



Greek enlightenment in South Russia

Περίληψη :

Greek enlightenment in Southern Russia was a significant part of the overall enlightenment movement in the Hellenic world of the 18th - early 19th century. Its most important members were the prelates Evgenios Voulgaris and Nikiforos Theotokis, who furthermore were proponents of a much more tolerant attitude vis-a-vis the religious sect of the Old Believers. Odessa was a thriving center of the Greek Enlightenment in Russia. A famous Gymnasium was founded there and many prominent Greek lay intellectuals, such as Konstantinos Vardalachos and Georgios Gennadios taught and edited books.

Χρονολόγηση

Mid 18th- early 19th century

Γεωγραφικός εντοπισμός

South Russia, Odessa, Taganrog, Poltava

1. Introduction

The Greek Enlightenment occurred in southern Russia at the end of the eighteenth century because Greece and Russia shared a common Byzantine Orthodox heritage, Catherine II was determined to enact “enlightened” reforms, and Russian imperial ambitions in the Black Sea littoral and Greek desires for national emancipation from the Ottoman Empire converged. Evgenios Voulgaris and Nikiforos Theotokis, two Greek prelates in the service of Catherine and the Russian Orthodox Church, were the essence of the Greek Enlightenment in southern Russia. Their accomplishments and successes as clerics, administrators, translators of Western philosophical and scientific works, proponents and teachers of natural philosophy, defenders of free inquiry, scholars, and advocates for Greeks in Russia and the Ottoman territory epitomized the Greek Enlightenment. As a consequence of their activities, southern Russia became a crucible for a renewed Greece.

The Greek Enlightenment in southern Russia commenced when Russia defeated the Ottoman Empire in 1774. Among other important provisions, the [Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca](#) secured for Russia the rich territories north of the Black Sea. Catherine named the area New Russia and began to implement policies to realize its political consolidation, social integration, and economic development. To this end, Catherine’s government encouraged the colonization of the sparsely populated new territories with Russian and foreigners. Russia enticed [Greek colonists to New Russia](#) with promises of safety from the Ottomans, economic incentives to promote business and trade, and the freedom to maintain their cultural identity. Also attracted to the south were members of Russia's most prominent religious sect, the Old Believers, whom Catherine promised limited religious toleration in return for political allegiance to St. Petersburg.

2. Eugenios Voulgaris

Empress Catherine II and Prince Grigori Potemkin understood that New Russia’s unique situation required special leadership. Catherine appointed Potemkin governor-general of New Russia in 1774 and of [Azov](#) in 1775. Also in 1775, she appointed Evgenios Voulgaris (1716-1806) as archbishop of the newly established diocese of Slaviansk and [Kherson](#) whose borders complemented those of the two new provinces. Voulgaris, one of the most notable members of the Greek Enlightenment, was born in Corfu. He received his education in the Ionian islands, Ioannina, and Italy. After taking his monastic vows, Voulgaris spent twenty years as a teacher in the Greek East in places such as Ioannina (Maroutsis School), the Athonite Academy on Mt. Athos, and the [Great Patriarchal School in Constantinople](#). He also translated numerous Western philosophical and mathematical works during this period. In 1764, Voulgaris journeyed to Saxony, where he published yet more translations and even his own work, *Logic*. In Leipzig, he made the acquaintance of Voltaire and translated his essay, *On the Dissensions within the Churches of Poland*, into Greek in 1768. The Voltaire translation and his translation of Catherine’s *Nakaz* (Great Instruction) earned him an invitation to Russia in 1771. Voulgaris served at the Russian court as a highly-respected translator and publicist of Russia’s involvement in the Greek East.¹



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One of the main pillars of the Greek Enlightenment was education and, in 1774, Catherine asked Voulgaris to help create a school to assimilate those Greeks into Russian service who had assisted the Russians in their recent war with the Ottoman Empire. The school became the famous Greek Gymnasium and its curriculum was an exemplar of enlightened education: students studied Orthodoxy, languages (Russian, Greek, Turkish, Italian, German or French), mathematics, history, and geography.²

3. Nikiforos Theotokis

When Voulgaris arrived in Poltava, the administrative center of his new diocese, he was appalled by the low level of education among the priests and quickly decided to establish a seminary. To assist him in this task he secured an invitation for his friend and fellow Corfiote, Nikiforos Theotokis (1731-1800).³ By 1776, Theotokis had also emerged as a major figure in the Greek Enlightenment. Like Voulgaris, he too studied in Italy and became an advocate of the curriculum of the "new philosophy", i.e., grammar, rhetoric, poetics, logic, philosophy, theology, mathematics, physics, and astronomy. After Italy, he returned to Corfu, became a monastic priest, and established a public school that taught Greek students the "new philosophy". In 1765, he departed from Corfu and, by the time he arrived in Russia nearly ten years later, he had taught and preached in [Constantinople](#) (Istanbul) and Jassy (Princely Academy); published works on physics, theology, and homiletics in Leipzig; and declined the position of metropolitan of Philadelphia in Venice.

In 1779, Voulgaris retired as archbishop and Catherine appointed Theotokis as his successor. Voulgaris remained in Poltava for two years and then, in 1781, he moved to the city of [Kherson](#). Finally free from diocesan responsibilities, Voulgaris turned to scholarly pursuits once again. He wrote a number of scholarly works related to the region and translated Virgil's *Georgics* into Greek. In 1779, the small school created by Voulgaris officially became the Poltava Seminary. Theotokis expanded the curriculum to include Greek, French, German, arithmetic and drawing. The Poltava Seminary was the first seminary in Russia to offer Greek and modern languages. By 1786, he added philosophy and theology. The very presence of Voulgaris and Theotokis in Poltava (and later, their legacy) imbued the seminary with an aura of Neo-Hellenism and attracted to it such figures as [Alexandros Mavrocordatos](#) (1754-1819) and Athanasios Psalidas (1767-1829). Among the seminary's finest non-Greek students were the future philhellenes, Ivan I. Martynov (1771-1833) and Nikolai I. Gnedich (1784-1833). Martynov attended in the early 1780s and Gnedich a decade later. It seems the curriculum had a tremendous impact on them for they both became leading translators of the Greek classics into Russian. Among their achievements, Martynov published the monumental twenty-six volume *Greek Classics* and Gnedich translated the *Iliad*. They also published work on modern Greek during the Greek War of Independence.

Theotokis was acutely aware of the importance of a solid education in developing skills for social improvement and perpetuating traditions and customs. His educational career in the Greek East and especially on his home island of Corfu reflected Theotokis' fervent desire to assist his "nation" (genos) in preserving its identity. Theotokis was particularly anxious that the Greek immigrants to Russia should maintain their own Greek identity as well as become well-educated and productive citizens of Russia. In a 1781 letter to the Greek community at [Taganrog](#), Theotokis strongly suggested that the community send its children to the Greek Gymnasium in St. Petersburg or to the school in Poltava. He told them that Catherine had established the school for the Greek nation and that other Greeks had attended the school and now held positions in the Russian government.

Theotokis believed schools to be a top priority and went to great lengths to ensure their construction in the Greek communities of southern Russia. In 1786, Theotokis tried to persuade the Greeks of [Mariupol](#) to establish a school in that city. Theotokis impressed upon them that the study of scripture leads to the salvation of man's soul. He emphasized the study of Greek to maintain traditions and Russian to find success. He stressed that this success would be available to everyone, for the school would accept the poor and orphans and it would educate, feed, and clothe them. Theotokis was so convinced of the value of education that he proposed that the money and donations originally collected for the construction of a monastery be used for a school instead. Theotokis provided the impetus and precedent for other communities to develop schools to nurture and preserve the language and culture of Greece. Perhaps, as a consequence of Theotokis's initial educational advocacy, the Greeks of Taganrog opened a Commercial Gymnasium in 1807 and the Greeks of Mariupol established a school in 1818.⁴

4. The Greek Enlightenment in Odessa



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The Greek Enlightenment, and its emphasis on education, was later evident among the Greek merchant community of [Odessa](#) in the early nineteenth century. [Dimitrios Inglesis](#) (1773-1844), born on the island of Cephalonia (Kefalonia), came to Taganrog with his uncle in 1787. After some time, he eventually became a very wealthy merchant in Odessa. Inglesis used his considerable wealth and social and civic positions to benefit the Greek community in Odessa. In 1817, Inglesis and three other merchants founded the [Greek Commercial Gymnasium](#). In the tradition of the Voulgaris and Theotokis, the school offered courses in commerce, shipping, navigation, geography, history, religion, natural sciences, ancient and modern Greek, Russian, Italian, and German. Many of the school's instructors were Greek and included [Konstantinos Vardalachos](#), [Georgios Gennadios](#), [Georgios Lassanis](#), and Ioannis Makris. These instructors were extremely accomplished and helped attract a large and talented pool of students. By the end of the decade the school enrolled almost three hundred students.

5. Religious toleration and ecclesiastical politics in New Russia

Religious toleration was another significant component of the Enlightenment and this became manifest in New Russia. Catherine's interpretation of the role of religion within an enlightened framework was expressed in her *Nakaz* or Great Instruction of 1767: she wrote that it was beneficial to the state that all her subjects should hold religious beliefs and be free to practice them without fear of persecution. Thus, Catherine allowed the Old Believers to return to their places of origin from the periphery of the empire and to practice their faith. As generally understood, the Old Believers (also known as Raskol'niki, Schismatics, Old Ritualists) were those Orthodox Christians who had systematically rejected Patriarch Nikon's liturgical and doctrinal reforms enacted at the Council of 1666-7 in Moscow.

In 1777, the inhabitants of an Old Believer settlement in the village of Znamenka petitioned Archbishop Eugenios to permit them to construct a chapel (Old Believers, by law, were not allowed to erect churches so they built chapels) and to have a priest from among them to celebrate the divine liturgy according to the old books. As a condition, Voulgaris demanded that they renounce the schism and when they refused he denied the petition.

Undeniably, Voulgaris had set a precedent by even suggesting the possibility of accommodation and Theotokis was to follow his example. When Theotokis became archbishop he circulated a pastoral letter among the Old Believers signally his intent to return them to the Orthodox flock. He established points of commonality with them by highlighting his non-Russian origins as well as his long service in the Greek East (the Znamenka Old Believers were from Moldavia and Wallachia). Theotokis had concluded, on the basis of his vast experience in the Greek East, that the Old Believers, and their differences with the Russian Church, were unique to Orthodoxy, but could be reconciled within the context of Orthodoxy's universalism (i.e., non-dogmatic, non-particularistic).

In 1780, the Znamenka Old Believers, perhaps encouraged by the archbishop's pastoral letter, sent a petition to Theotokis. In it they renounced the schism and requested permission to construct a chapel and to summon a priest. With the renunciation, Theotokis approved the petition and allowed them to keep their old books and rites with the condition that they accept the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and its priests. This conditional reunion to the Church was called *edinoverie*. Theotokis traveled to Znamenka himself to consecrate the first *edinovertsy* church and decreed that none shall call them Schismatics for they were Christians of the true faith.

The governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Holy Synod, however, reproached him for his policy of conditional reunion and warned of a possible reversal of his actions. Theotokis worked quickly to prepare a justification for his actions in the hopes of avoiding a reversal or official admonishment. His written defense, *A Short Narrative on the Conversion of the Schismatics of the Village of Znamenka*, produced a cogent two-part argument to support his position: 1) the old books and rites were not illegal or blasphemous and some were still used by the Russian Church, therefore, they were not an obstacle to reunion; 2) the Church had displayed considerable leniency toward different rites in the past. Theotokis argued that it was not unity in rituals, but unity in faith which created the spiritual union of churches and believers.

Theotokis's decision to allow the Old Believers into the Church on the basis of conditional union was not overturned and the conditions granted by Theotokis were a catalyst for the realization of the *edinoverie* policy, eventually implemented in 1800 by



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Emperor Paul I.⁵

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Greek Enlightenment in southern Russia, primarily in the persons of Voulgaris and Theotokis, contributed significantly to the spread of the "new philosophy" in education, opened the door to religious toleration, helped the Greek communities of the region to preserve their cultural identity, aided the national cause of Greece from through the translation of Western philosophical and scientific works destined for the Greeks in the Ottoman Empire, and, in some respects, laid the foundations for the creation of the "Society of Friends" ([Filiki Etairia](#)).

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