “Hellenic Chronicles” and lost his life in the heroic Messolonghi exodus. Henri Amsler died from typhus in Milos Island. Henri Dumont fought during the Revolution. Louis-André Gosse with his multifaceted medical, political and editorial activity was highlighted as representative of public life in his country and as a crusader of Swiss philhellenism. He co-operated with banker Jean-Gabriel Eyraud and organized money and resource transfers to rebel Greeks. He was assigned as general supply chain commissioner of the naval fleet and Archipelagos’ tax inspector. He participated in philhellenic committees for supply distribution. Moreover, he hospitalised the lethally wounded Karaiskakis (Fig. 6). He submitted report for the function of the first hospital in Nafplio to Kapodistrias [4,5].

After March 1829, Greeks were appointed as doctors of the tactical army apart from the foreigners (Fig. 7). Indicative examples are Stylianos Emilios from Lesbos, Chronias Drosinos from Ampelakia, Stephanos Kritis and Antonios Polilas from Corfu.



Figure 6. “The battle of Athens and the lethal wound of Karaiskakis” by Alexandros Isaïas. Oil on canvas (National Historic Museum of Athens).

The practical doctors

Historians unanimously agree that practical doctors were the ones who bared the biggest load of fighters’ medical care. They were skilful in reducing fractures and dislocations, in cleaning wounds and in performing minor operations. Transfer of knowledge and experience of practical medicine was passed from father to son like a family tradition. However, relevant schools were operating in Athens, Karpenisi, Sparta, Corfu and Chios. Panagiotis Giatrakos founded a medicopharmaceutical school in Mistras prior to Revolution outbreak. He had studied medicine in Italy for a short period, was member of Philiki Eteria and captain of a military unit. Before the Revolution, he had received 300 boxes full of drugs and surgical instruments. Five younger brothers of Panagiotis Giatrakos had also attended the Mistras School.

In relevant sources, we can find numerous practical doctors who contributed at the same timeframe. Most renowned is a woman, Helen Mavrovouniotis, the wife of captain Vassos Mavrovouniotis. In practical doctors also the name of François Pouqueville, French consul in Greece, is included [4,5].

When the Revolution was declared, there were no administrative measures and there were shortages of supplies and drugs. The term “Organized Healthcare Service” was completely unknown. Available drugs for the practical doctors were merely some herbs. Wounds were dressed with pieces of fabric and haemostasis was accomplished with

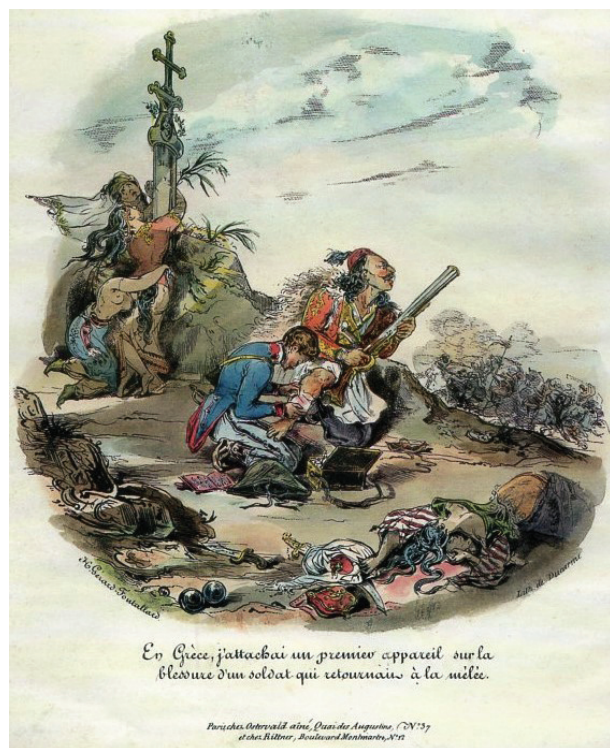


Figure 7. “French military doctor treating the wound of a Greek Fighter”. Painted engraving (National Historic Museum of Athens).

burning steel. They were retting the external side of the dressings with ointment made up from soap and raki. Inside the wounds, they were usually applying ointment from egg albumen and oil. For fractures, they were using improvised splints made up from wood or paperboard (Fig. 8).

In his autobiography, General Makrigiannis describes that they were using big ants to bite the wound edges and when they were ready to close their jaws, the fighters were beheading them forming with this way a strong suture [10]. Photakos mentions that they were using hot butter against oedema and bruises [11].

Drugs, which practical doctors trusted, were droges (extraction of crude drug), some substances or items containing balsam, elixir and laudanum, all brought from Konstantinoupolis, Smyrna, Eptanisa and Trieste. They were also using opium poppy as sleeping pill, saltwater against lower limb swelling, and tatary buckwheat seeds as an emetic [12].

Practical doctors were able to examine and clean



Figure 8. “The death of Lambros Tzavellas” by Donato Francesco de Vivo. Oil on canvas (National Art Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum. Nafplio Branch).

wounds thoroughly, to remove the responsible bullets and to isolate osseous fragments or big bone butterflies. Lightly wounded received care on site in battlefields (Fig. 9). Heavier wounded were transferred to nearby monasteries (Oblou Monastery in Achaia and Zoodochos Pigi Velanidias Monastery in Messenia) or to substandard hospitals.

Apart from the known sword and the scimitar, a sword with curved edge-“giatagani” (Fig. 10), weapons used by the two fighting parts were the pistol (short-barrel gun 58mm-“pistola”), the trombone (gun with flat barrel and flint mechanism releasing many pellets together at once) and the musket (front-loading riffle with long barrel and contemplation-“kariofilli”). These guns did not have long range and the causing damage was variable depending on the distance. Fighters were wishing each other “kalo voli” (Good shot), implying a quick, painless and heroic death [4,7].

Fake doctors were also performing medical duties and were prescribing drugs parallel to the practical doctors. They were mostly known as charlatans or “kombogiannites”. They were administering peculiar substances of unknown origin and their advice was usually complex and difficult to apply [4,6,12]. They tended to praise their supposed own therapeutic skills to a usually freaking extent but their interest was mainly the financial profit.



Figure 9. “Wounded Greek officer outside the walls of a captures city” by Jean Claude Bonnefond. Oil painting in tarpaulin

Epilogue

According to Professor of History of the Universi-



Figure 10. “The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan” painting by Eugène Delacroix. Oil on canvas (Art Institute of Chicago).

ty of Konstantinoupolis Esra Özşüer: “The proposed opinion in Turkish historic teaching is that revolutions across Balkans were the result of the ungratefulness of Greeks and other Balkan nations who were peacefully living under the Ottoman bliss” [13]. Therefore, it is easy to recognize nowadays the significance of the struggle in order to breathe as free Hellenic citizens without forgetting dividing practices who led to dead ends. [Ⓐ]

REFERENCES

1. [Κόκκινος Διονύσιος. *Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση* (εξάτομη έκδοση). Εκδόσεις Μέλισσα, Αθήνα, 1956.]
2. Finlay George. *History of the Greek Revolution*. 2 volumes. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
3. [ΦίνλεϊΓεώργιος. *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Επανάστασεως* (δίτομη έκδοση) σε μετάφραση Αλέξανδρου Παπαδιαμάντη και επιμέλεια Άγγελου Μαντά. Ίδρυμα της Βουλής των Ελλήνων, Αθήνα, 2008.]
4. [Δαρδαβέσης Θεόδωρος. *Η Δημόσια Υγεία και η περίθαλψη των αγωνιστών κατά την περίοδο της Επανάστασης του 1821*. Πανεργυρικός λόγος σε εκδήλωση του ΑΠΘ στις 23/3/2019.]
5. [Γερουλάνος Μαρίνος. *Η συμβολή των Ιατρών εις την παλιγγενεσίαν του Έθνους*. Πανεργυρικοί λόγοι Ακαδημαϊκών για την 25η Μαρτίου 1821 και την 28η Οκτωβρίου 1940. Επιμέλεια Π. Χάρη, Αθήνα, 1977.]
6. [Χατζηφώτης Ιωάννης Μ. *Η καθημερινή ζωή των Ελλήνων στην Τουρκοκρατία*. Εκδόσεις Παπαδήμα, Αθήνα, 2008.]
7. [Κασομούλης Νικόλαος. *Ενθυμήματα στρατιωτικά της Επανάστασεως των Ελλήνων 1821-1833* (τρίτομη έκδοση). Χορηγία Παγκείου Επιτροπής, 1940-1942.]
8. [Πουρναρόπουλος Γεώργιος. *Η Ιατρική του αγώνος*. *Η συμβολή των Υγειονομικών εις τον αγώνα της*

- Ανεξαρτησίας*. Αθήνα, 1973.]
9. [Αποστολίδης Χρήστος. *ΕΡΡΙΚΟΣ ΤΡΑΪΜΠΕΡ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ*, Αναμνήσεις από την Ελλάδα 1822-1828. Αθήνα, 1960.]
 10. [Μακρυγιάννης. *Απομνημονεύματα*, σε σχόλια Δημήτρη Φωτιάδη, επιμέλεια Έλλης Αλεξίου, μελέτη Γιάννη Βλαχογιάννη. Εκδόσεις Μέρμηγκα, Αθήνα, 1979.]
 11. [Φωτάκος (Χρυσανθόπουλος Φώτιος). *Βίοι Πελοποννησίων Ανδρών*. Εκδόσεις Ελευθέρη Σκέψις, 2003.]
 12. [Γκανιάτσας Κωνσταντίνος. *Βότανα-Γιατροσόφια-Κομπογιαννίται*. Ηπειρωτική Εστία, 1972.]
 13. [Esra Özsüer. Από το "*millet-i sadika*" στον προδότη Έλληνα. Εφημερίδα ΤΟ ΒΗΜΑ, 28 Φεβρουαρίου 2021.]

READY - MADE
CITATION

Markeas NG, Papachristos IV, Daras A. Provision of medical care to the 1821 Hellenic Revolution Fighters. *Acta Orthop Trauma Hell* 2021; 72(4): 332-339.