

Harry C Cliadakis, "The Political and Diplomatic Background to the Metaxas Dictatorship." *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 1 (1979): 117-38.

1. Who was Ioannis Metaxas? What was his background?
2. Analyze and assess the events that took place in Greece between 1932 and 1935, based on Cliadakis's account and consider who bears the greater responsibility the Liberals or the Populist Party for the collapse of democracy?
3. Based on this article, write brief descriptions of Kondylis, Metaxas, and King George.
4. How did Metaxas justify his seizure of power?

King George II



Harry Cliadakis

The Political and Diplomatic Background to the Metaxas Dictatorship, 1935-36

On 4 August 1936, King George II of Greece established a dictatorship under General John Metaxas. The reason given was to prevent 'communism'. This article attempts to explain the domestic policies and the international circumstances that enabled the king to establish the August 4th regime, as it was officially called.

Before the dictatorship, the dominant domestic issue in Greek politics was whether the monarchy was absolute or subordinate to parliamentary prerogatives. When, in 1924, a republic was established by a coup and King George went into exile (1925), the constitutional issue became that of republicans versus royalists. The attempt to assassinate Liberal Party leader Eleftherios Venizelos in 1933, and the March Revolt by intransigent republican officers in 1935, both events occurring during a period of great economic distress, triggered a series of political moves which led to a coup by General George Kondylis, followed by a rigged 'plebiscite' and the forced 'restoration' of King George in November 1935. However, George's insecurity after his return made him turn to Metaxas, and in 1936 the alliance between them fused two separate currents, the absolutist tradition of the monarchy and the fascist orientation of Metaxas.¹ It was ironic that the essentially conservative coup by Kondylis had led to the establishment of the Metaxas regime in which the primary *raison d'être* was to create a fascist new order, to which the majority of the conservatives were opposed.

In 1923 Metaxas had participated in a counter-coup in an attempt to prevent the king's exile. It failed, and so he too went into exile. A few months later he was allowed to return and, in turn, he publicly professed his 'loyalty' to the republic.² He tried to become active in politics by forming a party of ultra-royalists, the *Eleftherophrones*, or Free Spirits, but by 1935 his party possessed only

seven seats in parliament. Basically, he was unsuccessful in forming even a small 'fascist' type of action party, although it was reported that his followers in Athens did practice a brand of 'squadismo'.³ When the attempted assassination of Venizelos took place, Metaxas praised the terrorists in his party newspaper, *Helleniki*, as men who were trying to save sacred Greece.⁴ It was strongly believed that Metaxas was involved but nothing was proved. For that matter, the terrorists were never caught and the official investigation was conveniently dropped.⁵ Though Metaxas did not have a real party following, he was respected and feared as a military man and a close friend of the royal family. He was considered the public figure most intransigent about the return of the monarchy and most extreme in his open hostility to the parliamentary system, and it was due perhaps to these attitudes that he had not been able to form a party.

On 1 March 1935, Venizelist officers, disillusioned at the pace of the investigation into the assassination attempt and fearful of Metaxas,⁶ staged a revolt which almost succeeded. It was suppressed by General Kondylis, then minister of war in the government of Panagis Tsaldaris. What had made the revolt far more serious than the customary coup was that its base was to be the city of Salonika, which was a hotbed of republicanism. Thus the geographical and legal bases of the revolt were to be the dividing line between 'old' and 'new' Greece.⁷ Salonika and the surrounding region of Macedonia had suffered the most as a result of the forced return of 1,300,000 Greek-speaking people from Turkey in 1923. The majority remained there as poor tobacco pickers. The area also suffered more than any other during the 1930s because of the drastic cut in tobacco exports.

Perhaps the first serious consequence of the abortive revolt was that it had a destabilizing effect on the two major political parties, the Liberal Party and the Populist Party. In a conventional sense, the Liberals tended to be identified with republicanism and the Populists with the monarchy, but by then this identification had become misleading. The election of 1933, which the Populists won, revealed that the majority in both parties would have defended the republic because their primary desire was to support a constitutional system which guaranteed orderly change. The Liberals, now out of power, saw the republic as the best guarantor of their return. The Populists, now in power, were not prepared to restore the monarchy at the republic's expense. Therefore, the March Revolt

produced an ironic consequence. It disoriented the Liberals who, unfortunately, were identified as the party of the insurgents and this, in turn, weakened Tsaldaris's control over his own Populist Party. Suspicion of the Liberals increased the number of Populists who began to respond to Metaxas and the policy of restoring the monarchy. Tsaldaris was forced to make concessions to the right in order to maintain his control, and republicans were purged from public life.⁸ Metaxas had been invited into the cabinet as a concession to the extremists, but within a month he resigned because he had failed to force the cabinet to embark on a policy of 'bloody reprisal'.⁹ In turn, and in order to stall for time, Tsaldaris publicly declared that he would consider a plebiscite as a means of deciding the restoration question. His only hope was to try to control the mounting reactionary pressure. He firmly believed that, if allowed, public opinion would support him. In an editorial on 11 September *The Times* wrote, '[D]uring the last two or three months, however, feelings have cooled down and Republican predilections have steadily reasserted themselves.' Consequently 'ardent royalists . . . realize that delay is dangerous to their cause [and they] have urged the use of the government's resources to bring about a restoration as soon as possible, no matter what trouble that might mean in the future.' The editorial added that it was apparent that the republicans would win a plebiscite. On 12 September *The Times* correspondent reported from Athens that 'a large section of the Populist Party' was clearly opposed to the demands of a small group of extremists who were insisting on a restoration immediately and without a plebiscite.¹⁰ Tsaldaris then decided to call elections as the fastest way of regaining his control by increasing his visible base of support.

Kondylis as minister of war was Tsaldaris's greatest asset because he was a Liberal. As the man who established the republic (with Nikolas Plastiras and Stylianos Gonatos) in 1923 and saved it in 1935, he carried great prestige. The unity between the two parties in support of the republic, which had been so badly damaged by the abortive March Revolt, still survived tenuously in the symbol of his person, and he publicly supported Tsaldaris's policy of moderation.¹¹ The election was to be held on 9 June. The Liberal Party feared that it would be overwhelmingly defeated, and rather than face that reality decided to abstain. Momentarily this confused the situation because Tsaldaris had wanted the support of the Liberals as well, in order to withstand the pressure from Metaxas and the ex-

treme royalists. For some time, Metaxas had been openly calling for a 'new order' and an end to the republic and, just when the Liberals decided to abstain, he decided to enter the election himself, and run as the only authentic 'true' royalist. Tsaldaris and Kondylis thus were forced to clarify their position in public with respect to Metaxas, and by the last week of the campaign Tsaldaris and Kondylis were distributing handbills saying, 'Vote for Tsaldaris and Kondylis and save the republic.'¹²

Tsaldaris won overwhelmingly by 287 seats to 7. Few had expected Metaxas to beat Tsaldaris, but few had expected his loss to be so great. The election became a re-affirmation of the republic, the second within a year.¹³ Nevertheless, Tsaldaris did not feel strong enough to retract the plebiscite promise¹⁴ because Metaxas represented people in powerful positions, and Athens was especially exposed to military seizure. There was fear that Metaxas would resort to violence and that he would not hesitate to 'throw the country into a real civil war'¹⁵ — a fear that Metaxas had assiduously cultivated since the attempted assassination of Venizelos. The threat of violence had a strongly demoralizing effect. Nevertheless, Tsaldaris did all he could to prevent the plebiscite issue from reaching the floor of parliament and coming to a vote.¹⁶

On 3 July Kondylis suddenly declared for the monarchy. He had decided, he said, that the republic was unable to assure the country a normal life: 'If the monarchy is able to assure this, it will save Greece.'¹⁷ His former republican associates were stunned.¹⁸ The effect on the nation as a whole was just as great. The American Embassy described it as the shock 'that broke the hard core legal sentiment of the majority of the country which would have defended the regime on principle'. People began to vacillate and move towards the position that they felt to be the safest.¹⁹ Given this development, Tsaldaris certainly no longer felt strong enough to circumvent the plebiscite issue, and on 10 July parliament voted to hold a plebiscite by November. Kondylis began to separate himself from Tsaldaris and by August he was speaking in the language of the new fascism.

Kondylis was an enigmatic person. Perhaps he acted in order to prevent his own displacement by an *ultra* coup now that the Tsaldaris government had weakened. Be that as it may, somewhere at this point Kondylis began to think of fascism as a solution. He praised Mussolini:

We admire with sympathy this achievement and the civilizing struggle which Italy has made. You have created a new regime which Germany had already initiated and today there are in every nation Fascist centres which sooner or later will be triumphant.²⁰

Kondylis had been a liberal and had defended the republic all his life. Perhaps he can best be described as part of that phenomenon which saw many liberals before 1935 turn to Mussolini and the idea of the corporate state as a solution to the problem of mass democracy in an age of economic catastrophe.²¹

From June to October the nation was totally pre-occupied with the question of the restoration, although the country was suffering acutely because of the world depression.²² Fear of revenge and retaliation resulting from the March Revolt, the purge of the military officers, suspicions and rumours of another coup, and the manner in which Metaxas conducted his election campaign created the atmosphere of a constitutional crisis. What heightened this state of crisis was that Greek politics had to be played out in the small confines of the city of Athens. Public opinion inside the city, with its newspapers, café conversations, personalities and demonstrations, was separated from the undercurrents of national sentiment and took on a disproportionate influence.

Meanwhile, there were severe labour and rural problems developing in Athens, in Salonika and in the surrounding countryside as well as in the rest of the nation.²³ But Metaxas had only received seven percent of the vote. He had even done very poorly in the Peloponnesus, the historical centre of traditional peasant support for royalism. Even there, the republic had been unexpectedly re-endorsed. He had, however, received twenty per cent of the Athenian vote, which was astonishing.²⁴ If the peasants of the Peloponnesus represented traditional royalism, then perhaps the Athenian vote of twenty per cent represented the dividing line between conservatism and the appeal for a 'new order' with fascist overtones.²⁵ On 10 October 1935, a 'revolutionary committee' led by General Kondylis executed a successful coup.

The coup destroyed the republic, while the king's behaviour complemented the work of the new junta. What previously had held the Populist and Liberal leaders together was their belief in constitutional government and, in this respect, a democratic monarchy would have been acceptable to them, so long as it could have been established legally. By August, tension had become acute and prominent people of both parties constantly visited King

George in London in order to forewarn him against accepting a restoration brought about by a coup.²⁶ Republican leaders of stature, including Themostocles Sophoules, Alexandros Papanastasiou, George Kafandares, Alexandros Mylonas and George Papandreou, wrote him a letter warning him that a restoration imposed by force, such as the one that was being planned, would make him a prisoner of the party of the restoration, and that as such he could never be secure.²⁷ But the king's statements just before the coup of 10 October about his own attitude to a 'constitutional' restoration, were ambiguous enough to constitute an active bias in favour of the push to impose the restoration by force.²⁸

In the last hours before the coup, the king replayed this policy in microcosm. Tsaldaris's foreign minister, Dimitrios Maximos, telephoned the king twice from Geneva, on 8 October and on 10 October, the day of the coup.²⁹ Maximos informed the king that Tsaldaris planned to hold a National Council meeting that very day (the 10th) to decide and pass a resolution on whether to agree on restoration. He assured the king that the step was a formality so as to create a legal atmosphere for the transition from republic to constitutional monarchy. This was imperative in order to disarm the enemies of the constitutional state. Maximos assured the king that, because of the spirit of the council, there was no question but that the council would vote for the restoration. Maximos informed the king, however, that Tsaldaris felt it absolutely necessary to have a public statement from the king beforehand in which he would agree to abide by the National Council resolution procedure in order to deflect the coup and preserve the prestige of the state. King George had no reason to doubt this communication. Maximos's reputation was above suspicion, and he belonged to one of the oldest royalist families in Greece.

But the king refused, claiming that his primary responsibility was to his people, and in this regard he could not allow himself to be restricted by 'procedures'. He could not in principle admit that his kingship and his responsibilities could be circumscribed by legal action, even if the vote was certain.³⁰ The 10 October coup followed the last Maximos conversation by a few hours. On 31 October, three days before the plebiscite, the king, through a letter to a friend, called on the Greek people to accept the plebiscite verdict with 'good faith', asking the people to give a chance to the 'experiment' of 'crowned democracy'.³¹

The plebiscite engineered by the junta produced a 97 per cent

vote in favour of the restoration. The junta was so thorough that even republican Crete, the home of Venizelos, produced a 50,655 vote in favour against only 1,214 against. Western Thrace, another staunchly republican area, returned figures of 72,723 to 1,276 in favour.³² Officially restored on 3 November, the king finally declared that he would return as a constitutional monarch. According to Nicholas Kaltchas, 'The total poll of 1,727,714 exceeded by nearly half a million the average of the elections held during the preceding eleven years. Assuming that [all who were eligible voted] ... these figures reveal a degree of coercive and repressive control unprecedented in Greek politics.'³³ The American Embassy reported that among diplomatic circles the king's return was viewed as inevitable, and 'that the plebiscite is expected only to legalize decisions already taken'.³⁴ But just as inevitably, the king would have to 'depend on a miraculous person' to remain.³⁵ In a contrasting opinion, C. M. Woodhouse gives no figures. But he claims that, in spite of the fact that the plebiscite was rigged, 'there could be no doubt that the tide of opinion was emphatically against the republic. At the same time it was doubtful whether it would long favour the constitutional aspect of the restored monarchy'. Woodhouse appears to suggest that public opinion was in favour of abolishing the constitution altogether,³⁶ a suggestion which is not borne out by the facts.

There is a diplomatic dimension to these events which must now be sketched in. When the revolt failed, Venizelos fled aboard an Italian warship, signalling the fact that the Italians had hoped that, had Venizelos been successful, he might have reverted to his policy of 1928. He might even have withdrawn from the Balkan Pact. As prime minister in 1928, he had pursued a policy of detente with Italy and Turkey. At that time, the policy was feasible because of a relatively stable international situation, but after Hitler's attempt to seize Austria, a stable international order could no longer be assumed, and a dynamic and expansionist search for new lines of security had begun. By the time of the March Revolt, Italian transports were carrying troops through the Suez Canal to Ethiopia, and Germany had just announced a policy of compulsory military training. Consequently, while Italy offered Venizelos sanctuary, the British and French sent ships to Piraeus to proclaim their support for Tsaldaris. At the time the British had just finished re-

appraising their Mediterranean strategy and had decided not to abandon the sea for the 'Cape' school of naval strategy. Italy had become a menace to the Suez Canal and was consolidating her hold on Albania. The Spanish situation was bad, and the left was threatening in France. There was trouble with nationalists in Egypt and between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Cyprus had become an acute problem, and in this respect a beholden King George might be more manageable than Venizelos and a powerful Liberal Party with strong irredentist roots.³⁷ Finally, there were massive British investments in Greece, the debts on which Venizelos had insisted on renegotiating.³⁸ On the other hand, the British had refused to buy any substantial tobacco produce, which was all the Greeks had to sell. The social and economic disturbances were not making investors comfortable. 'Bolshevism' and 'communism' were phrases actively being used, and the American minister described the 'recent economic distress' as a 'fertile field for professional communist agitators from Moscow'.³⁹ *The Times* was seeing communists, socialists and subversives everywhere, as in Spain.⁴⁰

Thus, British policy in Greece increasingly reflected the policy of appeasement, a growing conservatism in foreign affairs which coincided with, and became supportive of, the conservative trend in Greek politics. The primary purpose of the policy of appeasement was to avoid a confrontation with Germany on the continent and, instead, find a peripheral line of defence in the Mediterranean. Whatever the relationship of cause and effect, the policy was anti-left and could not put up with social disturbances at each end of the Mediterranean. As a result, the British had supported Tsaldaris against a more extreme version of republicanism represented by the March Revolt. Six months later the British recognized Kondylis's coup and, finally, supported the return of the king. The British would have preferred the king to reign as a constitutional monarch, but this was not a prerequisite.⁴¹ It was within this diplomatic climate that the king acted to reject the Tsaldaris government's overtures on 10 October. A month later, the British ambassador greeted the newly arrived king with very explicit instructions in his diplomatic pocket: to guide and counsel the king who allegedly would trust nobody but the British.⁴²

After the plebiscite the king declared that his regime would be a 'crowned democracy', a step strongly advised by the British Foreign Office.⁴³ Venizelos, now in Paris, had become concerned about the deteriorating European situation and the spread of

fascism, and was convinced that the Liberals should accept the restoration, and even support the king, in order to prevent him from feeling totally dependent on Kondylis, who was now viewed as the 'Italian' factor in Greek politics. The king, in turn, had declared an amnesty for the republicans, which was of considerable legal significance and, furthermore, made it clear that he would rely on the Tasaldaris wing of the Populist Party. Kondylis was forced to retire.⁴⁴

Up to this point, his rapprochement to the Liberals was successful. But the 'good will' began to dissipate rapidly over the specific question of restoring the dismissed republican officers. The king found that the royalist officers who were responsible for his restoration were adamantly opposed to this step. The Liberals were willing not to press for a complete and immediate reinstatement, but they dared not admit no reinstatement at all. The issue had thus become a double-edged challenge to the restoration government: whether it could remain a parliamentary democracy and whether the king could survive as a constitutional monarch. Significantly, Metaxas, who was a rabid anti-republican, made no comments except to declare his loyalty solely to the king. He refused to associate with royalist officers who were pressuring George.⁴⁵

On Restoration Day, 25 November, Ernst Eisenlohr, the German minister, predicted that George could not survive without a new dictatorship.⁴⁶ On 11 December the king held a critical talk with him.⁴⁷ The talk established the conditions under which the new monarchy was acceptable to Germany. Minister Eisenlohr pointed out how quickly German policy could threaten the throne if necessary. Greece was totally dependent on Germany because

... the fact of a constant active balance in Greece's favour arising from the exchange of goods made it possible for Greece to obtain commodities from Germany which she could not purchase from other countries for lack of sufficient supplies of foreign exchange.

Consequently:

In discussing economic changes, I endeavoured to make clear to the King that Greece could not live without her German customers and that, in particular, a reduction or cessation of our purchases of tobacco *must lead to the impoverishment of the Macedonian peasants and thus to grave disturbances in Greek domestic politics*. Careful fostering of these relationships (between Germany and Greece) was therefore as much a political as an economic imperative.⁴⁸

It seemed, therefore, that in matters of domestic policy the king, for his own sake, should 'bind the armed forces to his person and thus provide himself with a reliable bulwark for his throne in the ever-changing currents of internal politics. The king then,' Eisenlohr stated, 'sought my advice about whom to entrust the reorganization of the army to...'

The conversation seemed not at all disagreeable. Eisenlohr's suggestions as to how the king should rule coincided with the king's own dispositions. The name of Metaxas does not appear in the document, but no other figure could have been as agreeable to both. Throughout the conversation the king complained bitterly and morosely about the incompetence of his advisors and Greek politicians in general and how alone he felt. He seemed eager for German assurances and technical assistance.

Finally, Eisenlohr pointed out that Nicholas Titulescu, Rumania's foreign minister, was attempting 'to coordinate the Balkan Pact with the Little Entente'. Greece, as an original member of the Balkan Pact, must never pursue a policy of allowing the pact to become part of a larger European (i.e. French) defensive arrangement. Such an arrangement could not help but lead 'to a clash of German and Greek interests'. In the next five years Greece never varied from these guidelines.

The king reached the high point of his democratic experiment when, on 17 December, it was announced that the first elections of the new regime would be held on 26 January. Actually, the election was held in an atmosphere remarkably free of coercion.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the Liberals were quite worried as to how to wage their election campaign because they did not trust the military or the monarchy. The events since June had left behind an atmosphere of intimidation. The dilemma which the Liberals faced, in forging their campaign strategy, was to find a way of opposing the Populists without allowing the Populists to claim that their only purpose was to attack the monarchy. Many who normally would have voted Liberal were hesitating for fear that a Liberal victory would be challenged by the military, especially since the issue of the reinstatement of republican officers was also woven into the campaign. It was important that the Liberals somehow keep that issue separated from the issue of the monarchy.

It was Venizelos who found a way out of the dilemma. From Paris, he wrote a letter to the newspaper *Elefthero Vema* which dramatically removed the issue of the monarchy from the cam-

paign. He wrote that, although the restoration would always remain illegal because of the way it was effected, if George succeeded in pursuing a policy of fairness and national unity, he would have deserved an immense reward, 'which will consist in the amnesty which the republicans will accord to the restoration'.⁵⁰ The slogan created an enthusiastic reaction which freed the Liberal campaign from the fear of a retaliatory *coup de main*. The Liberals felt that they had publicly separated the king from the issues and now could proceed in a free atmosphere. They pressed the campaign vigorously and thereby created the belief among themselves and the masses that parliamentary democracy was really functioning. Ironically, this led to a tremendous comeback for the Liberal Party. The Venizelist front won 141 seats of which 126 went to the Liberal party. The anti-Venizelist front won 143 seats but the vote revealed that the Populist Party was seriously divided. The Tsaldarists got only 72 seats while the followers of the more conservative John Theotokis won 38. Further to the right, the Kondylis won 12. And the Metaxas party, the *Eleftherophrones*, which represented the most reactionary position, won seven seats. But what surprised everyone was that the Communist Party (KKE), operating alone, won 15 seats.⁵¹

In general, the election redounded to the credit of the king, because of the popular feeling that 'democracy' has been restored and that the king had demonstrated that he intended to remain above politics. In popular terms, this is how the Liberal Party victory was perceived.⁵² In turn, these things had created a high point of good will for the king, which produced the second irony: it was this feeling of good will towards the monarchy that the public believed the king had betrayed when he authorized the Metaxas dictatorship. Nevertheless, the king saw the Liberal victory as a parliamentary challenge to his control over the armed services. He knew that he could not avoid a showdown over the restoration of republican officers now that the Liberals, with 126 seats, represented the biggest party.⁵³ The king not only feared the Liberals, he feared losing control over his own supporters because of the Liberal victory. He worried about the reaction of his own high ranking royalist officers, such as Admiral Economou, General George Reppas and even Alexandros Papagos. As chief of staff, Papagos had made it clear to the king that the army would seize power if either major party made an alliance with the communist deputies.⁵⁴ The Kondylis faction was another group that had to be

watched. There was, again, constant talk of a coup, and there was 'anger' with the king for 'stacking' the election in favour of the Venizelists. Finally, Reppas, Economou and 'others' called on the king just before the election and offered him a dictatorship.⁵⁵

The paradox was now complete. Even though the restoration had been forced, the king had created a democratic atmosphere by acting as a constitutional monarch. For this he gained the gratitude of his political enemies which in turn alarmed his friends, who responded by calling for a dictatorship. The king acted quickly. That night he personally appeared before the Athens military garrison where the coup was being planned, and by the force of his prestige disarmed it. But the warning was sufficient: he must control the army or it would control him. However, he did not want to take on the role of Victor Emmanuel, at least not for Kondylis. The next day he forced the resignations of Generals Papagos and Platas as minister and deputy minister respectively.⁵⁶ Papagos was reduced to chief of the general staff, a not unkindly demotion. Lastly, the king appointed Metaxas as minister of war, while Kondylis unexpectedly and most conveniently died in January.

Ever since the king's return, Metaxas had said nothing and done nothing to indicate anything but absolute loyalty to the monarch's wishes. The king's alliance with Metaxas brought the army and the conservatives under control. Metaxas had remained distant from the powerful group of army officers represented by Kondylis and Papagos. At this moment, his reputation as a stern and competent officer, his appointment as deputy minister of war, and the sudden death of Kondylis coincided to give Metaxas effective control of the army. His career as a political royalist, combined with the king's support, enabled them to greatly weaken Tsaldaris's grip on the Populist Party. The king had moved into power the one individual whose loyalty to himself and hostility to parliament was clearest. Paraphrasing Eisenlohr, the trusted person to support the crown had been found. Shortly thereafter, as Hitler seized the Rhineland, Metaxas insisted that the Greek government disentangle itself from the Balkan Pact.

Meanwhile, at the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) which convened on 28 September 1935, the party stated flatly that the restoration of the monarchy would lead to fascism. The Communists were extremely concerned about this because they would be the first to suffer, and they had appealed for a popular front as the only realistic alternative. On 10

October the Kondylis coup d'état took place. The party was immediately suppressed, but the restoration and the amnesty which followed enabled it to campaign openly, and it won 72,975 votes or 15 seats. This was an amazing success but there was little the KKE could do except ally with one of the major parties, thereby trying to gain some influence and protection. Its immediate aim was to strengthen the constitutional state, if for no other reason but to protect itself.⁵⁷ Consequently, the KKE entered into negotiations with both major parties, which created the turning point in the political crisis which, in turn, led to the dictatorship.

After the second world war, and the second restoration of King George in 1946 through the help of the British army, it became customary to describe the months leading to the king's 1936 dictatorship as a period of parliamentary crises which were brought about by the failure of democracy. According to this interpretation, the January election of 1936 divided parliament almost evenly between the Liberals and the Populists, and their respective supporters. This evenly-split parliament produced an impasse regarding the formation of a government. The Liberals were desperate to recover their political control and therefore entered into negotiations with the KKE. By doing so they 'proved' their intention to destroy the parliamentary system. But, contrary to this interpretation, the reality was that there was no impasse: the parties were not evenly divided. The Populist Party had come out of the election very badly split. The Tsaldarists had 72 seats, and a new group led by an extremely conservative royalist, John Theotokis, had 38. The Theotokis group represented the crystallization and the polarization of an influence among the Populists which was brought about by the return of the crown and the ascendancy of the military. What was remarkable was the steadfastness of the Tsaldaris group against this pressure.

The immediate issue dividing the two conservative factions was the problem of restoring the republican officers. Tsaldaris wanted to compromise, but Theotokis was still against that. Consequently, they could not agree on how to negotiate the composition of a cabinet with the Liberals. In March the alleged 'scandal' over the alliance with the Communist deputies broke out. It was 'discovered' that Sophoules, the head of the Liberal Party, had signed an agreement with S. Sklovainas, leader of the Communist parliamentary group, whereby the Communists would support Sophoules's candidature for speaker of the house. There was an im-

mediate, general fear that this 'scandal' would become the excuse for a coup d'état, and as a consequence the agreement collapsed. But other negotiations which were also quietly taking place between the Tsaldarists and the Communist deputies were also immediately dropped.⁵⁸ The point had been made: a parliamentary solution could not be found without the consent of the crown and the military. Metaxas was aware of the negotiations by *both* parties, a fact which made a 'profound' impact on him: 'At this critical point he decided to use all his influence to reinforce the throne as a separate institutional power, distinct from the parliamentary parties'.⁵⁹

The initiative during this period never left the hands of the king. By April the king had 'tired' of dealing with 'bickering' politicians and asked parliament to prorogue itself voluntarily for six months. He proposed that General Metaxas head the interim government as a minister-president. At the time, Laird Archer, the Athens chief of the American Near East Foundation, had an interview with the king which he described as 'amazingly frank'. '[My] impression is that the king, desperate to find non-political leadership with majority strength, will try out extreme measures and set aside the constitution if parliament fails today to support the proposal of General Metaxas to head the government.'⁶⁰ The king's proposal was accepted. Metaxas was approved as minister-president, and a watchdog committee to oversee the office was established by parliament as a face-saving formality. Thereafter Metaxas ruled unhindered. The American minister reported that 'In practice the government has become a dictatorship of the king.'⁶¹

Within the first week Metaxas moved to set the lines of his internal and foreign policies. At home, he rapidly began to spread a network of his own officials throughout the country. The significance was lost on no one: 'Metaxas was not an ordinary "non-political" premier. His appointment caused grave concern in the ranks of both major parties. Metaxas had made no secret of his contempt for the traditional parties and the parliamentary system...'⁶² In his diary, Metaxas describes the extremely dangerous social and political erosion in Greece and the serious fear of some kind of social revolution from below. The editor of the diary refers to the dangerous parallel of the 'Spanish situation'.⁶³

In foreign affairs, he immediately notified the Council of the Balkan Entente that the pact could not oblige Greece to participate in any action relating to a non-Balkan power under any

conditions. This was in direct contradiction to Article 3 of the pact, and to the sense of Article 4.⁶⁴ The Balkan Pact had been sponsored originally by Dimitrios Maximos, the Greek foreign minister under Tsaldaris, as well as the Rumanian foreign minister, Nicolae Titulescu. Maximos had been a very trusted associate of Tsaldaris, a fact which reveals that the king's foreign policy as well as his domestic policy were now in opposition to the former prime minister's. Furthermore, the king's policies increasingly coincided with the guidelines laid out by the German minister the previous December.

Added to this deterioration of policy was the sharply worsening economic situation, which was increasing the fear that an outright dictatorship would soon be imposed. In anticipation, strikes and demonstrations began to spread throughout the country, especially in Macedonia. These early strikes were responses to Metaxas's earlier appointment as minister of war, a connection which Metaxas did not fail to note.⁶⁵ But it was the Metaxas *diktat* appointment as prime minister that really accelerated the tempo of social unrest. Major strikes among the tobacco workers in northern Greece followed as a result of this appointment. The first large one took place 29 April, the day before parliament adjourned. By 9 May, Greece was faced with her first general strike in Salonika. More strikes followed, culminating in another general strike on 29 May. Slogans referring to Spain became prominent. Greek and American businessmen began to claim that money and organizers were coming from Moscow. The American minister described Salonika as capable of becoming another Barcelona: 'The spectre of social revolution has really appeared in Greece finally because of the blindness of Athens to the north. This is the real significance of the recent strikes.'⁶⁶

Metaxas promised a new order for the labouring classes, a point his defenders make much of, but in reality he pursued a policy of rigid oppression. MacVeagh reported, '...in sum, a social programme capable of turning the flank of communists by appealing to the workers is something which is badly needed but which I am afraid will not be supplied by the present "King's own" military-bourgeois government.'⁶⁷ Upon taking his new office, Metaxas also took to himself the ministries of war, air, marine and foreign affairs. His first cabinet consisted mainly of retired generals as well as George Logothetis as minister of justice. Logothetis was to become the head of the second of three collaborationist govern-

ments during the war. General Nicholas Tsipouras was appointed governor general of Macedonia. He was married to a prominent American woman and had close connections with American businesses in Macedonia. Tsipouras brought quick order to Macedonia, not hesitating to use violent methods. Macedonia and Thrace were torn by economic distress. Nevertheless, the areas still continued to be treated as legal entities separated from 'Old Greece'.⁶⁸ No serious effort was made to remedy this problem. On 22 July, the Spanish civil war broke out in full, and two weeks later Metaxas imposed his dictatorship.

The reality behind the political crisis was that Metaxas desired no parliamentary solution and that the king had given up any hopes of finding an agreeable one. Therefore, they claimed that a parliamentary solution was impossible. Indeed, considering the alternatives that they would not allow, a parliamentary solution was impossible. The only two possibilities were either an election under the majority system or an alliance by one of the major parties with the Communists, but neither of these solutions was acceptable to the king or Metaxas. The first would have produced a Liberal victory and an attempt to restore the republican officers, and that was unacceptable. The second, an alliance with the Communists, was absolutely unacceptable. No popular front was to be permissible under any conditions and the democratic state was not to be allowed to seek its own equilibrium, which would have reflected the political realities of Greece. The truth was that there was nothing that the 'politicians' could have done, because real power did not rest with them.

This domestic reality was matched by the general lines of British policy in Europe. From the days of Constantine, Metaxas was considered a Germanophile, but now the British began to hint that he was acceptable. Hitler had just seized the Rhineland and Litvinov addressed the League Council in London on 17 March, exhorting it to uphold the covenant and asking for collective action against Germany. Lord Lothian described Litvinov's speech as 'the most sinister speech ever made at the Council of the League'. He claimed that the only purpose of the speech was to create discord in Europe and that if the discord should precipitate a war, only communism would be the beneficiary.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, Metaxas began the process of nullifying the Balkan Pact. All of this reflected two new forms

of reality: Hitler's seizure of the Rhineland had altered the European balance in Germany's favour; and the British and Greek governments had determined that no matter who the enemy should be, an alliance with the left was unacceptable.

The major political parties made a last desperate effort to prevent a dictatorship. Tsaldaris had died in May and, in the meanwhile, Theotokis had begun to fear Metaxas. He and Sophoules, the leader of the Liberal Party, began negotiating an agreement in order to form a coalition government. Theotokis finally yielded on the issue of the restored officers and Sophoules approached the king with their agreement on the night of 3 August. The king told Sophoules that he would accept the cabinet drawn up by him and Theotokis. But later that night the king consulted with Metaxas and the two agreed to proceed with the dictatorship. The 'August 4th Regime' was proclaimed the next day. The king had rejected his own royalists; he would not chance his throne to the vagaries of democracy.

There is some disagreement as to these details. The American minister reported that Sophoules had notified the king 'a few days before' and that the king was now alert to the fact that a parliamentary solution was in the making. This 'decided' the king and Metaxas to act. The Greek historian Gregorios Dafnes placed the decisive conversation on the night before, 3 August. In his book, Kousoulas indicated that Sophoules told the king on 22 July that he was willing to form a coalition government, but Sophoules insisted that he could not form the government until the six-month interim period ended in October. However, the king was desperate and unable to wait, and was forced to declare the dictatorship in order to prevent a communist attempt at a revolution. Kousoulas also stressed that the king and Metaxas were concerned over the outbreak of civil war in Spain which furnished 'an impressive illustration of what "could also happen in Greece"'.⁷⁰ But these differences only confirm the point that the king and Metaxas wanted to prevent a parliamentary solution.

Metaxas claimed in his official proclamations that he had to act, just then, to save the country from revolution, and pointed to the fact that a general strike had been declared for 5 August.⁷¹ Actually, what Metaxas feared was not revolution but communism in any form, an attitude which meshed advantageously with the king's

desire to secure the throne. There was no communist threat to the democratic state: what the communists wanted was to participate in it, not overthrow it. Even their harshest critic, Kousoulas, admits they were not possibly prepared for revolution in the summer of 1936.⁷² Perhaps the best analysis was given by Metaxas himself.

I may declare, without going into details, that Greece will be organized in the future into a corporative State. It is towards this form of Government that our efforts and our acts are tending. I do not say that the Communists would have prevailed and taken over the power immediately. But I do say that they would have created such an overturn in the great bourgeois centres, spreading their influence gradually to the smallest centres, that we should have entered, without knowing it, a revolutionary atmosphere from which we surely could not have emerged without bloodshed.⁷³

NOTES

1. For an excellent theoretical examination of the distinction between conservatives and counterrevolutionaries, such as fascists, see Arno J. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York 1971). Though I classify Metaxas as a fascist, C. M. Woodhouse, for example, classifies him as a conservative. See *A Short History of Modern Greece* (London 1968), 227-34. Explaining the difficulties of sometimes distinguishing between fascists and conservatives, Hugh Seton-Watson wrote, 'All fascist movements combine, I suggest, in varying proportions, a reactionary ideology and a modern mass organization... In their original ideas they often closely resemble old-fashioned conservatives, but their methods of struggle, indeed their whole notion of political organization, belong not to the idealized past but to the modern age.' From 'Fascism, Right and Left', in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse, eds., *International Fascism, 1920-1945* (New York 1970), 183-84. On the nature of the Metaxas regime see my article, 'Le régime de Metaxás et la deuxième guerre mondiale', in *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, No. 107 (July 1977). For a contemporary view of Metaxas as the 'leader of Greek fascism', see *The New York Times*, 4 March 1935, 3.

2. Ioannou Metaxa, *To prosopiko tou imerologia (1896-1906)* [His Personal Diary...], ed. Ch. Chrystidis, 4 vols. (Athens 1951), 1:73-74. Hereafter cited as *Diary*. For a short biography of Metaxas see the editor's introduction, 3-86. As a junior officer, Metaxas had attended the War Academy at Berlin (January 1900-April 1903), and he recorded in his diary that those were happy years and that he felt very much at home in the world of German culture, which was based on the principle of authority. By 1913 he had been appointed Greek chief of staff, and by 1915 he had become King Constantine's principal military adviser and personal confidant. When the Entente forced Constantine into exile in 1917

and made Venizelos head of state, Metaxas was interned in Corsica by the French. He was later allowed to move to Sienna, where he lived for nine months before returning to Greece upon the recall of Constantine. For his years in Germany, see *Diary*, 1:460-648. For an assessment of his role as confidant and chief of staff during the turbulent years of the first world war, see George B. Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers 1914-1917* (Thessalonika 1974).

3. US Department of State, Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, Decimal file 868.00/917, Athens, 14 October 1935, Minister Lincoln MacVeagh to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. In his lengthy dispatch on the Kondylis coup, one of a series, MacVeigh reports that Metaxas had been hiring 'hoodlums' to create riots in Athens. (Hereinafter, the first citation for each document will list in order: US, decimal file number, location, date, and names. Afterwards, additional citations to the same document will be by decimal file number only.)

4. US 868.00/718, Athens, 9 June 1933, MacVeagh to Hull.

5. US 868.00/862, Athens, 26 April 1935, Military Attaché Franklin L. Whitley to Hull.

6. Ibid.

7. Woodhouse, op. cit., 150, 174. Macedonia and the key city of Salonika did not become part of the kingdom of Greece officially until 1913, and at the time were not integrated into the legal and administrative system of 'Old Greece', as defined by the original boundary set by the treaty of 1832. The new Greece was ruled by a governor general who was usually a military officer. This produced a resentment which led easily to republicanism and support of Venizelos's insurgent government in Salonika during the Allied intervention in the first world war.

8. US 868.00/836, Athens, 25 April 1935 and 868.00/837, 27 April 1935, MacVeagh to Hull. 868.00/842, Washington, DC, 9 May 1935, Phillips to MacVeagh. 868.00/843, Washington, DC, 29 April 1935, Murray to Hull. 868.00/868, Athens, 21 May 1935, Whitley to Hull. *The Times*, 4 November 1935, reported that the retirement of 1,200 officers and thousands of civil servants, diplomats, professors, members of the Council of State, elementary school teachers and justices of the peace, had seriously weakened republican elements in official society.

9. US 868.00/827, Athens, 24 March 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.

10. *The Times* (London), 8 June 1935, 13 and the editorial of 2 October 1935 on the 'waning' cause of the restorationists and the increasing resort to violence by extreme royalists.

11. US 868.00/822, Athens, 17 March 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.

12. US 868.00/852, Athens, 25 April 1935, MacVeagh to Hull. US 868.00/865, Athens, 9 June 1935, MacVeagh to Hull. *The Times*, 8 June 1935,

13. US 868.00/865; 868.00/893, Athens, 18 June 1935, Whitley to Hull. For election figures, see *The Times*, 13 June 1935, 11.

14. US 868.00/871, Athens, 21 June 1935, MacVeagh to Hull. *The Times* 6, 18, 20 and 22 July 1935.

15. US 868.00/834, Athens, 1 May 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.

16. US 868.00/871; 868.00/876, Athens, 3 July 1935, Chargé d'Affaires C. W. Aldridge to Hull.

17. US 868.00/876.

18. *The Times*, 6 July 1935, 3.
19. US 868.00/910, Athens, 24 September 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.
20. US 868.00/885, Athens, 18 July 1935, Aldridge quotes the passage to Hull.
21. John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton 1972), 223. Roy MacGregor-Hastie, *The Day of the Lions: The Life and Death of Fascist Italy, 1922-1945* (London 1963), 180, 190, 208.
22. G. Charitakis, *Annuaire Économique de la Grèce pour l'année 1938* (Athens 1939), 22-52. Ministère de l'Economie National, *Statistique du Commerce de la Grèce avec les Pays Etrangers pendant l'Année 1939* [in French and Greek] (Athens 1946), 1:7-9. Dimitri Kitsikis, *Hè Hellas tés 4és augoustou kai ai megalai dynameis* [Greece of the 4th of August (Regime) and the Great Powers] (Athens 1974), 40-58. Also Kitsikis's article, 'La Grèce entre l'Angleterre et l'Allemagne de 1936 à 1941', in *Revue Historique* (July-September 1967), 97-98.
23. US 868.00/886, Athens, 5 August 1935, MacVeagh to Hull on disturbances in Crete. US 868.00/910 on the dangers of 'communism' now 'spreading'. Coincidentally, the 4th Plenum of the Greek Communist Party's Central Committee met on 28 September 1935. In line with the policy of the Seventh International, the party called for a popular front policy. Kousoulas interprets this as clear proof of a conspiracy to overthrow the state, but more likely the party was responding to the fear of the coup against the parliamentary regime, in which case they would be the first victims. See D. George Kousoulas, *Revolution and Defeat* (London 1965), 98-105.
24. US 868.00/893. *The Times*, 10 June 1935, 9 and 11 June 1935, 12; *New York Times*, 11 June 1935, 6.
25. The problems created by the Great Depression coincided with this constitutional crisis over the form of government, but it is was the constitutional crisis which dominated the public mind because it represented the more immediate threat of civil war. Therefore the public preoccupation and debate over the issue of the restoration was not a refusal on the part of the Greeks to face up to the 'real' problems of the economy, as C. M. Woodhouse claims in *Apple of Discord* (London 1951), 9-15. Rather, the public preoccupation and debate over the issue of the restoration was really the recognition that within Greece and Europe by 1936 internal politics were becoming rapidly indistinguishable from international problems. The new European war of ideologies had joined the two. See A. J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1936* (London 1937), v to 35.
26. Panagiotés Pipinelés, *Geórgios B' [George II]* (Athens 1951), 78. US 868.00/894, Athens, 14 August 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.
27. US 868.00/914, Athens, 3 October 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.
28. *The Times*, editorial, 11 September, 30 September, 1 October and 2 October 1935.
29. Pipinelés, op. cit., 80.
30. Ibid., 80. Also, US 868.00/913, Athens, 30 October 1935, MacVeagh comments on the certainty in diplomatic circles of the king's return.
31. Alexés Kyrou, *Helleniké exóteriké politiké* [Foreign Policy of the Greeks] (Athens 1955), 78. US 868.00/915, Athens, 9 October 1935, MacVeagh to Hull. In the embassy's judgment, George was governed by a belief in his 'divine calling' and in the guarantor powers. He was 'incapable of understanding' other considerations. For a penetrating assessment of the king's personality see Henry Morgenthau, *I was sent to Athens* (Garden City, New York 1929), 120-24.

32. L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453* (New York 1963), 670.
33. Nicholas Kaltchas, *Introduction to the Constitutional History of Modern Greece* (New York 1940), 162-63.
34. US 868.00/913.
35. US 868.00/910.
36. Woodhouse, op. cit., 229.
37. In the secret London treaty of 1915 Venizelos was promised the Dodecanese Islands and Rhodes from Italy, but the latter was not to be given to Greece until and when Great Britain returned Cyprus. After Constantine's return to the throne in 1920, the English and Italian governments claimed they were no longer bound by any previous agreements made with Venizelos because of Constantine's pro-German policy during the war. But these territorial agreements had been concessions to the Liberals and this volte face did not mean that the Liberals had in any way abandoned them as aims.
38. Elizabeth Monroe, *The Mediterranean in Politics* (London 1939), 25. Also see note 22 above.
39. US 868.00/976, Athens, 29 May 1936 and 868.00/978, Athens, 6 June 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
40. See *The Times* treatment of the March Revolt on 4 March 1935, and of the strikes in Macedonia which are typical examples during this period.
41. *The Times*, 2 December 1935.
42. US 868.00/924, Athens, 18 November 1935, MacVeagh reported to Hull that he had been told this by Sir Sydney Waterlaw, the British ambassador.
43. US 868.00/934, Athens, 9 November 1935, MacVeagh to Hull; 868.00/939, Athens, 21 November 1935, MacVeagh to Hull; and 868.00/924.
44. US 868.00/940, Athens, 25 November 1935, MacVeagh to Hull; 868.00/932, Athens, 2 December 1935, MacVeagh to Hull; 868.00/941, Athens, 13 December 1935, MacVeagh to Hull; *The Times*, 19 December 1935.
45. US 868.00/954, Athens, 20 January 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
46. US 868.00/940.
47. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, Series C (1933-1937), IV, *The Third Reich: First Phase*, 1 April, 1935 — 4 March 1936 (Washington, D.C. 1962), 908. Hereinafter cited as *DGFP* followed by series, volume and page.
48. *DGFP*, C, IV, 910. My italics.
49. US 868.00/947, Athens, 10 January 1936, MacVeagh to Hull, *The Times*, 19 December 1935.
50. US 868.00/948, Athens, 12 January 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
51. For a more detailed breakdown of the election figures, see Grégorious Daphenés, *Hé Hellas metaxy dyo polemón, 1923-1940* [Greece Between Two Wars, 1923-1940], 2 vols (Athens 1955), 2:402.
52. US 868.00/956, Athens, 26 January 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
53. Ibid. 'It [restoring the republican officers] has become the burning question since the election.' It must be kept in mind that the vast majority of republican officers cashiered had nothing to do with the March Revolt.
54. Metaxas, *Diary*, IV (1960), 179-85, 197. US 868.00/960, Athens, 6 March 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
55. US 868.00/947, 868.00/956, 868.00/960.
56. Ibid.

57. See note 23 above.
58. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, 109-14.
59. Metaxas, *Diary*, 4:180-81. The quotation is from the editor.
60. Laird Archer, *Balkan Journal* (New York 1944), 36.
61. US 868.00/974, Athens, 2 May 1936, MacVeagh to Hull.
62. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, 113.
63. Metaxas, *Diary*, 4:222-230.
64. Alexander Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, trans., Pat Eliascos (Athens 1949), 34-38.
65. Metaxas, *Diary*, 4:210-212. Also US 868.00/968, Athens, 20 April 1935, MacVeagh to Hull.
66. US 868.00/976; also 868.00/973, Athens, 11 June 1936, MacVeagh to Hull. Metaxas, *Diary*, 4:212-217. Dafn s, *op. cit.*, 2:422-427.
67. US 868.00/979, Athens, 13 June 1936, MacVeagh to Hull. See observations by Archer, *op. cit.*, 44-46.
68. US 868.00/979.
69. Max Beloff, *The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia 1936-1941* (London 1949), 2:16.
70. US 868.00/995, Athens, 19 September 1936, MacVeagh to Hull. Dafn s, *op. cit.*, 2:209. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, 121-22.
71. For a copy of the royal decree of 4 August, dissolving parliament and instituting martial law, see MacVeagh's dispatch to Hull, US 868.00/983, Athens, 5 August 1936.
72. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, 124-25.
73. US 868.00/995, reported in MacVeagh's dispatch to Hull, Athens, 19 September 1936, taken from an interview with Metaxas by the newspaper *Vradyni*. Portions of the interview may be found in Metaxas, *Diary*, IV, as an appendix.

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