

“In our times...when people seek to find in other people something clear and stable and compassionate, it is appropriate to speak of people such as Makriyannis.”

GEORGE SEFERIS



GENERAL IOANNIS MAKRIYANNIS (1797–1864) was an uneducated patriot who fought valiantly in the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832), and who made important contributions to the political life of the early Greek state. He played a prominent role in the granting of Greece’s first constitution, but is perhaps best known for his *Memoirs*, considered “a monument of Modern Greek literature” for being written in the simple, dynamic language of demotic Greek.

IOANNIS Makriyannis

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On the cover:

The Siege of Athens (detail), by Dimitrios Zographos

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“For the earth has no handle with which a single person... can lift it on his own shoulders... let him not imagine saying, ‘I did it!’ Let him say, rather, ‘We did it!’”

IOANNIS MAKRIYANNIS, MEMOIRS

THE PEASANT

Ioannis Makriyannis was born in Avoriti, a village in the mountains of Phocis, isolated from Ottoman rule. He was given the name Ioannis Triantaphyllos, and acquired the nickname Makriyannis (“Long John”) later on, because of his height. When his father was killed in a clash with forces of Ali Pasha, the boy’s family was forced to flee to Levadeia, where he spent the remainder of his childhood. Makriyannis never received any formal education.

THE GENERAL

Makriyannis joined the Philiki Etaireia in 1820, and first took arms against the Ottomans when the war broke out in 1821. He fought valiantly throughout Epirus, Roumeli, and the Peloponnese, leading several bands of warriors and eventually earning the rank of full general in 1824. In 1825, he relocated to Athens after marrying the daughter of a prominent Athenian, and in 1826 became provisional commander of 800 Greeks on the Acropolis during the second siege of the city. The general took part in battles during the last phases of the war, despite ailing from lifelong injuries sustained while defending the Acropolis.

THE STATESMAN

Makriyannis did much to lift up the nascent Greek state in the chaos following the war. From the start, he fought passionately and tirelessly for a constitution that would empower the people to elect their own leaders. These efforts often put him at odds (and his life in danger) with the new monarchy, as well as with the leaders of quarreling factions seeking to claim personal and political power.

One of the three leaders of the revolt of 3 September 1843, Makriyannis mobilized the population to pressure the monarchy into granting a constitution. He was a leading member of the National Assembly, whose work led to the constitution’s signing in March 1844, then served as a representative to the National Constitutional Conference two decades later in 1864, the year of his death. The national hero is buried in the First Cemetery of Athens, where he is remembered for leading Greece to independence through his selfless deeds and actions.

THE AUTHOR

Shortly after teaching himself to read and write while stationed in Argos, Makriyannis began composing his memoirs in 1829. Understanding history as a duty to future generations, he was concerned that accounts of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary years in Greece would be tainted by biased political agendas. Seeing himself as an objective critic because he was not affiliated with any political power, the author hoped his memoirs would serve as an impartial firsthand account of the war and the beginnings of the modern Greek state.

The result is a vivid and dramatic work that serves as a rare written example of the era’s common spoken language of demotic Greek. Novelist Yiorgos Theotokas called Makriyannis’s *Memoirs* “a monument of Modern Greek literature” and Nobel laureate George Seferis anointed him as “one of the greatest masters of Modern Greek prose.” Makriyannis’s *Memoirs* were completed in 1850, and published in 1907.



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THE MAKRIYANNIS COLLECTION OF THE GENNADIUS LIBRARY

To better communicate his writings, especially to the illiterate, Makriyannis commissioned the Spartan Zographos to illustrate the most important battles from the war. They visited the battle sites together, and Zographos used his patron’s descriptions and sketches to create a series of 24 paintings on wood (1836–1839). Four copies in watercolor were presented to the monarchs of the countries involved in the war: Greece, Russia, England, and France.

All but Queen Victoria’s set (now in Windsor Castle) were unknown until 1909, when John Gennadius purchased an almost-complete set in Rome believed to have belonged to King Otto. The 24 paintings now reside in the Gennadius Library, and remain on rotating display in the Ioannis Makriyannis Wing. Powerful and direct like Makriyannis’s *Memoirs*, the paintings juxtapose the old style of Greek folk art with the more modern style of the Western European tradition, reflecting the rapidly changing world of post-revolutionary Greece.