

Ioannis Karatzas:
The Cypriot Co-martyr of Rigas
[Ιωάννης Καρατζάς:
Ο Κύπριος Συμμάρτυρας του Ρήγα]

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Cypriot history, even before the beginning of the national Revolution of 1821, was in line with the course of the rest of the Greek world. Thus, the common desire for freedom and independence of the Greek nation was something that was burning in the hearts of the Greeks of Cyprus, too.

It is known that, on numerous occasions, Cypriot volunteers fought in the front line of the battles, from 1821 onwards, with the aim of throwing off the Ottoman-Turkish yoke. What is not known, however, but is equally important, is the fact of the participation of a Cypriot scholar of the diaspora, Ioannis Karatzas, in the pre-revolutionary plans made by the famous revolutionary Rigas Feraios and in the closed circle of his collaborators, with whom he, alas, met the same horrible fate. It is in this fact, as well as in aspects of Karatzas' personality, that the thorough biography by George I. Sourlas, sheds light on. It is the only existing printed biography of Karatzas, published by the Epiphaniou historical publications.

The author, in the first pages of his work, enlightens us about his intentions, referring -in the preface of his book- to Rigas; who, 'listening to his time', tried to become a pioneer and at the same time a servant of higher purposes, concerning the freedom of his people ('my partner is my whole nation', p. 7) and transforming himself into an early hero and martyr of the modern Greek nation. In this effort he was of course not alone, but on the contrary, he had seven other comrades who were martyred with him in the Nebojša Tower of Belgrade. There they were all killed on 24 June 1798, 23 years before the Greek Revolution. One of these 'unsung' heroes and collaborators of Rigas was Ioannis Karatzas from Cyprus, about whom this book was written, in an effort to restore his memory and present him to the Greek and foreign public.

In the first chapter of the biography, the author provides some very important information about Karatzas' early life. Thus, we learn that he was born in Nicosia, Cy-

prus, in 1767, probably a child of a wealthy merchant family, and probably attended the School of Greek Letters and Music or Ellinomouseion (founded in 1735), which was run by the Archbishops Philotheos, Paisios and Chrysanthos (p. 11). He also belonged to the second generation of the ‘early intellectual spring’¹ and was an important representative of the Greek Enlightenment (1774-1821), which displayed a more national and revolutionary direction, compared to the Western one, and paved the way for the armed national Revolution of 1821, adapting many elements to the Greek reality, with respect to both the Ancient and the Byzantine heritage.² In addition, he lived alongside the Archbishop and eventually ethnomartyr Kyprianos, who, apart from being a member of the revolutionary Society of Friends (*Filiki Eteria*), whose purpose was to secretly organise its members in order to prepare the ground for fighting off the Ottoman yoke, was also an important spiritual man of his time. The course of Karatzas’ life, however, was to be more adventurous.

At an early age, Karatzas left Cyprus and travelled to Central Europe, seeking his fortune in an environment that offered more economic and spiritual freedom. More specifically, he travelled to the two major centres of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, namely Vienna and Pest; while, he had previously resided in the Danubian Principalities and in Constantinople.

But his stays in Vienna, initially, and Pest were important and would prove decisive for him. In these two important centres of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in general throughout its territory, a rich intellectual life had developed and a multitude of Greek communities had grown, which reached the number of 30 (p. 16).

In Pest, he occasionally worked as a candelabra lighter in the Orthodox Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, probably to alleviate economic hardship. This had led in the past to his intellectual work being underrated, and even to his paternity being questioned.

However, based on modern historical findings, we can now say with certainty that Karatzas had had a broad education, spoke three languages, namely Greek (ancient

¹ About the intellectual life of Cyprus, see. Kostis Kokkinoftas, *Cyprus and 1821* (Nicosia: Centre for Studies of the Holy Monastery of Kykkos, 2021), George K. Myaris, ‘Cyprus and the Spiritual Movement of the New Hellenism in the mid-18th Century and up to the Beginning of the 19th century’, *Cypriot Studies*, 71, 2009, pp. 69-95 and Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *Cypriot Literacy (1571-1878): a Portrait View* (Nicosia: Centre for Scientific Research, 2002).

² K. Th. Dimaras, *Modern Greek Enlightenment* (Athens: Hermes, 1989) and Panagiotis Kondylis, *The Modern Greek Enlightenment: The Philosophical Ideas* (Athens: Themelio, 2008).

and modern), Latin and German,³ and his publishing and writing work was quite rich, which was, if not rare, quite sophisticated for that early period, when everything depended on personal will and hard work.

In particular, he published or wrote and published the following works: (a) the neo-Aristotelian *Introduction to Logic*, by George Sougdouris of Ioannina, (b) the *Pinax of Kevetus of Thebes*, an ancient Platonic philosopher; (c) the engraving of this *Pinax*, (d) his own ethical and literary work *Eros' Effects*, i.e. a moral-erotic history with songs themed after Constantinople, of which he wrote the third part together with his friend and collaborator and well-known representative of the Greek Enlightenment of his time, Athanasios Psalidas, (d) the popularized translation of the Bible, entitled *Holy History of the Old and New Testament*, by G. Zavira, e) the *Greek Calligraphy for Children*, and, finally, (e) the work of Joseph Petzel, *Dissertation and Critique on Greek and Other Languages* (pp. 40-1).

Out of these works only the first two are available nowadays, with an introduction by Karatzas himself, as well as his own work, *Eros' Effects*, which has many similarities, not coincidentally, we might say, to the, also ethical and literary, work of Rigas Feraios, *School of Delicate Lovers*. As we can see, all of his works were oriented towards education, the development of which was a central position of the Enlightenment. The only difference being that, in his case, it was oriented towards a 'subjugated genos' (nation), which he wanted to enlighten.

For this reason, he initially chose to publish the book *Introduction to Logic* by Sougdouris, since -apart from the fact that he wanted to highlight philosophy as the basic principle that stabilises every human condition and constitution, as he wrote in his introduction of this book- the author of this book had previously clashed with the more outmoded educational concepts of his time, namely the ecclesiastical authorities of Ioannina (p. 45). In the same line of connecting the pedagogical view of Enlightenment with a more modernised teaching practice, he published, in a separate book, the *Pinax of Kevetus of Thebes*, which was formerly provided to the students in the last pages of the official School Grammar. In this new form, he probably believed that it would not be a text detested by the students any more, frustrated as they were by the anachronistic educational system of their time; but, on the contrary, translated into a simpler form of Greek, it would be a better means, not only to introduce

³ Iliia Hadjipanagioti-Sangmeister, "The Library of the Cypriot Scholar Ioannis Karatzas. Reflections on his Intellectual Axis", in *Tribute to the University Teacher Vass. Sfyroera: from his Students* (Athens: Lyhnos, 1992), pp. 201-26.

the students to the philosophy of the Stoics, but also to more recent German philosophers, as is clearly seen from the addition of a German supplementary passage, translated by him, at the end of the original text (p. 51). Of course, he attempted the same with the Bible, republishing it in a more popularised form, the *Holy History of the Old and New Testament*, translated by G. Zavira (p. 68).

He did not stop at these didactic works, but instead wrote, as we have seen above, a literary work with philosophical and socio-political implications, the aforementioned *Eros' Effects*, which later become very popular in the Greek world. In this work, probably influenced by the German Enlightenment, he formulates a secularised moral philosophy that certainly does not resort to either moralism or materialism, but instead idealistically extols 'honest love' (p. 59).

In the second chapter, the author briefly provides the biographical details of the other six companions of Rigas and Karatzas, who, as we saw at the beginning of our text, were also executed. More specifically, the other six comrades were: (a) Efstratios Argentis, born in Chios from a rich merchant family, (b) the doctor Dimitrios Nikolidis from Ioannina, (c) the merchant and scholar, Antonios Koronios, also from Chios, (d) the merchant Theocharis Touroundzias from Siatista and, finally, (e) the brothers Ioannis and Panagiotis Emmanouil from Kastoria. All of them were educated and relatively wealthy. An equally important fact is that the average age of Rigas' companions did not exceed 30 years (Karatzas 31, Argentis 31, Nikolidis 32, Koronios 27, Touroundzias 22, and the brothers Emmanouil 24 and 22 respectively), while he was the oldest, at 41 (p. 72).

In the third chapter, after having sketched, in the two preceding chapters, the portrait of Karatzas and of the circle to which he belonged, the author gives us the chronicle of the martyrdom of him and his companions. It must be said at this point that Greek scholars and revolutionaries had developed a conscious and organised 'conspiratorial activity', even at the level of an informal society of European type, that was based on a common core of ideas, long before the appearance of the *Filiki Eteria*.⁴

But Koronios' associate, Dimitris Economou, denounced the society to the authorities of Trieste, handing over to them two letters by Rigas, that had been intended for Koronios. In the letters, Rigas gave information about three boxes full of revolutionary texts, written by him, which had been sent to the shop of the merchant

⁴ Dimitrios Karaberopoulos, *The Synomotic Action of Rigas Velestinlis* (Athens: The Scientific Society for Study of Feres-Velestino-Rigas, 2009).

Antonis Niotis by Argentis and which were to be received by Koronios (p. 89). This led to the arrest of Rigas, who had gone to Trieste with the intention of travelling to Venice, where he intended to meet in person Napoleon the Great, probably to ask for his assistance in the uprising he had been preparing. This first arrest was followed by the arrests of the rest of his associates; the very first among them were Karatzas and Touroundzias.

The Austro-Hungarian authorities, and in particular the monarch Franz I, who had expressed a personal interest about this case, considered that the ideas and activities of the society would lead to a destabilisation of the Ottoman Empire, which would be dangerous for them, having previously confronted the activities of the Hungarian nationalist and academic Ignác Martinovics (pp. 103-4).

Despite the harsh interrogation by the Austro-Hungarian authorities, Rigas and his associates did not turn in or betray their comrades. Karatzas in particular, throughout the interrogation remained taciturn and rigid, not revealing that he was a publisher but repeating, on purpose, that he was only a candelabra lighter, even though his books had been confiscated by the authorities (p. 34). After these interrogations, the Austro-Hungarian authorities concluded that they were guilty of ‘conspiratorial activity’ and they were handed over to the Ottoman authorities, who, after long and horrible torture, finally sentenced them to death by strangulation in the Nebojša Tower, outside Belgrade, having found them guilty of ‘conspiracy’, in 1798 (p. 111).

In conclusion, the author George I. Sourlas offers us not only a detailed and multidimensional biography of a little known scholar of the Greek Enlightenment and a fighter of national liberation, but also, through his vivid, lyrical and literary narrative, the life chronicle of an integral personality and a revolutionary scholar; who, like his compatriots would do later, from the Phalanx of Cypriots to EOKA, fought with all available means for the shaking off of the foreign yoke, both for his homeland Cyprus and for Hellenism as a whole.

George Dritsas