

THE ADMIRAL Bouboulina

Transcript of [What'sHerName Episode 43](#)

[ad] This episode was sponsored by [Girls Can! Crate](#), a subscription box inspiring girls to believe that they can be and do anything. Real women make the best heroes and every month they deliver them to your front door.

[theme music]

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

KN: Let's say you only had two choices in life: either you live a life of grueling hard work and suffering, or you have to live a life of extreme social isolation and boredom.

OM: Oh man!

KN: Which one would you choose?

OM: [laughs] ...I don't know.

KN: It's interesting to consider.

OM: Um, there's no other options? Something else?

KN: Well, lucky for you, we can choose *neither* in the modern world. But, in 18th century Greece, these were the only two paths available to women. And back then, women couldn't *choose* one or the other. Poor women lived the life of grueling work and suffering, and wealthy women lived in extreme social isolation and loneliness. *No* women, regardless of their status, rich and poor, had any education whatsoever.

And today, I'm going to tell you about one woman who changed all of that forever.

OM: Yay!

KN: But - Greece as we know it didn't actually exist yet. At this point in time, everything on and around the Aegean was part of the [Ottoman Empire](#).

OM: That's Turkey, right?

KN: Yeah. It's *now* Turkey, but it used to be a massive, Middle Eastern empire - wealthy, powerful, at one point probably the most powerful empire on Earth. And like any massive empire, it crushed its fair share of uprisings here and there. Its capital, Constantinople - now Istanbul - is actually my favorite city in the world. I love it! And back then, as today, it spanned two continents, and it was stunning and elegant and an icon of the Ottoman state.

Picture the [Blue Mosque](#) sitting regally across this great square from the [Hagia Sophia](#), the most incredible medieval dome - markets are bustling, ships on the Bosphorus sail in and out carrying goods from all over the world. Music is sounding ending out from the streets. and from the minarets... but we're not staying here.

OM: Oh man!

KN: Because there are darker corners of Constantinople - and our story begins there, in prison. A dark and horrible place that modern westerners probably can't really even imagine, and in this terrible place, a mother is giving birth.

May 11th, 1771. This woman is there because her husband is imprisoned, and she has ventured miles and miles to visit him. Her husband participated in one of those uprisings I mentioned, and he's paying the ultimate price. The conditions in the prison are so bad, though, that his suffering won't last long. He holds out long enough to meet his new child, and then dies shortly after. The baby was a girl - a common nobody, born in a prison, fatherless and fortuneless - but she would go on to dedicate her life to liberation. Liberation not just for herself, or for Greece, but for women *everywhere* - so we are going to love her. [laughter]

Against all odds she made a fortune, she used it to build ships, and she sails the seas in command of a fleet that would take on the Ottoman Empire's most impregnable strongholds. She was braver and stronger and more daring than them all. In fact today in Greece her very name has come to mean "strong woman" - Bouboulina, the Greek freedom fighter, and until very recently, the only female admiral in the history of the world.

OM: Wow.

[theme music]

KN: I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And I'm Olivia Meikle

KN: And this is *What'sHerName*.

OM: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

KN: So, while I was in Greece - we've already established, I went there to teach Study Abroad -

OM: Yeah.

KN: I met a woman, mostly by coincidence, who was on her way back home to the island of [Spetses](#).

Vassiliki Opsimouli: My name is Vassiliki Opsimouli. I'm from Ligourio, Epidavros in Greece. I'm from Spetses - so I know the story of this brave woman very well.

KN: She told me about how Spetses was known as Bouboulina's Island. And she just mentioned how the legacy of Bouboulina is still powerful today, and I was like... *Who? Who is this woman?* And I was literally in my swimming suit, ready to head out to snorkel over a sunken city - but I had to grab my recording equipment and hear this story. [laughter] Totally took her off guard. Because I had never heard of Bouboulina, and her story is so incredible and she is legendary in Greece.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: Exactly, her story is also in the school books.

KN: And here I had this woman from Spetses.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: As I'm from Spetses I know a little bit more to tell than the school books, right.

KN: Vassiliki Opsimouli worked as a guide at [Bouboulina's Historic House](#) before she left the island of Spetses - and in fact the owners of the museum say she was the best ever, and every year they tried to get her to come back. So this is my first interview conducted in my swimming suit [laughter] sitting at a table outside my hotel in Epidaurus. But, I just *had* to get this story.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: Her name was Laskarina Bouboulina. Laskarina was the first name and Bouboulina the second name, the surname. And in Greek, Bouboulina means 'the wife of Bouboulis.' Bouboulis was the surname of her second husband, so Bouboulina means the wife of Bouboulis.

KN: Laskarina Bouboulina is a legendary national hero in Greece. Before the introduction of the Euro, she was on the one drachma coin *and* the fifty drachma note. There's a statue of her in Spetses, and her house is a museum.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: It's a very interesting museum, that - there is a guided tour for everybody. So of course, there you can learn more details about her story and her actions.

KN: But, surprise, surprise - there are very few written records about her. Her story was recorded in folk tales and folk songs and legends and stories, preserved by the people of Greece, and by her own descendants.

So Bouboulina's great-grandson describes her as, quote, *dark in coloring and with a regal stature and untamed character*. So I like her already.

OM: Yeah.

KN: The first time we really see her is at age seventeen, when she marries for the first time. And this isn't surprising that this is considered the first important event in her life - because at the time women in Greece were not their own persons. They were married off by their families, sometimes as young as twelve, and they weren't consulted nor were their preferences taken into account. This is just a family transaction - and they serve their husband's household. This is the way things had been for centuries.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: And then Bouboulina had four children from that marriage. Her husband, he was a captain. He died to the sea, from the pirates.

KN: Oh!

Vassiliki Opsimouli: That was the danger of the sea in those days.

KN: He was killed by pirates, leaving her widowed, but with some significant property. She marries another sea captain.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: A second marriage once she was thirty years old, and then she's doing three children with her second husband. Totally she had seven children.

KN: Until he too is killed by pirates at sea.

OM: That's a dangerous job apparently.

KN: Apparently yeah!

Vassiliki Opsimouli: So she's widowed when she was thirty-seven.

KN: So it's 1881, by this point she's twice widowed, seven kids, and quite a lot of wealth.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: She was widowed with a great fortune. Both her husbands were very rich captains in Spetses.

KN: She herself has a great love of the sea - so this time around she didn't remarry. She took her husbands' fortunes, she invested them wisely, and she bought her own fleet of merchant ships. She takes to the seas herself!

Vassiliki Opsimouli: In those days, the merchant shipping, it was a very wealthy occupation - because the Greek, even though they were under the Turks rule, they had the permission to do merchant. So it was a very wealthy family.

KN: But as she gets richer, the Ottoman Empire takes notice. *Who is this woman? Who let her off her leash? What does she think she's doing?* And they dig into her history, and discover that her second husband had once sided with Russia against the Ottoman government - and so they confiscate all her property. But Bouboulina has already cultivated that untamed character, so she traveled to Constantinople, the city of her birth, the city of her father's death, to plead her case. She must have known that her own imprisonment was a very real possibility - and that, you know, if that happened, death would inevitably follow. But she went anyway.

Bureaucrats and officials were never going to listen to her.

OM: Right.

KN: So who did she go to?

OM: Well, you need a man...

KN: You *don't* need a man! Actually, possibly the most powerful person in the emperor's court was his mother.

OM: Ah! [laughs]

KN: In the Ottoman Empire, the mother of the emperor was always a powerful, powerful figure. It was pretty incredible - like, the emperor, he has this massive harem - but the mother of the emperor is the one who chooses who he's gonna sleep with every night. It's an odd, odd world where she basically micromanages his life. And Bouboulina sees her chance! The mother of the emperor, she will understand. She is a powerful woman in a man's world. And she won her over. The mother reprimanded her son for mistreating this poor innocent Bouboulina, and Bouboulina returned home, all her property intact. Legend says that when Bouboulina asked how she could repay the emperor's mother, the mother replied that in the future she should 'pay it forward,' so to speak.

Soon Bouboulina would become an icon, the vanguard of the Greek war for independence from the Ottomans, but she never forgot what the emperor's mother did for her, and she did find a chance to repay the debt.

[music]

KN: So here's how it all happened: Upon returning home, Bouboulina was not messing around. She took go-big-or-go-home to the next level - or I guess it was more like go-big-*and*-go-home... *go-home-and-go-big* - that's what she did. She took her reclaimed fortune and she built a ship, not just any ship, an eighteen-gun [corvette](#) fit for war. Picture a giant hull, lots of sails, eighteen cannons sticking out of the side... This is a *massive* warship, and she named it the *Agamemnon*. [laughter] I mean, most men name their boats after women, right?

OM: Yeah.

KN: And she, a 'she-captain,' she names her boat after a dude. And I love the symbolism here of [Agamemnon](#). Do you know your Greek mythology? Do you remember?

OM: I'm trying to remember... Agamemnon...

KN: He's the great Greek hero who led the invasion of [Troy](#).

OM: Oh right, right, right!

KN: Who said he launched a thousand ships to take down their rivals to the east. So she's drawing clear parallels here - the great Greek hero who sails across the Aegean to take down their rival to the east. Which at this point is the Ottoman Empire. But also if you know your [Iliad](#) then you might remember what happened to *Agamemnon*.

OM: Uh, right, his wife... upon his victorious return, his wife discovers that he sacrificed their daughter for this victory - and murders him in the bathtub!

KN: Murders him in the bathtub with a *double-headed axe*! And so she is also recalling that story somewhat by naming her ship the *Agamemnon*. She's - a bit terrifying, and I bet she knows it.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: And then Bouboulina began to have relations with other people who wanted to begin their uprising against Turks.

KN: So, step one: Acquire massive warship, name it *Agamemnon*. Step two: Stockpile supplies. She has got plans. She's smuggling munitions in her ships. She's stashing them in secret hideaways in her own house. Then she goes on to raise her own private navy, made up entirely of men from the island of Spetses. She calls them collectively her "brave young lads." She personally, with her own fortune - she paid their salaries, she supplied them with weapons, she feeds them...

[music]

Vassiliki Opsimouli: And she gave all her fortune, she gave all her money, all her ships, everything, for the war.

KN: And then, she was ready. The first flag of the Greek revolution was raised by Laskarina Bouboulina on the mast of the *Agamemnon*.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: Bouboulina had her own flag that she had on her fleet with a two-headed eagle. And she had this flag on her sleeves, it was the uprising flag against the Turks in the colors of blue and red, blue symbolized the sea and the red symbolized the blood of the warriors.

KN: She raised the flag and she saluted it with cannon fire. And, on April third, 1921, she led a fleet of ships, her own personal navy, plus others from Spetses, and together they sailed toward Nafplio, a fortified coastal the city that was an Ottoman stronghold.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: So Bouboulina was one of the first to the apprising against the Turks.

[music]

Vassiliki Opsimouli: The great thing is that she as a woman, a lady. In those days that if we think that even today, the role of women in some countries is a little bit lower than the men. How about in 1821, two hundred years before, for a woman to be the first to the uprising against the enemies. Even today is an example for brave and tough women. If a lady has this character we say *Ah! She's like Bouboulina!* Even today.

[ad] And now let's pause for word from our sponsor. [Girls Can! Crate](#) is an awesome subscription box that introduces girls aged five to ten to real, fearless women who made the world better. Every crate features and inspiring women, a 28-page activity book, plus everything you would need to complete two or three hands is on STEAM activities, and more. And if you're on a budget, they have mini crates too. Real women make the best heroes, and every month Girls Can! Crate delivers them. For *What'sHerName* podcast listeners, we have a special discount code for you. You'll get twenty percents off your first month's crate any subscription that you order. Girls Can! Crate, C.R.A.T.E, dot com. And use the code HERNAME to get 20% off.

[music]

Vassiliki Opsimouli: She was very brave. She didn't fear the Turks. And she was the one who gave courage to her men. And men are trying to hide and thinking about going back, but she stayed through to the castle, she was fighting, and that's why she's a brave woman.

KN: There's a painting of this moment. It's awesome. We'll [post it on our website](#). You see Bouboulina on her ship, standing amid the turbulent skies, and she's holding her sword and looking fearlessly ahead. This has become the icon of the spirit of Bouboulina: fearless, driven, ready, leading the fearful men toward their destiny. What's amazing about this painting to me is that if you put it side by side with our famous American painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware.

OM: That's what I was just gonna say, it sounds like that.

KN: Yes, it is exactly that, they're so similar. It's not a coincidence. It's obvious one is modeled on the other. I mean... the George Washington one wasn't till 1850. They don't know who painted the Bouboulina painting - but it is fascinating. And the Greek Revolution was clearly influenced by the American Revolution. It was just one of the many dominoes that fell as a result

of this movement to establish liberty all across the world. The Greek National Anthem is called “The Hymn to Liberty” - so they’re deeply, deeply connected.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: They had to take the Nafplio back from the Turks, because it was a very well fortified area due to the castles, as it has the castle Palamidi into the heel and the castle Bourtzi. And Nafplio in those days was impossible to take not clear back from the sea as Bouboulina came with her ships to take Nafplio back.

KN: How crazy is it to attempt to take a massively fortified, cliffside castle from the sea?

OM: Pretty crazy, it seems like. [laughter]

KN: Yeah, it turns out, it's pretty crazy. The Ottoman castle at Nafplio had three hundred cannon, and they used them. But, the ad-hoc navy held out. The men tried to turn around, but Bouboulina refused to allow a retreat. [laughter] And this bold stand at Nafplio, which turned into a land siege also, showed the world that the Greeks were serious. Bouboulina's first invasion was so surprising and impressive to other countries around the world, it showed they were capable - and Russia supported the Greeks against its old nemesis the Ottomans. Help came from Europe, and the war was on.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: And she was here for ten months. It was one of the most difficult places to take back. That's why Nafplio became the first capital of Greece when Greece was free.

KN: Battles raged across the Greek mainland and across the Aegean, land battles, sea battles, and this was not pretty. The Greek War of Independence is famous now for the brutality that was enacted on both sides - horrific massacres, rape, slaughter, retribution, *so much* hate. And remember what it was to be a woman at this time period in Greece: you’re a pawn, you're just simply an appendage of your man, with no education, zero rights. And with the war at their doorstep, and the brutal fighting from town to town, Greek women had to make some unimaginable choices. They had heard what would be their fate if their town was taken by the enemy, *a fate worse than death*, they thought. And so multiple locations in Greece are today famous because when all was lost, Greek women committed suicide by the thousands rather than submit to the enemy.

[music]

KN: But they also fought alongside armies, mostly by chucking rocks and fighting with sickles and scythes. Some women worked as spies, exploiting the sexism of the day, you know, which I

love - the sexism that blinded men to the possibility that women could be doing anything clever at all.

OM: Right. [laughs]

KN: And some women even dressed as men in order to travel with and fight alongside the men. So the fierce spirit of Greek women was there - in the ways it was allowed to manifest - but this is what makes Bouboulina even more remarkable. She is on a whole different plane. She is the commander of a fleet. She is a de facto General in the rebel army, and her opinion was as respected and heeded as all the other male generals. She had a seat at the table, and her voice was as loud and valued as everybody else.

For a year and a half, she led her men into battle at sea and on land. On sea she commanded the *Agamemnon*, the largest warship in the Greek Revolution, and on land it's said that she rode on a white stallion at the front of her men.

OM: Of course she did! Awesome.

KN: They captured city after city - like Monemvasia, which today is so famous for its romantic castle. She took that castle from the Ottomans. Her older children joined her in the fight...

Vassiliki Opsimouli: She lost two sons during the war, because they were fighters against the Turks.

KN: But still she kept going. And she was at the [Battle of Tripoli](#), which is famous for its brutality. Tripoli was an Ottoman stronghold, and after three days of battle the Greeks took it with a ferocity that had been building and building over time. And when the Greeks unleashed their rage on the city, 25,000 bodies lay dead in the streets. The Greeks headed toward the residents of the Pashin, that's the sort of Sultan of Tripoli, to unleash hell. And Bouboulia was there too. It said that she personally decapitated many, many men with her sword.

But when they entered the palace of the Pashin, she came face to face with his wife - who begged her to save her life, and the lives of all the other women in the harem. She remembered her promise to the emperor's mother years ago, and she turned toward her *own* Greek troops, and wielded her sword in defense of the women of the harem.

OM: Wow!

KN: She saved every last woman in the palace and helped them escape to safety. And this act is one of the centerpieces of her legend.

Finally, after a year and a half of fighting, Nafplio - the city she attacked to start it all - finally fell to the Greeks. They took control of the city and they named it their new capital, and demanded independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: The war officially, in the school books, says that it started on the 25th of March in 1821 - and even today it's a National Day.

KN: She moved into the city; all the great leaders did. She took a house and participated in the political negotiations of the formation of a new nation. The political infighting escalated and escalated. Different factions fought with each other over the direction of the new nation, and it got so bad that Bouboulina was arrested two different times, until eventually she had to flee back to the island of Spetses. She had nothing. And she was disillusioned with the politicians that she saw as self-interested schemers who were destroying what Greeks had fought and died for.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: In 1825, four years after the beginning of the War of Independence, Bouboulina was totally poor, totally poor. She has no money, she has lost her children, she has lost everything.

[music]

KN: Back in Spetses, one of her sons showed up with his new wife. They had eloped and this was strictly against the cultural codes of the day. The bride's family came looking for her.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: They want to take their daughter back. It was afternoon as it's said, when Bouboulina goes there to see what's happening. Bouboulina then, she starts speaking very rude, insulting the father and the other family of the daughter because, the this, the family of Koutsis, Koutsis is the name of this family. The family did not want Bouboulina's son to marry the daughter because it's a poor family. Even though it's a very beloved family, they want it, because they do not have money anymore. So Bouboulina starts to insult them, and they have an argument, and some of them, nobody knows who it was, takes off his pistol and he shoots Bouboulina. The bullet finds her in the head... and that was the end of the female Captain. Very unglorious.

OM: What! Ahh! That's the most anticlimactic ending *ever*.

KN: I know, it is such a waste. When he heard the news of the ignoble end of Bouboulina, the Russian Tsar [Alexander II](#) was moved to grant her the honor and recognition that she was denied in life because she was a woman, and he named her Rear Admiral of the Russian Navy. And until very recently, she was the only female admiral in the history of the world.

[music]

KN: The people have always remembered her, and sung songs about her and written poems about her, and she is still held up as a proud example of the strength and courage and power of woman.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: In the film [Zorba with Anthony Quinn](#), there is a widowed woman who, [Irene Papas](#), a Greek actor played this role, and she had the nickname, as she was very brave, and her nickname was Bouboulina. It's very well known, even today I'd say, yes - for tough women.

KN: And besides that incredible legacy, here's another thing she achieved. The new Greek Government, once it worked its way through factional fighting and civil war, established for the first time in Greek history, public schools for girls.

OM: Yay!!

KN: An *enormous* step for women. The first school was literally on the [Acropolis of Athens](#), symbolically located where Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, dwelt. And this was as a direct result of liberation that came from the Revolution. A hundred years later, Bouboulina's great granddaughter, [Lela Karagianni](#), became another great hero in the Greek Resistance. This time it was against Nazi invasion. She led a [resistance organization](#) called *Bouboulina*.

[music]

KN: Born in a prison, Laskarina Bouboulina spent her life in pursuit of liberation. To me it seems like she found liberation. First, at sea - you know, that freedom of the open waves, the endless horizon that sailors so often talk about. But she also dedicated her life to the liberation of Greece from Ottoman rule. And maybe most of all, she showed Greece the power and value of a *liberated woman*. She didn't shout about the patriarchy - she lived boldly and loudly in defiance of it. And by doing that, she helped to liberate every Greek woman who followed in her wake.

Vassiliki Opsimouli: Her story, I think it should be heard, because for those days this woman made *amazing* things.

KN: Do you think her story has created a culture among Greek women of being strong and brave?

Vassiliki Opsimouli: Yes, yes, yes.

[music]

[credits] If you want to learn more about Laskarina Bouboulina, head to our website whatshernamepodcast.com. Special thanks to Vassiliki Opsimouli for bringing us the story of Bouboulina. The music for this episode was generously shared by the eminent female composer, [Evanthia Reboutsika](#). You can find links to her many albums on our website. And we also featured an antique recording of famed Greek folk singer Marika Papagika, which you can also [download for free](#) on our website whatshernamepodcast.com. Our theme song was composed and performed by [Daniel Foster Smith](#). You can follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#) where we'll post lots of amazing images of Bouboulina, and pictures of her historic house, shared with us by the [Bouboulina Museum](#). We're so grateful for all of our sponsors. You can [become one for as little as a buck a month](#) and help make more episodes happen. Special shout out to Debbie Farthing and Chawntelle Oliver. Thanks for [donating](#). Thank you for listening.