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The Political Symbolism of Flags in Revolutionary Movements: The case of the 1821 Greek War of Independence

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Introduction

On Wednesday 20th January 2021, a sea of flags filled the National Mall for the inauguration of the new President, Joe Biden, in the United States. This artistic installation, entitled the ‘Field of Flags’, constituted some 191,500 American national and state flags. The flags were intended to represent the breadth of the US population, given that people were unable to attend the ceremony due to the coronavirus pandemic (Winsor, 2021). This poignant scene exemplifies how a nation can collectively identify through a process of symbolism. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s work, *Imagined Communities*, Arthur (2019:1) argues, that it is through a “process of imagining and meaning-making, [that] symbols bind such groups together and enable their coexistence and positive, collective identification”.

Throughout history, political symbols have played a vital role in fostering collective identities, including, prominently, in both the making of nations and the subsequent sustaining of nationhood. Political symbols used by revolutionary movements, as well as by other political formations, have been meticulously studied by sociologists, political anthropologists and social movement scholars (Elgenius, 2011; Arthur, 2019; Voegelin, 1987; Tilly, 1995). Resonating across human history through social imaginaries, religion, political ideologies and value systems, political symbols have been omnipresent in social life since antiquity. It is for this reason that Wydra (2011:5) refers to them as “phenomena of the *longue durée*.” There are thus many examples across space and time where and when popular symbols of resistance have possessed mass appeal and visibility; from the tricolor cockade of the French Revolution, to the yellow umbrella of the 2014 and 2019 Hong Kong protests (Patsiaouras et al., 2017). Amongst such signs of resistance, flags have played a dominant role, especially with respect to the revolutionary movements of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Drawing on the premise that symbols are open to a variety of disparate meanings, some argue that symbols are less real or of secondary importance to the world of politics. In line with other scholars (Elgenius, 2011; Wydra, 2011), this paper argues the exact opposite; that sometimes, their consideration is essential in attempting to achieve a more comprehensive or holistic understanding of reality. As Elgenius (2011:5) eloquently suggests “it is through such symbols that the past remains in the present and tells us something about the importance of history in the making of nations”.

In line with the argument made above, to better understand both the creation and use of symbols and the meanings attributed to them, it is necessary to consider the historical contexts and complexities involved. In this chapter, we conduct a social semiotic analysis of the flags used during the Greek War of Independence. Drawing on studies that understand symbols to be significant components in nation-building processes and attendant communications (Arthur, 2019; Blumer, 1980), we examined the meanings and functions of the flags that were created and used by the Greek revolutionaries. Social semiotics allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between form and the semiotic choices made by the revolutionaries in their specific historical contexts, because, as Aiello (2020: 373) argues, *signification* is conceived “as a process deeply embedded in existing cultural norms and shaped by social structures.” In social semiotics the focus is dual, on both the *sign* and on the “way people use semiotic ‘resources’ both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them [...] in the context of specific social situations and practices” (van Leeuwen, 2005: xi).

The Greek War of Independence constitutes an interesting case study, since, despite fighting for a common aim, the lack of a unified leadership resulted in the creation of various flags that depicted the ideology, history and religious convictions of each of the different groups of revolutionaries. Taking into consideration the specific temporal, political and social contexts and characteristics, we seek to contribute to existing scholarship through an in-depth understanding and examination of the use of flags as powerful political symbols. We argue that flags have a predominant dual role: on the one hand to facilitate the formation of a collective identity, and on the other, to communicate in a way that provides visibility and consolidates alliances with external partners.

Revolutionary symbols, collective identity and action

From images of the olive branch and the dove as expressing resistance to military campaigns in ancient Greece and Rome (Finley, 1983) and diverse political banners displayed at the Hippodrome in Constantinople (Langdale, 2019), to the Guy Fawkes masks of Occupy Wall Street (Beer, 2018), revolutionary symbols have a long-standing history. Political revolutionary symbols are emotional and affective, capturing the “minds and hearts in ecstatic, out-of-ordinary situations” of ordinary people (Wydra, 2011:4). Explanations as to the power of such symbols have long been at the centre of debates between action theorists and structuralist traditions (Cohen, 1969; 1979); in which the former view symbols as a manifestation of agency, and the latter focus on them as

examples of collective representation. Research in political anthropology makes clear how such symbols, through social imaginaries, religious value systems and political ideologies, have resonated across human history – and that, as such, revolutions are not merely examples of externally imposed institutional or structural change, but phenomena that involve agency, through creative acts that serve to structure peoples’ consciousness and aspirations (Wydra, 2011: 5-6).

In out-of-ordinary situations people form their identities through symbolic interaction, social performance, and image-making practices (Wydra, 2011), which, as Sewell (2005) argues constitute examples and sites of cultural creativity. Various semiotic practices, such as the use of symbols and art, have long been used by people to communicate, and develop knowledge and understanding (Duncombe, 2017). According to symbolic interactionism theory the use of symbols is central to communication, as our experiences, relationships, and knowledge are inexorably mediated through them (Blumer, 1980). Symbols provide people with a means to interact with their social environment, and within the context of a given group of people, they facilitate the creation of a common language that promotes group meaning. As Elgenius (2011:13) argues “symbols provide short cuts to the group they represent and symbolism is by nature referential, subjective and boundary-creating.” It seems most likely that it was during the French Revolution that revolutionary symbols of protest, such as the tricolor cockade and “The Marseillaise”, were prominently deployed in order to create mass appeal amongst the public and revolutionaries (Andress, 2015). Tilly (1986; 1995) has provided a critical exploration of the use of symbols in protests and strikes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Throughout these periods, in the absence of any sophisticated channels of communication, revolutionary movements paid particular attention to protest symbolism – such as flags, garments and banners, amongst other examples. The use of red flags by the 1870 Paris Commune became a powerful emotive symbol espoused by subsequent communist and socialist movements (Leith, 1978). In a similar vein, the symbols and slogans of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, such as the Little Red Book, propaganda posters, and revolutionary songs, were designed to be striking and memorable (Wang, 2008). This communication, through the use of distinctive common symbols, sought to attract people and thus build party membership, increase visibility, and develop class-consciousness amongst working class people (Berger and Nehring, 2013).

In the early 20th century, a series of spectacular and creative protest movements and campaigns emerged, such as women’s struggles for the vote and for equal rights. In the United Kingdom, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) adopted an innovative protest repertoire, that encompassed the employment of non-traditional womanhood symbols, large parades, and other more militant radical tactics, in order to communicate their message, increase popular engagement and encourage political participation (Teske and Tetrault, 2000). The movement was very successful in promoting its aims and the formation of a collective identity (Smith, 2003). It is the formation of a group’s collective identity that allows its members to recognise themselves, as well as be recognised by others, as forming part of a broader collective with emotional attachments. It

is within such contexts that symbols are particularly effective as “they express social values in ways that allow for a common form to be retained and shared” (Elgenius, 2011:15), and possess the potential to inspire mobilisation and engagement with working for change or transformation.

A considerable number of studies have provided novel insights on the roles played by symbols and visual arts in communicating messages, and with respect to educating and mobilising the public (Patsiaouras et. al., 2011; McGarry et. al., 2019), as co-creating and consolidating collective identities (Adams, 2002). From the revolutionary events of May 1968 to the more recent Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, we have witnessed a series of new movements that have taken to the streets in spectacular and creative ways that are central to the promotion of their demands for new identities and ways of living, and their campaigns against racism and violence (Buechler, 1995; Blaagaard, 2019). Activists in dialogue with their society become ‘culture users and producers’ (Alexander, 2006), and in doing so, as Olesen (2013: 7) argues, they “not only *reflect* society, they also *produce* it, by [...] contributing to its stock of shared symbols”.

The role of flags in revolutionary movements

Flags have always been among the most potent of political symbols. Emperors, religious leaders, military commanders, political entities, nations, and revolutionary movements - much before the creation of their nations - have used flags to signify and reinforce desired and distinctive characteristics, to raise awareness of and build membership, and to elevate their national or comradeship spirit. Flags have always been celebrated as objects of veneration; in particular as symbols used for marking the declaration of independence and to glorify nations. Although this chapter focuses on the subset of national independence movements, it is important to recognise that flags have been more widely used. In her seminal study, *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism*, sociologist Gabriella Elgenius (2011:3) argues that “flags have remained successful political symbols because they *authenticate boundaries* between those who belong and those who do not.” Drawing on such arguments, we can say that such symbols have a strong effect upon the community because they consolidate its collective identity and enhance a sense of belonging.

Despite this importance, while the history of the use of flags spans considerable historical periods, it was not until the 1960s that a stand-alone field for their study emerged. Whitney Smith (1969, 1975) coined the term *vexillology* to represent the study of the history and symbolism of flags. This term refers to *vexillum*, which, deriving from the Latin for sails, were flags and standards of the Roman army; the latter being the flags built on heraldic shields that denoted military units in battle, or the personal flags of emperors or high ranked officials (Elgenius, 2011:28-29). The Romans used a range of different vexilloids as emblems of identification. For example, the Roman Empire used a variety of different animals for this purpose before adopting the eagle as the sole standard of the Roman legions; a symbol which was considered sacred, and whose divinity was embodied by the empire (Elgenius, 2011). These early forms of flags were characterised by their

adaptability in use, as the main aim was that they were easy to use, to transport and display, across a range of contexts and situations, so that they were ubiquitously visible to the people. Several studies of political symbolism have supported Durkheimian assumptions, which propose that national symbols, such as flags, can be seen as modern totems which “merge the mythical sacredness of the nation into forms experienced by sight and sound” (Elgenius, 2011: 14; Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984). To better understand the potency of such symbolisms, we again draw on Durkheim (1976) for his explanation of the relationship between the piece of cloth and the meanings attached to it, the transfer of emotions to objects. According to Durkheim, the soldier who dies for his flag, dies for his country; and in his consciousness, the flag, as its representation, actually is his country. If it is lost to the enemy, the soldier is willing to risk their life to reclaim it. The soldier is oblivious of the fact that the flag is only a sign with no inherent value; he fixates on the reality that it represents, and as such treats it as if it were the reality itself (Durkheim, 1976: 221).

In order for the flag to be treated as if it were the actual reality itself, Eriksen and Jenkins (2007) argue that it must constitute an *empty vessel*, in order for it to both be meaning laden and allow for changes to the meanings it encapsulates over time. In this sense, simplicity in design as allowing multifaceted associations of belonging that can thus be attached to flags works to induce strong emotions that can serve to initiate group action (Firth, 1973). Political and militant leaders across space and time have designed their banners with ingenuity and a close association with their key (often religious) beliefs. Flag symbolism has a long history. The development of silk farming allowed for the construction of colourful and enduring flags, such as Chinese flags dated to 3000 BC (Crampton, 1992). The Arabs further developed cloth flags, incorporating colours that were associated with Mohammed and bearing specific inscriptions (Smith, 1975). The banner of the 18th-century Moorish State of Granada displayed the inscription “There is no conqueror but God” on a red background (Elgenius, 2011). As Elgenius (2011:30) argues, “the association of specific colours with dynasties and individual leaders reinforced political identities and became the basis for all modern flags.” These Arab military banners became the source of inspiration for the flags of many Western European countries during the conflicts between Christians and Muslims of the Crusades.

From the eleventh century onwards, through its use in the crusades, the cross became the distinctive symbol of Christianity (Elgenius, 2011; Smith, 1975). The Crusader flag was a red cross on white. Often emerging in times of warfare, such as the crusades, the flags and banners carried by various troops and armies, reflected deep rooted ideological and religious divisions, as well as territorial claims. Ethnopolitical symbols, often related to religion, among other identities – including linguistic and ethnic association – provided a means for organising membership and the creation of clear boundaries of belonging (Armstrong, 1982). Studies contend that religious symbols help group members to not only collectively define themselves, but also exclude others

(strangers or outsiders) (Armstrong, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 2004). The tricolour flag came to symbolise the struggle against oppression, with the three colours – red, white and blue – becoming known as the three ‘colours of liberty’ (Elgenius, 2011:36). As such, the tricolour flag of The French Revolution became a symbol of revolution, being adopted by many subsequent revolutionary movements and struggles.

Across the years, flags have managed to attain a distinctive prominence amongst other forms of political symbolism. Their flexibility, derived from a simplicity of design that allows for differing interpretations and the re-invention of their meanings, has helped to ensure their longevity. A prominent example of such is the case of the Red Flag, a political symbol closely associated with protest and resistance. Following a long and turbulent history, having been initially used in the 1830 and 1848 revolutions in France and subsequently the Paris Commune of 1870, the red flag was to become associated with Communism. In Russia, it was used during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, and in 1923 it was adopted as the flag of the USSR, incorporating a depiction of a golden hammer and sickle emblem (Elgenius, 2011:60). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Eastern European countries were quick to resurrect or produce new national symbols and flags to reflect their newly independent national realities.

The context: the 1821 Greek War of Independence

The Greek War of Independence (also known as the Greek Revolution of 1821-1832) involved the successful rebellion of Greek revolutionaries against the Ottoman Empire, an event and subsequent processes which gradually led to the formation of modern Greece. The outbreak of the revolution was the outcome of a wide range of factors (ideological, political, financial, socio-structural) (Kitromilides, 2013; Lekas, 2006). The revolutionary spirit had long been nourished by the *Philikí Etaireía* (the Friendly Society), a secret patriotic organisation founded, in Odessa in 1814, by well-educated merchants of the Greek diaspora who had become attracted to Jacobin-style politics and aimed to advance liberal and radical agendas (Hatzopoulos, 2009: 81). The Society’s aims were supported by a growing Philhellenic movement in Western Europe, rooted in the newly emerging ideas of romantic nationalism (Beaton, 2013). Drawing on the classical Greek past, which at that time was viewed by many in Europe as representing a national ideal, the idea of “the ‘Greek people’ as a distinctive community with a common culture” was being passionately promoted (Hatzopoulos, 2009:81).

Moreover, by the 1820s, Greek merchant settlements were spread all along the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as in the major commercial and financial hubs of Central and Western Europe. These merchant communities were, by definition, urban and, thanks to their numerous connections and contacts with the West, they also tended to be literate and imbued by liberal ideals. Their financial resources, which were to provide the initial source of funding for the Greek nationalist movement prior to the foreign loans contracted for during the War of

Independence, were drawn from commercial activities not only in and around the Ottoman Empire itself, but, more importantly, between East and West (Lekas, 2006:170-171). An additional factor was that, within the Ottoman Empire, there were ethnic Greek political elites occupying decision making positions in the empire's administration (e.g., Phanariots in Istanbul and Moldavia). This secured both access to and a form of partial control of the empire's administration, as well as serving to provide the kind of political experience necessary to undertake a successful uprising against the Ottoman empire (Lekas, 2006; Finlay, 1877).

A further important factor was that revolutionary ideas increasingly predominant in the West, as evidenced by the American and French Revolutions, further intensified the desire for collective autonomy and subsequently a disposition for action (Horton, 1976; Dakin, 1952). These ideas, along with the prevalence of the Christian Orthodox religion in the region (as opposed to the Muslim religion, as predominant in the Ottoman Empire) (Finlay, 1877), formed the core of the ideological apparatus supporting the Greek War of Independence. In political terms, relying heavily on the then emerging ideological/political current of nationalism, the Greek War of Independence ought to be viewed as the "Greek exit" from traditionality, one more instance in a much broader process of historic transformations that wrested mankind out of tradition and into modernity (Lekas, 2006:166). This revolutionary upsurge was realised by the coming together of different strata of society, the Phanariots,¹ the peasantry and the agrarian elites. As various historians attest, the lower rural strata did aspire (however inarticulately) not merely to national liberation, but also to a more equitable society (Lekas, 2006:177). The Greek Revolution was characterised by the presence of internal social grievances and conflicts of interest. As such, the history of the revolution is also the complicated story of shifting factions which attempted to gain control of government and land (Finlay 1877; Dakin, 1952:232). In the face of such disparate groupings and objectives, when nationalistic activism developed in prominence, form and membership, the need to communicate its agenda in an effective manner became imperative (Panagiotopoulos, 2003).

Analysis: The symbolism of flags of the 1821 Greek War of Independence

The instigation of the Greek Revolution found diverse factions of society fighting for a common aim, but essentially lacking a unified leadership. As a result, each group of revolutionaries possessed their own flag, one that represented their particular ideology, history, origins and religious convictions. Through our research, we managed to find 67 flags of revolutionaries. As it

¹ The Phanariots was a class of wealthy, Western educated, Greek merchants who were influential in the administration of the Ottoman Empire. Despite their cosmopolitanism, they were very much aware of their Hellenism (in broad terms the spread of ancient Greek culture and religion).

was not possible to analyse all these flags, given the limitations of this project, we have selected an indicative sample from them, that best illustrate the arguments developed here. We chose nine flags for the purpose of this study based on the criteria that these are among the most well-known flags, and that they include patterns that are featured in the majority of the flags.

Within processes of insurrection and nation-building, the existence of diverse subjective identities is common ground, and it is exactly in such cases that the power of political (national) symbols is illustrated through the fact that “they enable unity and solidarity without de facto homogeneity” (Arthur, 2019: 15). Within such a context, the flags used during the Greek Revolution became highly charged political instruments in the fight for independence, bearing strong symbolic importance in the processes of the formation of collective identity, as well as in the strategic communication of the insurrection’s aims. Moreover, in the Greek case, flags achieved prominence because they managed to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers.²

In what follows, we present and discuss two prevalent themes that emerge from our analysis of these flags, namely, (a) *identification*, the process of belonging and stating one’s identity, and (b) *internationalisation and alliances*, the process of gaining visibility and support beyond one’s borders.

Identification

One of the most striking elements stemming from the analysis of the flags is the prevalent depiction of religious symbols and specifically the cross. As Figure 5.3.1 illustrates, various flags depicted specific religious figures, including the Virgin Mary and Saint George fighting the dragon. Both were figures conceived of as acting as protectors of the revolutionaries, while the well-known hagiographical narrative of Saint George also connoted the good fight against an evil enemy. Interestingly, the cross was not only depicted on the flags, but also formed the endpoint of the pole of the flag, with a somewhat sharp end, so as to be used as a spear during battle.

² The cross, as a ubiquitous symbol, appearing on almost all of the revolutionary flags, was intended to unite different populations under the rationale of the Orthodox doctrine, thus “bridging” the cultural gaps and identities of different localities and populations (Finlay, 1877: 8-9).



Figure 5.3.1: From top left to right, (a) Paleon Patron Germanos' flag, (b) the flag of Parga E., (c) Bisbinis' flag, (d) K. Dragonas' flag, (e) M. Botsaris' flag ©ellas2021

As Hatzopoulos (2009: 86) argues, there was a pressing demand for “ideological elements capable of activating and mobilizing the masses”; these were very much predicated on the Christian Orthodox doctrine, as they had to be perceived as “a reservoir of myths and symbols capable of galvanizing anti-Ottoman sentiments”. Of course, for any mobilisation to take place, the formation of a collective identity, a shared sense of belonging, was a necessary pre-requisite (Smith, 2003; Elgenius, 2011). In the case of the Greek War of Independence fostering a unified ‘national’ identity, was a considerable challenge given the heterogenous composition of the revolutionary movement (as described above), as well as due to the fact that a consensus as to the need for a ‘neohellenic’ consciousness was only just emerging (Lekas, 2006). It is in such contexts of division and internal tensions that, as Arthur (2019: 2) argues, symbols acquire a significant “unifying function” as they allow for “a plethora of imaginings of identity to join under one visual object”. In this vein, the symbolism of the Greek Revolution drew upon the tripartite of shared faith, common descent, and the objective for national liberation, so as to reconcile the traditional and the modern, in order to form and enhance a collective identity, ultimately to create a common language promoting shared meaning across the group. As Hatzopoulos (2009:88) eloquently argues the imagery and language of Christian faith, in particular the reinterpretation of Resurrection, as

framed in nationalist terms, was used to appeal to the Orthodox and traditional constituents in the population, in order to develop their sympathies in support of nationalist ideals, objectives and actions, while serving to further shape and augment a collective identity through an acceptance of the revolutionaries' foundational myth of Hellenic descent.

The emphasis on religious symbols (specifically the cross) was also an attempt to differentiate such flags from those of the opposition featuring the Ottoman crescent moon. As such, the sign of the cross was intended to unify, to act as a glue binding the revolutionaries together within a religious collectivity; the subjugated Christians struggling against the Muslims. Such symbolism on the flags was frequently complemented with powerful emotive text, designed to further boost the fighting spirit. Indicative texts included: 'Freedom or Death' (*Ελευθερία ή Θάνατος*); 'Jesus Christ Prevails' (*Ιησούς Χριστός Νικά*); 'Freedom-Motherland-Religion' (*Ελευθερία-Πατρίδα-Θρησκεία*) (see Figure 1, flag images, a,d,e, respectively).

During the revolution, flags were glorified and celebrated; from merely waving them to using them as weapons in fight, they constituted the prime vehicles of loyalty to the cause of liberation and belonging. Upon a closer inspection, the flags' celebration can better be explained through the Durkheimian ideas and those like-minded studies that see flags as modern totems (Elgenius, 2011; Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984). Every chieftain was performing a ritual of sanctification for their new flag. The ritual included the setting of a big wooden cross and the flag that the community and the soldiers worshiped (a place of pilgrimage) and to which they vowed to fight for their faith and their motherland (*Υπέρ Πίστεως και Πατρίδος*). Such rituals were designed to facilitate and intensify the transfer of emotions to symbols and thus the consolidation of a collective identity. This role of increasing and strengthening recruitment to a cause, is reflected in studies, such as that of Berger and Nehring (2013) which illustrated how distinctive symbols were used to build party membership.

Internationalisation and Alliances

The religious symbols depicted on the flags did not just serve an internal purpose, that of the formation of a collective identity, but also that of connecting with potential external allies in the name of Christianity. The Cross was the distinctive symbol of the Christians in the Crusades; a symbol that thus clearly drew distinctions and boundaries between Christians and both Pagans and Muslims (Elgenius, 2011; Smith, 1975). In a similar vein, other religious figures were utilised, in particular St. George, who was believed to be the protector of the knights during the First Crusade.

Another popular motif depicted on the flags is the mythological bird, the phoenix (see Figure 5.3.2, image a); which relates originally to Egyptian and later Greek and Roman mythology, in which the phoenix is considered immortal, as it is reborn from its ashes. It was a symbol widely used by the Friendly Society (Lekas, 2006), with a dual purpose: firstly, to link to the past and instill in the

uprising Greeks a belief in being the descendants of the ancient Greeks fighting for the “re-birth” of the Greek nation, and secondly, also harking back to historical Greece, to connect with the philhellenic stance of western European intellectuals who admired ancient Greek civilisation.



Figure 5.3.2: From top left to right, (a) A. Ipsilantis's flag, (b) T. Kolokotronis' flag, (c) United State of the Ionian Islands flag, (d) R. Feraios' flag, ©A. Argiros (image c) ©ellas2021 (images a,b,d)

External influences were also apparent on the flags of certain revolutionary leaders, with some clearly being inspired by the tricolor, as the most prominent flag of the French Revolution. Examples are provided by the tricolour flags of Alexandros Ipsilantis' and Rigas Feraios'³ (Figure 5.3.2, images a, d), on which red connoted patriotism, white fraternity, and black sacrifice. The tricolor flag was a global symbol of the struggle against oppression and had been widely used by many, including the Dutch and the Russians (Elgenius, 2011:50). Some of the flags of these revolutionaries bore symbols that either related to their allies or to countries closely connected to their political history. An example of such is the flag of Theodore Kolokotronis (see Figure 5.3.2,

³ Ipsilantis was from a prominent Phanariot Greek family that held high positions in Russian society, and that had a leadership role in the Friendly Society. Feraios was a writer and political thinker, active in the Modern Greek Enlightenment. He was an important foundational figure of the Greek Revolution.

image b) – a Greek general and pre-eminent leader of the revolution – which is basically the Russian flag portraying the blue cross of Saint Andrew. Another flag that reflects the stormy history of the Greek territories is that of the United State of the Ionian Island (USII). The USII was a Greek semi-autonomous state and protectorate of the UK between 1815-1864 (also previously known as the Ionian State when under Russian-Ottoman occupation). As seen in Figure 2 (flag image c), the flag constitutes an amalgam of the state's history; depicting the yellow winged Venetian lion holding the Gospel, the seven spears symbolising the seven islands, with the flag of the UK embedded in it. The use of such symbols or patterns (e.g., a tricolour) could also be seen as a way to emphasise or gain external revolutionary sympathies and support. Concurrent with Tilly (1986), we argue that, in periods characterised by the lack of any sophisticated channels of communication, flags played a vital internal and external communicative role.

Concluding remarks

This study has sought to shed light on the critical roles flags perform in fostering the collective identification of diverse actors, and with respect to such collectives communicating ideas and messages both internally and externally. This chapter's analysis of flags has served to demonstrate that the semiotic choices that were made (as to religious symbols, established symbolic patterns – e.g., the tricolor flag) served a variety of purposes, that include; creating a sense of belonging, calling for participation and recruitment, boosting fighting morale, raising awareness, and encouraging support through nurturing revolutionary sympathies. Attaching shared meanings to symbols provides a powerful way of communicating, that empowers through fostering a shared identity within movements whose stimulus can subsequently lead to action (Duncombe, 2016; Stanton et al., 2017).

While this chapter is focused on a single case study, it highlights how developing understandings as to the symbolic meanings of flags can serve to further our understanding of the identities and development of revolutionary movements. The examination of such political symbols facilitates our reflections on how people identify, how political aims are imagined, and how collective action is achieved across diverse groupings. While flags have predominantly been explored through the theoretical lenses of nationalism, it is proposed that further research on the communicative functions of such political symbols can offer much broader insights as to the development and functioning of social and revolutionary movements. Engaging in comparative analyses could help us understand how symbols and their meanings have been shared, throughout history, by revolutionaries and activists, and how, in and through these processes of struggle, they have been revised, modified or adapted.

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