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Editorial Introduction

Re-assessing the Metaxas Dictatorship (1936–1941)—Greek Fascism or Old-Style Authoritarianism?

Aristotle Kallis | ORCID: 0000-0001-6711-1969
School of Humanities, Keele University, Keele, UK
a.kallis@keele.ac.uk

George Souvlis
University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece
g.souvlis@yahoo.gr

Abstract

There are few more challenging tests of fascist core-periphery topographies than the case of interwar Greece. Greece can claim no significant fascist movement in the interwar years; no significant fascist political party; and no dictatorial regime inspired by a genuinely revolutionary ultranationalist vision. In the last category, the only possible candidate, the 4th of August dictatorial regime headed by the retired general Ioannis Metaxas, was established late (1936) and lasted only for a few short years until the death of the dictator (January 1941). The contributions to this special issue on interwar Greece feature not only diverse aspects of the Metaxas regime but also offer broader perspectives on the ideological and political dynamics of fascism across the 1920s and 1930s. This special issue intends to build bridges between historical and sociological approaches; between the study of ideas and the analysis of policies; between contextual specificities and international trends; and, in the end, between recent historiographies of generic fascism and of modern Greek history. Collectively, the contributions also evince a plea to take the fascist experience and the potential for radical ruptures in interwar Greece more seriously.

Keywords

Greece – fascism – Metaxas regime (1936–1941) – interwar period

Where there is a 'core' there are also multiple 'peripheries'. Attempts to define the ideological essence of a generic fascism and extrapolate its political paradigms have inevitably produced imaginary topographies featuring central canons and degrees of kinship, hubs and networks, as well as an abundance of fascist peripheries.¹ For decades, the idea that Italian Fascism and National Socialism—as regimes or indeed as movements that seized power and consolidated their rule—must be regarded as the two de facto 'paradigmatic' cases of interwar fascism generated all sorts of cleavages that allegedly separated them from the wider circle of fascist movements and the register of right-wing ultranationalist dictatorships that emerged in the interwar years.² The extraordinary in scale, speed, and momentum circulation of fascist ideas and practices across Europe and beyond inspired a wealth of active translations that engaged an ever-expanding register of external fascist stimuli with local specificities.³ The result was a kaleidoscope of local(ised) varieties, some more closely matched to the fascist 'core' than others. International actors engaged with the fascist experience at different stages of its historical trajectory: broadly speaking, early adherents tended to be attracted to fascism's promise of revolutionary rupture through radical action while later fellow travellers also engaged with the practices of fascism-in-power as totalitarian dictatorship and organic nation-statism. The more fascism (by which we mean the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon rather than its scholarly definitions) grew in stature on the interwar political scene, the more it appeared capable of 'solving' crises and crushing 'enemies', and the more attractive it (or, crucially, aspects or translations thereof) became for an ever-wider circle of political actors. Therefore, fascism expanded and diversified not only geographically but also politically, reaching new constituencies well beyond the initial core of radical ultranationalist paramilitary zealots.⁴

1 For an application of the morphological approach of ideology to generic fascism see Carlos Manuel Martins, *From Hitler to Codreanu: The Ideology of Fascist Leaders* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), Ch 1.

2 For critiques of this view see Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19; David D. Roberts, 'Fascism and the Framework for Interactive Political Innovation during the Era of the Two World Wars,' in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, eds. António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 42–66.

3 On the diffusion of fascist ideas and practices in the interwar years see Kurt Weyland, *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism during the Interwar Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

4 Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017); Aristotle Kallis, 'The Transnational Co-Production of Interwar "Fascism": On the Dynamics of Ideational Mobility and Localization,' *European History*

In one sense, the fascist ‘core’ ought to be differentiated from its ‘peripheries’. In another sense, however, the two together formed a network of ideologically and political kindred interactions that supposedly set it apart from other contemporary networks. In this latter sense, the notion of a periphery raises the critical question of demarcation of the outermost boundaries, where fascist ideas and practices failed to gain traction. By definition peripheries occupy a place betwixt and between: they are different from the core but also crucially different from what lies beyond. The outermost boundaries matter at least as much as the lines that distinguish the core from the varying degrees of its relations. Yet even this task is fraught with ambiguities and contestations because such boundaries that supposedly mark the limits of fascist diffusion were neither absolute nor fixed over time. Fascist ideas and practices circulated freely and widely during the interwar years. Even where and when they seemingly failed to gain significant social traction, at times they frequently influenced political discourse and praxis locally, leaving behind traces of influence and paving the way for novel syntheses. Moreover, not only did the repertoire of fascist practices continue to generate new stimuli through the 1920s and 1930s but local conditions and agencies were ever-changing and thus unpredictable, often setting in motion processes of ideological and political convergence with the fascist experience even if they stopped short of its original revolutionary or totalitarian dynamics—a trend described as ‘fascistisation’⁵ but often agnostic about the outcome. This meant that something that could have passed by a local audience at one point in time could be reappraised more sympathetically at a later stage in response to new local challenges.

The task of determining where the inter- and trans-national fascist networks of interactions and translations ended and where something else (e.g. authoritarianism or conservatism) began has proved vexatious for fascism studies, generating all sorts of rigid binaries that, on closer inspection, dissolve into multiple grey zones. If by the 1930s fascism had disrupted pre-existing political spaces of the radical but also conservative-authoritarian right,⁶ if it had gained some traction among liberals or even dissident constituencies of the left,⁷ then

Quarterly 51, no. 2 (2021): 189–213; Ángel Alcalde, ‘Towards Transnational Fascism: German Perceptions of Mussolini’s Fascists and the Early NSDAP,’ *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 2 (2018): 176–195.

5 Ismael Saz Campos, ‘Fascism, Fascistization and Developmentalism in Franco’s Dictatorship,’ *Social History* 29, no. 3 (2004): 342–357.

6 António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

7 For example Richard Griffiths, ‘Fascism and the Planned Economy: “Neo-Socialism” and “Planisme” in France and Belgium in the 1930s,’ *Science & Society* 69, no. 4 (2005): 580–593.

how feasible is it to search for fixed outermost boundaries that set fascism apart from other categories? And even if these lines can be meticulously fixed in the laboratories of scholarly analysis, how can they possibly stand firm on the quicksand of history in the 1920s and 1930s?

There are few more challenging tests of fascist core-periphery topographies than the case of interwar Greece. The count of challenges is high: there was no significant fascist movement in the interwar years beyond—possibly and again tenuously—a motley crowd of action squads (e.g. the anti-Venizelist Panhellenic Reservist Association formed in 1916; the Venizelist Democratic Battalions of the 1920s;⁸ the ultranationalist and fiercely antisemitic National Organisation of Greece, known as ΕΕΕ);⁹ no significant fascist political party (Mercouris's National Socialists were invited to the international fascist congress of Montreux but failed to gain traction within Greece¹⁰); and no dictatorial regime inspired by a genuinely revolutionary ultranationalist vision. In the last category, the only possible candidate, the 4th of August dictatorial regime headed by the retired general Ioannis Metaxas, was established late (1936) and lasted only for a few short years until the death of the dictator (January 1941) and Greece's military occupation by the Axis forces a few months later. The Metaxas dictatorship did eventually register on the radar of 'generic fascism' but only as the ultimate peripheral or 'minor' case with a very mixed and dubious record.¹¹ Its ideologically and political peripheral status within the interwar fascist panorama was based on its alleged distance from the fascist fundamentals: Metaxas was a conservative, fervently pro-royalist, and distinctly uncharismatic dictator;¹² the regime that he headed lacked any meaningful social support or single-party infrastructure; its ideology, hard to pin down to begin with in the absence of canonical statements, oscillated between admiration for for-

8 Ioannis B. Daskarolis, *Δημοκρατικά Τάγματα: Οι 'πραιτωριανοί' της Δεύτερης Ελληνικής Δημοκρατίας, 1923–1936* [Democratic Battalions: The 'praetorians' of the Second Hellenic Republic, 1923–1936] (Athens: Papazisis, 2019).

9 Spyros Marketos, *Πώς φίλησα τον Μουσολίνι: Τα πρώτα βήματα του ελληνικού φασισμού* [How I kissed Mussolini: The first steps of Greek fascism] (Athens: Vivliorama, 2006) 'Christian's Pistola, 'Η Οργάνωση "Εθνική Ένωσις Ελλάς" (Τρία Έψιλον)' [The organisation 'Ethniki Enosis Ellas' (Tria Hepsilon)] (PhD diss., University of Thessaloniki, 2014).

10 Marco Cuzzi, *L'internazionale delle camicie nere* (Milan: Mursia, 2005), 192–193.

11 E.g. David Close, 'Conservatism, Authoritarianism and Fascism in Greece, 1915–1945,' in *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Martin Blinkhorn (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 200–217; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 317–320.

12 Victor Papacosma, 'Ioannis Metaxas and the "Fourth of August" Dictatorship in Greece,' in *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeastern Europe*, eds. J. Bernd and J. Fischer (West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 2007), 165–198.

eign fascist examples (though in the end less for Germany or Italy and more for other ‘peripheral’ cases such as Salazar’s Portugal), but seemed wedded to more traditional norms of authoritarian dictatorship than totalitarian fascist rule; its nationalism was more inward-looking, and its foreign policy more pragmatic than ideologically driven;¹³ in the end, its lifespan was too short to allow any deeper radical intentions to take meaningful shape.¹⁴

It is tempting to shade Metaxas and his regime out of the fascist picture for under-performing on all sorts of ideological or political tests. However the contributions to this special issue intend to highlight why perpetuating such an approach is a missed opportunity. There are two main reasons for this. First, the conventional assumption that the 4th of August regime was ‘not genuinely fascist’ (more traditional than ‘modern’ in institutional and ideational terms; more conservative/status-quo preserving than radical, let alone revolutionary; more conventionally right-wing authoritarian than third-way fascist) has largely prevented a serious examination of its radical ideological foundations and tensions that shaped its political and institutional development in the second half of the 1930s. Such an approach has conferred upon the case of Greece an unseemly marginal status in the conceptual and political geographies of interwar fascism that is undeserved. It is also impoverishing because it has impeded the fruitful application of recent theoretical innovations in the field of fascism studies to the analysis of the case of Greece as part of a fascinating landscape of kindred post-liberal authoritarian departures across interwar Europe and beyond. The contributions to this special issue seek to address these and other analytical lacunae in order to offer systematic accounts of the regime’s complex ideological formation, of the diverse ideological lineages—both local and international—that shaped its vision and praxis, and of its intellectual and institutional transfers from other fascist/authoritarian forces of the time, both local and international. This more flexible and inclusive line of reasoning will allow us to better integrate the ideological and political experience of interwar Greece into the wider European one, and to revisit the extent to which it represented in reality a rogue or peripheral case of fascism or one among many translations thereof.

The second missed opportunity also concerns the 4th of August regime, but this time as distinct part of a much broader—chronologically but also

13 Marco Tarchi, ‘The Role of Fascist Movements,’ in *Authoritarianism and Democracy in Europe, 1919–1939: Comparative Analyses*, eds. Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 106–107.

14 John Ploumidis, *Το καθεστώς Ιωάννη Μεταξά (1936–1941)* [The Ioannis Metaxas Regime (1936–1941)] (Athens: Hestia, 2016).

ideological/political—and more volatile picture of Greek history between the end of the First World War and the country's Axis occupation. Earlier interpretations of the Metaxas dictatorship as a marginal or failed case of fascism typically came with the accusation that whatever fascist trappings displayed by the regime were products of superficial mimesis of foreign blueprints.¹⁵ In a country supposedly lacking in genuine fascist mass movements, the historicisation of the 4th of August dictatorship invited either tropes of discontinuity with the recent local past or alternatively narratives of its Greek rootedness as traditional, patrician, paternalistic, and lacking in radical aspirations. The notion of an imported, perfunctory fascistisation of the Metaxas regime denied 'Greek (native) fascism', such as it was, any genuinely native roots or drivers or any sense of local traction long before the (re)appearance of the 'Metaxas solution' in 1935–1936. It also robbed a much wider range of maverick Greek actors of the interwar period of any agency in terms of actively and creatively engaging with, and translating aspects of the international ideological and political experience to fit the specific conditions of the Greek context. Upon closer inspection, however, the Greek interwar years were teeming with dissident radical under-currents that came to intersect with diverse facets of the international fascist experience long before Metaxas evangelised his *metavoli* [transformation] in the mid-1930s. Thus, rather than being considered merely as a rogue, half-hearted attempt at mimicking foreign prototypes in a country with otherwise very little fascist traction, the Metaxas dictatorship could be reappraised as part of significantly more complex and active synthesis of heterogeneous stimuli in the longer term that spanned the local and the international, the traditional and the modern, the order-affirming and the radical.

In different ways, all the contributions to this special issue feature accounts that encompass the 4th of August dictatorship as a serious effort to engage with aspects of its contemporary fascist experience. At the same time, however, they also zoom out in both chronological and geographic terms to capture the bigger, if messy picture of a Greek native fascism in all its diverse entanglements and radical potentialities. In so doing, the articles seek to add nuance and depth to the ideological formation of the Metaxas regime by examining some of its defining features (nationalism and propaganda, anti-liberalism and anti-parliamentarism, third-way synthesis and innovation, gender and femininity, modernity and modernism, biopolitics and eugenics) in relation to two axes: first, a chronological one that places the 4th of August regime in

15 For example, Jon V. Kofas, *Authoritarianism in Greece: The Metaxas Regime* (Boulder CO: East European Monographs, 1983); P.J. Vatikiotis, *Popular Autocracy in Greece, 1936–1941: A Political Biography of General Ioannis Metaxas* (London: Routledge, 1998).

a longer-term context of modern Greek history and culture; and second, an international mobilities one that approaches the Greek interwar experience not as a marginal, unwieldy, regressive or insular outlier of the interwar fascist panorama but as the product of active contacts, intersections, and creative syntheses between local and foreign contemporary ideological and political trends.

The articles featured in this special issue intend to build bridges between historical and sociological approaches; between the study of ideas and the analysis of policies; between contextual specificities and international trends; and, in the end, between recent historiographies of generic fascism and of modern Greek history. Collectively, they also evince a plea to take the fascist experience and the potential for radical ruptures in interwar Greece more seriously. Following a methodological approach that combines Dylan Riley's historical sociological analysis of fascism¹⁶ with a close reading of the canonical texts of the 4th of August regime, Souvliis challenges the traditional view that the Metaxas regime lacked a radical ideological core by focusing on the anti-liberal thought of one of the dictatorship's key theorists, Nikolaos Koumaros. Koumaros's choice as the legal voice of the dictatorship channeled a wealth of radical international anti-liberal/-parliamentary ideas into the Greek context and shaped the regime's normative political foundations in the second half of the 1930s. Kallis approaches the Metaxas regime as part of a broader pursuit of third-way solutions in Greece that stretched back to the early 1920s. If early fascism-as-radical-movement did not appear to gain traction in a country paralysed and exhausted by the catastrophic defeat in Asia Minor in 1922, fascism-as-dictatorial model of rule thrived in the dissident thirding spaces that opened up in the 1920s and exploded in the 1930s—as a key ingredient of third-way alchemies that sought to reconcile Greek specificities with international fascist templates or practices. Metaxas's *metavoli* was thus rooted in a much deeper search for radical alternatives that fed from both local and international trends, in ever-closer contact and exchange. In this vein, Papari examines another set of mainstream Greek intellectuals who functioned as nodes for the translation of dissident international post-liberal ideas. People like Konstantinos Tsatsos and Panayotis Kanellopoulos eventually converged on the National Unionist Party that was founded in 1935 and espoused the need for an authoritarian diversion from parliamentary democracy as only solution to the perceived crisis. Papari's article shows how these and other intellectu-

16 Dylan Riley, *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

als, already fluent interlocutors with international radical conservative/fascist thinkers of the time, paved the way for Metaxas's coup by legitimising the overthrow of the parliamentary system and exerted influence on the dictatorship's ideological formation.

The other four articles of the special issue shift the analytical focus on Metaxas and his dictatorship while maintaining a productive dialogue with *longue durée* and the inter-/trans-national context of intellectual exchanges. Two of these contributions (Bogiatzis, Stamos) focus on the negotiations of tradition and modernity in the field of ideas and discourse. Bogiatzis explores the formative role of international sources, such as the *Konservative Revolution*, on Metaxas's ideology from the turn of the twentieth century until the late 1930s. Bogiatzis sees Metaxas's ideology as a particular response to what Peter Wagner has described as the 'first crisis of modernity',¹⁷ paying particular attention to the ways in which the general-cum-politician-cum-dictator tapped into these international influences to develop his 'solutions' to the problems facing Greece in the interwar period (the 1922 collapse and the agonising search for a new paligenetic platform; the crisis of the party/parliamentary system; the financial crisis of the 1930s; the perceived threat of communism). For Bogiatzis, the Metaxas of the 1930s was already deeply invested in the modernist dynamic of fascism along the path of a post-liberal, ultranationalist, and anti-communist new futural order. Stamos reappraises one of the overarching tropes of the 4th of August dictatorship—the vision of a 'Third Hellenic' civilisation. While this trope was rooted in long-term local traditions of nationalist thought (not least the nineteenth-century *Megali Idea* [Great Idea] of national rebirth and territorial aggrandisement that reached its peak in 1920 but was exhausted with the defeat of the Greek forces in Anatolia in 1922), Stamos illustrates how this key propaganda theme of the Metaxas dictatorship functioned as a new 'sacred canopy' seeking to reactivate local traditions and traits in a decidedly regenerative, modern, future-facing direction while also maintaining an active dialogue with international experiences.

This kind of creative mediation of the past with the future, of the traditional with the modern, and of the local with the international also pervades the other two articles in this special issue (Vasilaki, Tzanaki), with their focus being on gender identities and sexuality. Vasilaki's article addresses gender antinomies during the 4th of August dictatorship. Vasilaki explores the inherent contradictions of the dictatorship's gender ideology, highlighting how constructions

17 Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 37–71.

of femininity and masculinity oscillated between the evocation of a 'return to tradition' and the search for a modern reorientation based on projects of social engineering. Tzanaki analyses the 4th of August dictatorship as a long-term project of engineering 'healthy' populations in continuity with bourgeois notions of ethical-psychic 'normality' where both mainstream and fascist ideas about eugenics, reproduction, social inequality, gender identities, and sexual education coalesced. Tzanaki also demonstrates how, rather than representing a categorical rupture in the history of interwar Greece, the Metaxas regime's biomedical discourse also displayed critical continuities with key ideas about social and gender normativities that stretched back to the Second Hellenic Republic (1924–1936) and survived to a significant extent in the post-World War II period.

All the articles featured in the special issue represent a unique contribution to the better understanding of the dynamics of, and potential for, a 'Greek fascism' in the interwar period. They also offer new insights into how the most familiar case study of the 4th of August dictatorship did not emerge in a political, social or cultural vacuum but instead mapped onto very diverse pre-existing undercurrents while also actively engaging with, refracting, and translating the contemporary international experience of European fascism. The editors hope that this special issue opens up new research avenues in the study of fascism in interwar Greece; and that it has made a strong case for taking lesser, 'peripheral' cases of interwar fascism more seriously.