



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Authoritarianism in Greece: The Metaxas Regime (review)

John S. Koliopoulos

Journal of Modern Greek Studies, Volume 2, Number 1, May 1984,  
pp. 126-132 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/mgs.2010.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2010.0021)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mgs/summary/v002/2.1.koliopoulos.html>

until the 1940s to house a heroic, old-fashioned and poverty-stricken way of life that had altered little for centuries.

Gage's book portrays one such community, the village of Lia, in its moment of dissolution. He does so with sympathy and accuracy, respecting its ruling values while revealing also some of the harsh limitations of that way of life. As such, his book is an historical document of the first rank as well as being a high and serious celebration of the life of a woman who remained heroically loyal to the values she had inherited by contriving to save her children and risking, knowingly, her own destruction in order to do so.

WILLIAM H. MCNEILL  
*University of Chicago*

John V. Kofas, *Authoritarianism in Greece: The Metaxas Regime*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1983. Pp. 192. \$20.00.

A book on the dictatorship of Gen. John Metaxas in Greece (1936–1941) should normally be welcome to the student of Modern Greece. Developments of that period have received very little scholarly attention, in comparison with those of the 1940s. The inter-war years in general deserve more attention for at least two reasons: a) they can provide partial explanations for certain developments customarily associated exclusively with the period of Axis occupation of the country, and b) they should have fewer snares for the scholar than subsequent years. But reading the present book leaves one with the impression that, perhaps, even the dictatorship of Metaxas is not free of snares for the careless scholar. Subsequent developments, it seems, have influenced, not only postwar Greek politics, but the study of the dictatorship as well; and they have condemned the dictator to suffer after death from both those who have tried to exonerate him for policies he did pursue and those who have saddled him with crimes he did not commit. The author of this book must have been aware of these extremes in the assessment of the Metaxas dictatorship; but the choice of sources—and current fashion, perhaps—made him adopt the latter extreme.

The general direction of the author's arguments, it seems, was provided by histories of the dictatorship written by journalists like Spyros Linardatos,<sup>1</sup> who have popularized Communist conceptualization of the dictatorship. This becomes apparent not only through Kofas' crude division of the political forces of the time into progres-

sive and conservative or reactionary, but also through his reliance on popular Leftist histories of the dictatorship. In what concerns Greek Communist Party (KKE) positions and policies of the time, in particular, the author essentially reproduces subsequent KKE interpretations of its own past. For instance, in the effort to show that Metaxas's theory of an imminent Communist bid for power—which incidentally, is now commonly considered a mere pretext for establishing dictatorship—the author maintains that “Communist leaders then and now have never maintained that the social unrest of 1936 approximated anything like a proletarian revolution” (p. 22). If he had taken the trouble to read contemporary Communist assessments of the situation, as they appeared in *Rizospastis*, the official KKE organ, or recent studies of the KKE in the interwar period, like Angelos Elefantis',<sup>2</sup> he would have realized that such a statement would have been considered insulting by the Communist leadership of the time. He goes so far as to maintain that the KKE did not have “political ambitions in 1936,” but “merely wished to prevent monarchofascism and to preserve the democratic regime” (p. 23); that “at no time . . . did the communist leaders entertain the illusion of seizing and retaining power” (p. 24); that the KKE “wanted desperately to preserve parliamentarism [sic]” (p. 45). Similar statements defy available and unedited evidence of the period and betray an effort to retroject upon the past the image of the KKE cultivated currently in Greece. The requirements of that same image and the consequent need to rewrite history on the basis of current KKE conceptualization of the past are no doubt responsible for the description of the various plots to unseat Metaxas in 1938 as a “massive resistance movement” (p. 125), and for maintaining that “an organized popular uprising was the only viable alternative” to “bourgeois solutions” (pp. 111, 112).

To some extent, these and similar remarks must be due to the author's failure to consult some basic studies on various aspects of interwar Greek political developments. For instance, writing about military intervention in Greek politics in that period he uses (p. viii) popular books like Constantine Tsoukalas, *The Greek Tragedy*<sup>3</sup>—which was never intended to be used as a source, in the first place—and neglects one of the most important studies on the Greek military to be published in recent years.<sup>4</sup> If he had read Veremis' book, he would have realized that the reinstatement of the cashiered Venizelist officers (p. 29) in the army was perhaps the most important issue that kept the two major political camps from forming a coalition government during the first half of 1936. Similarly, writing about Nicholas Plastiras and his unsuccessful coup of March 1933, he refers

the reader to general or irrelevant books (p. viii), but not to the only existing biography of the Venizelist general.<sup>5</sup> For Eleutherios Venizelos, on the other hand, the reader is referred to two popular biographies (p. ix), but not to a recent collection of scholarly articles on various aspects of the Cretan statesman's political career,<sup>6</sup> which, like Thanos Veremis's study of the Greek military, is conspicuously absent from his bibliography. Elsewhere (p. 30), Kofas' source for the dubious statement that the British Legation in Athens "assured Metaxas that they did not object to the idea of a dictatorship" is Linardatos's popular history of the dictatorship, already mentioned.

The treatment of Metaxas' references to the Greek "race" (p. 62) shows a lamentable ignorance of the principal features of Greek nationalism, and particularly of the nationalistic writings of Ion Dragoumis, a thinker of the early twentieth century whom Metaxas had certainly read, if one judges from his personal books, now in the Library of Parliament, Newspaper Collection (Athens), and the dictator's own writings on the *Great Idea*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the treatment of Metaxas' fascism (pp. 53-54) is superficial and simplistic, and is based on weak or untenable criteria. For instance, the facts that Metaxas dissolved all political parties or that he favored Hitler's Germany, or that he tried to apply authoritarian ideas to many sectors of society, do not constitute adequate criteria for describing his regime as fascist. Anyway, Metaxas failed—indeed, he did not even attempt—to form a ruling party of his own; and his leaning towards Hitler was never more than ideological. He disowned Hitlerism before he died in some very revealing entries in his personal diary.

As for the application of authoritarian ideas, that, too, was never fully realized. The same is true of the corporate state, which Kofas considers evidence of the fascist structure and form of the dictatorship. The corporate state, perhaps more than any other of the dictator's schemes, remained on paper. As for the other criteria proposed by the author, they are either questionable or simply defy all evidence. Metaxas did not purge the royalists, at least in vital sectors like the armed forces, which remained a royal preserve; nor did he escape the influence of the palace. His power *vis-à-vis* the king, it could be argued, increased as the latter became identified with the dictatorship so that his fate got bound to that of the dictator. The youth organization was, perhaps, one of the main fascist trappings of the dictatorship, but that, too, remains to be studied, on the basis of the organization's archives, now in the General State Archives (Athens).

This is not to say that the Metaxas regime was not fascist, but only that the criteria and the general conceptual framework used by

the author are not adequate for examining such a complex and elusive subject as twentieth-century Greek authoritarian government. Research in the dictator's personal papers, which have been available for study for almost fifteen years, would have given the author the necessary source material for a serious examination of the ideological currents and sociopolitical developments associated with that dictatorship. Recent writing on fascism, and particularly review articles like Eugen Weber's "Fascism(s) and Some Harbingers,"<sup>8</sup> or Gilbert Allardyce's "What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept,"<sup>9</sup> would have made the author more aware of the traps awaiting the scholar who simplifies complex phenomena. Unaware of the problems involved in the examination of similar subjects and lacking the proper source material, the author spread himself thin over inadequate sources and tried to fill the gaps with logical jumps or positions put forward for popular consumption by writers of the Greek Left.

The author is on steadier ground when he switches from internal developments to the foreign relations of the dictatorship; but that section, too, suffers from a jumble of undigested contemporary opinion, eked out from mostly British Foreign Office papers of uneven importance. In the chapter "British Policy in Greece, 1936-1939" (p. 181 ff.), the author takes issue with this reviewer for maintaining, with respect to the initial British attitude towards Metaxas and the dictatorship, that, as a result of the protracted and bitter Venizelist—anti-Venizelist conflict, which produced great political instability, the dictatorship was seen as a "necessary evil."<sup>10</sup> Instead, Kofas maintains that "a closer analysis of the Foreign Office documents concerning Anglo-Greek relations will reveal that the government in London and its legation in Athens fully confided in the Metaxas regime because it was to their economic and diplomatic interests to do so" (p. 181). His reading of my book seems to have been very selective, to say the least; because, if he had read more carefully, he would have been surprised to see that that is one of the main theses of the book, and that it is based on a very "close" reading of both British and Greek sources.

In several places, the informed reader will find strange or outdated positions. Venizelos, for instance, was *not*, by any account or criterion, a "pillar of republicanism" (p. ix). Staunch and sincere republicans like Alexander Papanastasiou were no less resentful of Venizelos shifting position with respect to the regime of the country than most royalists. He was the leader of a political camp in which the republicans were not the most important or numerous element; and to describe the Cretan statesman as a "pillar of republicanism"

misses the essence of his turbulent political career. Equally, Venizelos was *not* “convinced” of an “imminent threat of monarchical restoration” when he assumed the leadership of the March 1935 rebellion (p. ix); that was what was announced in an effort to justify the rebellion against the lawful government of the time. Similarly, social unrest in the first half of 1936 was *not* due to popular opposition to the fraudulent monarchical restoration of the previous year or to the government of Metaxas, who, according to the author, “publically [sic] pronounced himself an enemy of the workers and their leaders and vowed to suppress them” (p. 15). Statements such as that, or that Metaxas persevered in “crushing the lower classes and their leadership” (p. 1), or that the dictatorship was established “to prevent the mobilization of the working and peasant classes for the ultimate benefit of the wealthy elite” (p. 66) are no longer put forward except in official KKE assessments of the dictator’s role in the political developments of the period; they merely betray a fascination with contemporary communist rhetoric. Metaxas, although an avowed enemy of parliamentary government and an anti-communist to boot, never pronounced himself “an enemy of the workers and their leaders”; that was what the Communist leadership said he was. On the other hand, to link the social unrest of 1936 with opposition to the monarchical restoration and the government of Metaxas is to defy, not only all reliable evidence, but the author’s own analysis of a rapidly declining economy, sketched in the preceding pages. Incidentally, figures about the Greek economy of the time (pp. 3–4), contained in such partisan publications as N. Psyroukis’ book on the Metaxas dictatorship,<sup>11</sup> should be used with great caution, because they are not always reliable.

No less unsubstantiated are statements like the following: that “to secure the elimination of the lower classes from education,” the government, among other measures, used “deliberate teacher shortages” (p. 84); and to control society, Metaxas created a “vast state machinery” (p. 112). For the former argument, the author cites figures from Linardatos’ popular history of the dictatorship—figures which do not support the argument and show no deterioration of the state of education; while for the latter he gives only one figure (72,000 employees), which by itself cannot possibly show change in either direction, and fails to explain that state employment has been a traditional party reward in Greece and one of the most striking features of the modern Greek state.

Less serious but indicative of the author’s careless treatment of the events and personalities that appear in his book are numerous

factual errors, which could have been avoided if he had consulted reliable accounts of the period. Thus, the plebiscite on the regime of Greece was held, not on November 10, 1935, but on November 3, and the general elections of January 1936, not on the 9th, but on the 26th (p. ix). The 1923 counterrevolution could not have been “designed to destroy the republic” (p. 25), because the republic was proclaimed in March 1924. D. Lambrakis and J. Diakos were not “prominent capitalists” (p. 29), but newspaper publishers. The Minister of Press and Tourism was called, not Nikiforos, but Nikoloudis (p. 51). E.O.N. stands for *Ethniki Organosis Neolaias*, not *Ethnikos Organismos Neolaias* (p. 83). Michalakopoulos’ name appears several times (pp. 109, 110, 118, 122, 124, 125) one syllable shorter, as Michalopoulos. Daphnis was not a historian, but a wellknown journalist, and his first name was not George, but Gregory (p. 111). The name of the Archbishop of Athens was not Chrysathanos (pp. 159, 160), but Chrysanthos. The branch of the British Foreign Office responsible for southeastern Europe was not called Southern Division but Southern Department (p. 175). Waterloo could not have supported the Venizelists in power, because he was appointed to the Athens post *after* they fell from power (p. 202). Gen. Alexander Papagos was not Under-Secretary for War when Metaxas proclaimed the dictatorship, to be retained in that post (p. 50). Finally, Plastiras was no longer an “officer” in 1936 (p. 28), but had been living in self-exile in France since 1933.

The study of Greek authoritarianism, especially the authoritarian regime of Metaxas and King George II, requires a deeper understanding of modern Greek developments than the one exhibited by the author of this book, as well as more reliable and varied sources than he consulted, and a far more careful approach to the various themes. Lacking the proper sources and sound methodological tools, the author was unable to tackle such basic aspects of the dictatorship as its structure and form, the operation of the state machinery, the state’s impact on traditional social and political relationships, the background of the new political leadership, and the distance separating objectives and rhetoric from everyday realities. Instead, he essentially reproduced some old or not so old theories and myths of the Greek Left, supporting them when necessary with selective evidence from British and American state papers—unaware perhaps that these theories and myths have, for some time now, been under revision by the moderate Left.

JOHN S. KOLIPOULOS  
*University of Thessaloniki*

## REFERENCES

1. *I Tetárti Avgústu* (The Fourth of August). Athens, 1975.
2. *I epangelía tis adinatis epanástasis* (The Promise of the Impossible Revolution) Athens, 1976.
3. Penguin Books, 1969.
4. Thanos Veremis, *I epemvásis tu stratú stin ellinikí politiki, 1916-1936* (The Interventions of the Army in Greek Politics, 1916-1936). Athens, 1977.
5. I. A. Peponis, *Nikólaos Plastíras sta gegonóta, 1909-1945* (Nicholas Plastiras in the Events, 1909-1945), 2 vols. Athens, 1948.
6. *Meletímata yíro apo ton Venizélo ke tin epohí tu* (Studies on Venizelos and His Times), ed. O. Dimitrakopoulos and Th. Veremis. Athens, 1980.
7. See, for instance, a series of articles on the National Schism of World War I, in *Kathimerini* of 1934-1935, and particularly the concluding articles.
8. *The Journal of Modern History*, 54:4 (Dec. 1982), 746-65.
9. *The American Historical Review*, 84:2 (Apr. 1979), 367-98.
10. *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941*. Oxford, 1977, 59.
11. *O fasismós ke i Tetárti Avgustu* (Fascism and the Fourth of August). Athens, 1977.

George Alexander. *The Prelude to the Truman Doctrine: British Policy in Greece, 1944-47*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1982. \$46.00.

Mr. George Alexander is a counter-revisionist on the subject of Anglo-Greek relations at the end of the second world war. The revisionist thesis, which has held the field for many years, may be summarized thus: that EAM was a genuinely democratic organization, which happened to include a minority of Communists; that its armed force, ELAS, was solely concerned with resistance to the German occupation; and that Churchill (and later Bevin, the Labour Foreign Secretary from 1945) ruthlessly crushed them both in order to reimpose the unpopular monarchy of George II, supported by a tyrannical right-wing government. Mr. Alexander rejects this account both of the nature of EAM/ELAS and of British policy.

EAM/ELAS, he argues, was the instrument with which the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) sought to obtain its objectives. "Its immediate objective was a multi-party government under communist hegemony; its ultimate aim, a Bolshevik Greece" (p. 8). This claim, which was the basis of British policy forty years ago, is