

Monumental Visions: The Past in Metaxas' *Weltanschauung*

Philip Carabott

I

Over the last two decades, a number of individual studies and collective works have set out to argue that there is more than one monumental vision of a nation's past to which at a given moment its members, individually or collectively, subscribe and associate with (selectively, see Nora 1984-1992; Lowenthal 1985; Revel and Hunt 1995). Thus, Robert Gildea has shown how each French political and cultural cluster from the late eighteenth century onward has endeavored to shake off what it perceives as the "nightmares of the past" and promote its own all-consuming version of that past, where "what matters is myth, not in the sense of fiction," but as an exclusive notion that serves as a means to a particular end (1994, 12, 340-41). Despite the need for more case studies of this nature and content, it is fair to assume that Gildea's findings hold true for numerous national groupings all over the world. In the case of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, this process tends to be carried out sweepingly by the state and its agents in the name of the nation. Often, it revolves around the projection of the myth of racial superiority, and the safeguarding of that superiority is blatantly appropriated to legitimize the regime's usurpation of power (cf. Machera 1987, 163-64). This mythical dimension in the construction and articulation of memories—and of the *lieux de mémoire*—associated with a nation's past, in whatever guise and under whatever circumstances, does not seem to have lost its prominence even in today's age of globalization. Hence, in a recent *Guardian* leader (#42249, 7 August 1998, 15) on the discovery at Tintagel Castle of a stone dating from the sixth century and inscribed with the name

“Artognov” (Arthur), it is argued that the myth of the legendary King Arthur “has survived so long without historical legs. . . . Whether we want facts to intrude any further is a moot point. . . . Maybe the myth and the man shouldn’t come too close together. Sometimes truth needs to be kept at a distance—so memories can live on.”

Ioannis Metaxas (1871-1941) would probably have agreed with this line of reasoning.¹ Having played an instrumental, if somewhat controversial, role as a military strategist and royal confidant in the early period of the *ethnikos dichasmos* (national schism), by 1921 he had already begun to disassociate himself from the core of the Antivenizelist camp. That year he set up his *Komma Eleftherofronon* (Free Opinion Party) in time-honored fashion: the infusion of new blood into Greek politics would be attained by “completely rejecting past methods of governing and administering” (Metaxas 1951-1964, 3:778). Although he scored well in the 1926 elections and participated in the ecumenical government of Alexandros Zaimis as minister of communications, the return of Venizelos to power in August 1928 and his unassailable position as a “parliamentary dictator” (Dafnis 1954, 1:395), cut short Metaxas’ foray into conventional politics. The former general and former politician now considered himself a “simple citizen” (Metaxas 1951-1964, 3:705), who was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the trappings of parliamentarism, though at least with time on his hands to indulge in his favorite pastime of reading and philosophizing. In what was probably a preamble to his polemical exchange of views with Venizelos on the national schism, serialized in the Athenian dailies *Eleftheron Vima* and *Kathimerini* in late 1934 to early 1935 (see Venizelos and Metaxas 1994), in January 1932 he jotted down in his carnet of thoughts that “reference to the past, studying the past, has no other value than that which present needs bestow upon it” (Metaxas 1969, 2:433). Four years later, he would expand and articulate this view in earnest.

Drawing upon the corpus of Metaxas’ diaries, speeches and thoughts, as well as some contemporary representative publications on the Fourth of August Regime, here I will examine readings of the past in the context of Metaxas’ *weltanschauung*. I will also seek to assess the extent to which the past was conceptualized as myth, in the sense mentioned above, designed to serve the exigencies of the present and legitimize Metaxas’ rise to power.

II

In recent years a number of doctoral dissertations, monographs, and articles on the Fourth of August Regime and its *archigos* (leader) have helped refute somewhat the aphorism of J. Joachim (1982, 135) that Metaxas' *politia* is one of "the most closely guarded skeleton[s] in the Greek political cupboard." Notwithstanding partisan and polemic publications which continue to appear, perhaps as testimony to the controversy and passions that the subject arouses fifty years on, a general consensus emerges as regards the content of Metaxas' *weltanschauung*, of *metaxismos* (cf. Machera 1987, 32-33). A "minimal, oversimplified political ideology" (Vatikiotis 1998, 14) which was never thoroughly put into practice, it revolved around the notion of a society devoid of internal conflicts, a society at peace with itself. In May 1940, speaking at a meeting of officials of the *Ethniki Organosis Neolaias* (National Youth Organization—EON), the would-be pillar of the leader's new Greece, Metaxas stressed that "one heart, one soul, one intellect, one enthusiasm, one devotion unites all of us. . . . There are no longer any distinctions in Greece. The epithets Macedonians, Peloponnesians, Cretans, Cephallonians, Corfiots, Thracians, and Epirots constitute now local appellations. . . . [In Greece] there are Greeks and only Greeks all the way, from one end of the country to the other" (Metaxas 1969, 2:308; cf. Metaxas 1969, 1:27, and Sarandis 1993, 171).²

This structurally rigid vision of a homogeneous society postulated the individual's merging with the whole and the subjection of his/her own will to that of the nation (Sarandis 1993, 151-52, 163). The unselfish leader himself was to lead by example: "You have to know that, personally, I have nothing else in mind but to serve the [nation]. I sacrifice myself in favor of the whole; my only happiness is Greece's happiness," he emphatically declared in October 1937 (Metaxas 1969, 1:254). In turn, this concept of collectivistic nationalism went hand in hand with the enunciation of a hegemonic, in Gramscian terms, national(istic) ideology "to which all citizens should conform" (Close 1990, 9-10; Machera 1987, 28). For, as the leader put it, "nations become great only if their citizens are imbued with the feeling of self-sacrifice and are at every moment . . . ready . . . to give their lives for their country. . . . Youth cannot live without an ideal . . . [and] no other ideal can fill their souls, give purpose and meaning to their lives . . . but the national one" (Metaxas n.d., 34-35; Venizelos and Metaxas 1994, 523, 526; cf. Close 1992, 141).

Closely linked to the unequivocal devotion and commitment to the national ideal was faith in the nation's ability and duty to progress by creating

a new civilization (Metaxas 1969, 1:239). By and large a remote inspirational dream couched in vague generalities, the *Tritos Hellinikos Politismos* (Third Hellenic Civilization) which the *Neon Kratos* (New State) was to establish would constitute a fusion of the best elements of ancient Greece and medieval hellenism (Metaxas 1969, 1:285-86). Attributes such as obedience and devotion to the New State, prowess, self-discipline and hard work denoted a strong sense of "Greekness from times immemorial," encapsulated in the catchphrase "It is a heavy heritage to be Greek" (Metaxas 1969, 1: 223; Sarandis 1993, 150; Papantoniou 1996, 20). As members of a nation which created the basis of mankind's civilization (Metaxas 1969, 1: 98), the modern Greeks were in this vision duty-bound to embark on a new civilizing mission. In a speech at Larisa a mere two months after establishing his dictatorship, Metaxas maintained that "indeed, we can expand no further in terms of territory, but as a civilization, cultural and material civilization, we are still far, very far from reaching our civilizing boundaries" (Metaxas 1969, 1:59). Naturally, this "call to arms" was accompanied by frequent references to the inherent superiority of the Greek "race/nation," though not as a means of justifying territorial aggrandizement as in the case of Hitler's Germany and, to a lesser extent, Mussolini's Italy (indicatively, see Metaxas 1969, 1:98, 239; Venizelos and Metaxas 1994, 527-28).³

What is noticeable in metaxismos, prior to as well as after Metaxas' assumption of dictatorial powers,⁴ is that the ideals and values it embraced and propagated followed paths that had been laid down from the 1840s onward. For example, the call to embark on a new civilizing mission is reminiscent of Ioannis Kolettis' speech of January 1844 on the so-called diffusion of Greek civilization in the East in the context of the irredentist Great Idea, itself the hegemonic ideology *par excellence* (cf. Clogg 1988a and 1988b; Varouxakis 1995, 23-26). Similarly, the regime's endeavors to build the *Neon Kratos* and inculcate its values in society relied on authoritarian, autocratic, and paternalistic practices which were by no means uncommon features of parliamentary politics in Greece from 1915 onward. Thus, although metaxismos may be fittingly described as "a repugnant phenomenon," it is difficult to call it "unique," whether in a Greek, Balkan, or European context (Close 1990, 1 and Joachim 1982, 141, respectively).⁵ Far from constituting a radical break with the past, metaxismos comprised "a personal conservative interpretation of familiar interwar concepts, anti-liberalism, anti-communism and national rebirth" (Papantoniou 1996, 27, 25). The British ambassador at Athens at the time opined that the Fourth of August Regime was trying to

Metaxas 1969, 1:175, 231), without at the same time canceling out with a stroke of the pen three thousand years of Greek history.

The first objective necessitated the outright condemnation of the immediate past. It comprised a rather sterile treatise on the decadence of liberalism and the bankruptcy of parliamentary democracy,⁶ both of which, it was maintained, had impeded the sovereignty of the *laos* (people) (Metaxas 1951-1964, 2:634-35). The emphasis here is on the deleterious consequences of mimicking such outlandish foreign concepts and institutions (cf. Metaxas 1969, 1:225, 239, 248-49, 250). It constitutes a continuation of Metaxas' "anti-foreignism," the earliest and most virulent recorded expressions of which date back to the late 1890s (cf. Vatikiotis 1998, 23-24; Metaxas 1951-1964, 2:315-16), and is linked to his 1910 recorded belief that "the Greeks are still a people of slaves" (Metaxas 1951-1964, 2:56; cf. Vatikiotis 1998, 59). Equally unoriginal is the castigation of political parties as clusters of self-seeking, power-hungry individuals (Metaxas 1969, 1:16, 29-30), although an earlier (1920) brief dissection of the issue reveals an incisive understanding of the nature of these groups across the political spectrum (Metaxas 1951-1964, 2:637-38; Metaxas 1969, 2:416). In any case, together with communism, "a plant that is not self-grown in Greece" (Metaxas 1969, 1:30), parliamentarism constituted the "double yoke" which was responsible for hindering "every manifestation of a free and superior life" (Metaxas 1969, 1:17; cf. Papantoniou 1996, 2). This deplorable state of affairs was highlighted by the communists' alleged attempt to overthrow the existing social order on the occasion of a general strike on 5 August 1936. To avert falling down the "precipice," the leader argued, the Fourth of August Regime was set up as an "anti-Communist, anti-parliamentarian, totalitarian state" (Metaxas 1951-1964, 4:553; Metaxas 1969, 2:443-44); thereafter, the Greeks, united as never before, took "a big sponge and erased all the passions and hatred of the divisive past" (Metaxas 1969, 1:100; cf. Papantoniou 1996, 4).

What one observes in this short synopsis of the near-total expunging of the immediate past is not only an attempt to reshape it in line with present needs by projecting a procrustean version of "historical truth" but also a conscious effort to shake off the nightmares of the past and, in particular, those of Metaxas himself.⁷ Thus, although the Manichean schema of unity versus disunity, harmony versus discord, is a constant theme of metaxismos, the role of Metaxas in the national schism is rarely accounted for, while his leading contribution to the demise of parliamentarism in the mid-1930s is often hailed. In the many instances that reference is made to the leader's political past by theoreticians and supporters of the dictatorship, it

history (Vatikiotis 1998, 215). Indeed, what one observes is the appropriation of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos' schema about the "threefold continuum of Hellenic history." But whereas the doyen of modern Greek historiography and his subsequent disciples delineated this schema as incorporating "the heritage of pagan hellenism, the tradition of Orthodox Byzantium," and the post-1830 secular state (Kitromilides 1995, 11), in metaxismos the latter is substituted with the *Neon Kratos*. In other respects, however, the premises of this collective self-definition remain unaltered, with the Greek language providing the greatest proof of the nation's *fyletiki synecheia* (racial continuity), "the natural development of one and the same race through time" (Venizelos and Metaxas 1994, 528; Metaxas n.d., 20; cf. Close 1992, 146).

Predictably the overall "glory that was Hellas" is invariably celebrated as the fountain of civilization into whose pure, crystal clear waters the contemporary Greeks ought to be reborn as Hellenes again (Metaxas 1969, 1: 98). Naturally, such a belief smacks of *progonoplaxia* (ancestor obsession) and *archeolatria* (the worship of antiquity) (cf. Clogg 1988b, 16) and betrays a conscious—albeit hardly original—recourse to the glorious past and its deployment as symbolic capital, as a means to an end (cf. Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996, 1999). However, it did not constitute an unqualified appropriation of classical Greece. Thus, whereas ancient Athens is seen as the foremost archetype of the arts and artistic development (Metaxas 1969, 1: 126), Athenian democracy is castigated as a disgraceful failure that led to the Peloponnesian War (Metaxas 1969, 1:285; cf. Close 1990, 3); a system of social organization "characterized by mediocrity . . . and deriving its strength from amorphous and misguided masses" (Anastasakis n.d., 25); and a "decadent legacy" which survived in modern Greece through the *Tourkokratia* (Close 1990, 3). Not surprisingly perhaps, given the contradictions that are inherent in any makeshift ideology designed to serve the exigencies of the present through a highly selective deployment of notions of the past, this outright condemnation of Athenian democracy neglected to explain how as a social system it produced precisely those intellectual achievements that the Fourth of August Regime held in high esteem.⁸

On the other hand, ancient Sparta and, to a lesser extent, ancient Macedonia are eulogized for bequeathing the political and national ideals of unity and territorial integrity upon which the *Neon Kratos* itself was to be built (Metaxas 1969, 1: 126-27, 285, 382, 385). However, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that the regime was heavily preoccupied with rebutting Bulgarian titles to the Macedonian heritage, claims which were partly based on the existence in Greek Macedonia of a small but compact

Slavic-speaking minority (cf. Carabott 1997b, 268-72), it did not elevate ancient Macedonian history into the forefront of its *weltanschauung*. On the contrary, and in line with contemporary notions of symbolic capital—for example, in Hitler’s Germany—it was the Spartan ideal of *peitharhoumeni eleftheria* (disciplined freedom),⁹ of prowess and obedience to the state, which was constantly referred to as constituting the principal paradigm of the regime (*Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou* 1940, 2:77; 4:186; cf. Linardatos 1988, 89; Sarandis 1993, 151). And, somewhat predictably considering the near-complete abrogation of the more recent past and its alleged legacy of decadence, it was the promise “we shall surpass you,” which young Spartans gave their fathers before the latter went to war, that was evoked to galvanize the youth’s belief in the country’s progress (Metaxas 1969, 1:258; *Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou* 1940, 2:73, 81).

At the same time, and conforming to the threefold continuum of Greek history, medieval Hellenism was credited for forging a religious ideal which it instilled in millions, while the professed absence of scientific and artistic feats was compensated for by its creation of one of the most powerful states ever, ruled, at least in its heyday, by “enlightened autocrats” (Metaxas 1969, 1:285-86; cf. Gounaridis 1994). In fact, as early as 1900, Metaxas had clearly stated his belief in the linear link between modern Greece and Byzantium via the institution of the monarchy:

I belong to that aristocracy which fought for the King and the State long before the birth of the new Greece. . . . For me the motherland is not the Greece that was born in 1821, because as a Metaxas I belong to a *genos* which antedated this motherland and which belonged to a much greater motherland. . . . From the history of this motherland originates the Monarchy we have now. Because the Monarchy was not born in Greece after a treaty, but was the innermost desire of the Nation, which during its enslavement always awaited the moment at which the life of the Monarchy which was interrupted in 1453 [with the fall of Constantinople] would be restored. The Monarchy in Greece is the continuation of the one my ancestors served. Therefore, it is my duty to serve it too (Metaxas 1951-1964, 1:527-28).

The unmistakable potency of this eclectic view where the historical past is massaged in a way that it can be deployed as means to a particular end was not lost on the leader. When Metaxas assumed power, the Danish king, George II, presumably a descendant of those “enlightened autocrats,” and the institution he personified become one of the main pillars of the Fourth of August Regime.

V

In a late 1936 piece setting forth the principles of the New State, the minister of press and tourism and a close confidant of the archigios, Theodoros Nikoloudis, opined that “our history, our traditions, our geography ought to determine our activities. We live from Greece and for Greece. The history of our nation today, as well as in the future, cannot sever the links that connect it with the past” (Gounaridis 1994, 151). Save the fact that such an opinion is nothing short of a commonplace truism, it does, nevertheless, illustrate the meaningful—albeit bloated—role that the past was accorded in the discourse of the Fourth of August Regime. Its conceptualization as an exclusive notion served a dual purpose: it legitimized the establishment of the regime and provided the springboard for the construction and articulation of the Third Hellenic Civilization. Naturally, the version of the past which the regime espoused and sought to promote was mirrored in a number of practices, which ran parallel to its endeavor to negate the principles and values of “others,” elevate those of “us,” and create a society devoid of internal conflicts (cf. Avlami 1990, 125; Koliopoulos 1978, 389; Carabott 1997a, 60-61).

Thus, the works of diverse authors ranging from Darwin and Marx to Tolstoy and Papadiamantis were disposed of in well-publicized public bonfire gatherings of the regime’s supporters, while the teaching of Pericles’ funeral oration in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* and the staging of Sophocles’ *Antigone* were banned (Linardatos 1988, 71). With Metaxas in charge of the Ministry of Education as of 1938, the existing textbooks for primary education were bowdlerized with a view to “improve their content” (Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou 1938, 93), and new textbooks for secondary education were produced by the recently established *Organismos Ekdoseos Scholikon Vivlion* (Organization for the Publication of School Textbooks), though they were never introduced into the classroom because of the advent of war (Kagalidou 1999, 118-26; Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou 1940, 3:194). At the same time, fora of mass culture—the press and radio (the state-owned Athens station, the first of its kind, went live on 21 May 1938), cinematography and the theatre—were cleansed of “unhealthy elements” and with their remit and content clearly defined were employed to “enlighten public opinion” (Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou 1938, 196-97, 209-13; Yfypourgeion Typou kai Tourismou 1940, 3: 208-9; 4: 148-68). Furthermore, a number of new governmental departments and committees were established, the most prominent of which was the Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism, which was engaged in a

frenzied propaganda campaign, producing numerous publications, both for internal and external consumption (cf. Koliopoulos 1978, 386-87). And of course, EON, a would-be “kind of ultra-nationalist or fascist party” (Iatrides 1980, 112), came to embody the ideals and values of metaxismos, both in nature and content (cf. Koliopoulos 1978, 387-89; Machera 1987, *passim*). Nonetheless, the outbreak of the Greco-Italian war in October 1940 and the death of the archigos three months later cut short all attempts to put into practice Metaxas’ grandiose vision.¹⁰

By way of conclusion, I would venture to argue that used or distorted, embellished or negated, celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past was omnipresent in Metaxas’ *weltanschauung*. Yet, contrary to the regime’s implausible attestations, the appropriation of this monumental vision of the past did not constitute a radical break with the immediate past. It embodied all the main characteristics of an ideology in which the potency of Greek nationalism and its deployment as a unifying force cut across most societal boundaries,¹¹ in the same manner that the Great Idea had done during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; a qualitative difference was that this time around it was an inward—rather than outward—looking nationalism adorned and/or disfigured, as the case might be, by a fascist-type discourse (cf. Machera 1987; Kokkinos n.d.; Bregianni 1999). In this respect, metaxismos did not preach a revolution or even a counter-revolution (cf. Hobsbawm 1986, 11). Although the regime’s theoreticians were quick to invest it with a revolutionary dimension, again couched in nationalistic terms,¹² metaxismos was more of an antirevolutionary movement fed by obsessive anticommunism in an attempt to consolidate the *astiko kathestos* (bourgeois regime) (Metaxas 1969, 1:50), and to defend it, in theory against revolutionary forces, in actual fact against destruction from within.

Admittedly, some aspects of this far-from-unique reading and appropriation of the past did survive the death of the archigos and the demise of his “personal creation” (Close 1993, 35; cf. Carabott 1997b, 274-75). As a kind of postscript, one could point to the highly suggestive parallels in relation to the Colonels’ dictatorship (cf. Clogg 1972, 54; Close 1993, 34) or, perhaps, even to subsequent readings of the past such as that proffered in 1982 by Andreas Papandreou, who incidentally was imprisoned as a Trotskyite by the Metaxas regime: “It was not the imperial purple and the sharp swords of its Emperors that preserved the Byzantine Empire during the thousand years of its existence but rather the simple working man with his love and concern for the Byzantine state; and thus they [*sic*] brought into being the first elements of a political system that today is called socialism”

10. The starting points for a study of these are the numerous official publications of the Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism. For useful, though far from complete, summaries, see Koliopoulos 1978, Machera 1987, Linardatos 1988, Kagalidou 1999.

11. A reading of the contributions—and even of the contributors themselves—to the regime's principle mouthpiece, unimaginatively titled the *New State*, reveals a gamut of ideas cutting across the political and social spectrum, save that of the communist left, naturally couched in terms acceptable to the regime (cf. Kokkinos n.d., Panaretou 1993).

12. Cf. the views of EON leader Alekos Kanellopoulos that the “national ‘meritocratic’ state [that is, the New State] emanated from the revolution of 4 August. A revolution which is continuing and will continue. A political, constitutional, social, moral and spiritual revolution. An all-embracing revolution, a people's revolution which in a nutshell can be called a national revolution” (Linardatos 1988, 105-6).

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