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Ioannis Metaxas
The Formative Years 1871-1922



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Introduction

Outside Greece very little is known about Ioannis Metaxas. Some Europeans associate his surname with a certain type of brandy. Others, the historically more versed ones, connect this name either with the Greek fascist dictatorship of the the 1930s or with the Metaxas line of fortresses covering Greece's northern frontier against attacks from the north, or, in rare cases, with both. In Greece, Metaxas is the man who said no (όχι) to Mussolini's ultimatum on 28 October 1940 and led Greece through that glorious period which is called in Greek historiography the "Έπος του σαράντα" (the epic of 1940) i.e. the successful defensive battle against the Italians in the Greek and Albanian mountains. Each year this day is commemorated; it is a national holiday. Greeks with a deeper knowledge of their history remember his military achievements in the Balkan Wars and refer to him as little Moltke considering him a military genius.

Still in the 1960s the following story could be heard: When Metaxas studied in Leipzig his professors were so impressed by his intelligence that after he had left they put the following inscription in golden letters on the tympanum of the main university building: Για το Ιωάννη Μεταξά είναι τα αδύνατα δυνατά (For Ioannis Metaxas the impossible is possible). However, even for him, being a professional soldier it was impossible to be admitted to a university.

Historiography on Ioannis Metaxas is extremely scarce. There is not one biography dealing with his whole life. There are historical accounts of his time as a dictator but they contain very little personal biographical information. This is astonishing because biographical sources on Metaxas are rather plentiful. Since his early years Metaxas kept a diary which is a mine of information about his private and public life. This diary was published between 1950 and 1960 in four volumes closely supervised by Metaxas' widow. Additionally Metaxas' notebooks which he kept over the years were printed and they, too, offer valuable information. Both sources were well known by historians and frequently used for their accounts of general Greek history or more specialized monographs mostly dealing with the period of the dictatorship. Dr Joachim is the first historian to make extensive use of these sources when he was writing the present biography.

This biography covers the life of Ioannis Metaxas from 1871 to 1922. As was usual for a member of a noble family of the Ionian Islands (in the 17th Century the Venetians had made the Metaxas family counts) was to take a military career. From 1885 to 1890 Metaxas studied at the Greek Military Academy (Σχολή Ευελπίδων). In the disastrous Greek-Turkish war of 1897 Metaxas served as an engineer officer and came into close contact with the Crown prince of Greece, Constantine. The latter discovered Metaxas' strategic talent and had him sent for additional studies to the Prussian Military Academy (Militärakademie) in Berlin from 1899 to 1903. After his return he worked in the General Directorate of the Army planning the reorganizing of the Greek army according to the German model. When the new General Staff was formed

Constantine invited Metaxas to become a member. In 1907 Constantine entrusted to him the military education of his eldest son George, the future King George II and Metaxas' co-dictator. When, after the Revolution of 1908 Eleftherios Venizelos became Prime Minister Metaxas was appointed his first *aide-de-camp*. In this position Metaxas acquired first hand insight into Venizelos' policy and often discovered fundamental differences in their views. In 1912 Metaxas was sent on an official mission to Sofia to negotiate the military convention with the Bulgarians which he signed on 30 September on behalf of Greece. In both Balkan Wars Metaxas served as third in command in the General Staff and proved his military talents. Several times he was promoted and in September 1913 reached the rank of a Lieutenant-Colonel. After the War he became Director of the General Staff and Principal of the Higher Military Academy. Venizelos and the Crown Prince promoted their successful soldier.

In the First World War Venizelos believed in the victory of the Entente whereas Metaxas was convinced that Germany would win the war and advised King Constantine accordingly. In 1915 Metaxas became Chief of the Greek General Staff. When, in the same year, Venizelos insisted on Greece's participation in the Entente's attack against Gallipoli, Metaxas resigned from his post. In the ensuing schism of Greece he became the sharpest political opponent of Venizelos. When in 1917 Venizelos with the help of the Allies emerged victorious from the domestic struggle Metaxas was among those who were deported by the French to Corsica. In 1919 Venizelos' former opponents were sentenced to death and Metaxas fearing that the French might hand him over to the Greek authorities fled to Italy where he lived until the end of 1920. At the end of the First World War Greece had emerged as one of the victorious nations. But unlike the others her war aim, the restoration of a Greater Greece, (Megali Idea) had not been achieved. Metaxas considered this idea a sheer folly. He was convinced that such an adventure would end in a disaster. Called back by the re-established Royalists he was offered the post of the Chief of the General Staff for the war against Kemalist Turkey which had just started. Metaxas refused flatly and advised the Greek Prime Minister Gounaris to seek a political way out of the dilemma. The latter did not follow Metaxas' advice and the Asia Minor Catastrophe was the result. Metaxas withdrew from the military and began a political career which led him finally to the Dictatorship of 1936.

Against this highly dramatic political background Metaxas' personal biography often seems rather petty-bourgeois. At the same time we observe the unfolding of a rather split personality with strong likes and dislikes and partly neurotic features. Joachim's biography makes fascinating reading and I can but wish him many readers and the strength to finish the second volume bringing the story to its end.

Heinz Richter

The Greek-Turkish War of 1897

Ioannis Michael Metaxas was born on 24 April 1871 on the island of Ithaca where his father was Assistant Prefect (*Eparchos*). His father recorded the event on a sheet of paper under the heading "My Yiannos". The mother, he wrote, was in labour for three days. Present at the birth were the wives of the mayor, the district treasurer and the doctor, as well as three or four other women, and the doctor himself. The father wrote: "In the rooms of the house there were various persons of every class, including young girls. Outside the house there was a great number of people of every class, age and sex. When he was born, Evdokia, Praxitheia and Elpiniki dressed him." Then he added: "God grant him a long life and make him a good Christian and an honest citizen." Further down the page he wrote: "Two days later the musicians came and played outside the house for good luck."¹

The Metaxas family had been known as "Contides", (Counts) for two centuries. Thirty years before the birth of Ioannis Metaxas, "the Noble Signor Giorgio Metaxa Anzolato" submitted documents to the Senate of the United States of the Ionian Islands which demonstrated the claims of the Metaxas family to the title of "Count" and requested on behalf of himself, his brothers and cousins, a decree reaffirming their claims. On 10 February [O.S.] 1841 the Senate, "Having seen the original decree, in virtue of which, from the year 1691, the family of the said Counts Metaxa has been invested, *in perpetuum*, by the Venetian government with the title of "Count" [and] "Considering that the said gentlemen have a just right to that title", authorized that they "continue styling themselves "Counts" [a title which] may also be assumed by the legitimate descendants of the said Counts Metaxa, *in perpetuum* ..."² One of those mentioned in this decree as entitled to call himself Count was Ioannis Metaxas, son of Nikolaos Anzolatatos, the paternal grandfather of Ioannis Metaxas. This "noble lord", Ioannis Metaxas, married a poor girl who came from Macedonia in 1821 (perhaps a refugee as a result of the Greek War of Independence), after living with her for many years and begetting four children, a not uncommon practice among those classes.³ One of these children was Panaghis Metaxas, the father of Ioannis Metaxas. He, in his turn, married the daughter of a small landowner from Agrinion, a town in Epirus. Thus

1 *Diary*, I. 41. Metaxas did not use his second name of Michael, but in his earlier years he would sometimes insert the middle initial P for Panaghis, his father's name. The popular version of Ioannis (or Joannes) is Yiannis. His family and close friends (e.g. Sophia, the consort of Constantine) would often affectionately call him Yiannakis, little John, Johnny, a diminutive which suited him because of his small stature. During his dictatorship the paternalist image of Metaxas, carrying a silverhandled walkingstick, was reinforced by the use of the name Barbayiannis - Father John. The French called him Jean, the Italians Giovanni, while British and American correspondents referred to him as John.

2 A facsimile of the decree in Greek, English, and Italian is printed in the *Diary*, vol. I. p. 47.

3 A similar case is that of Dionysios Solomos. Solomos' mother was a maidservant in the household of his noble father, who married her only on his deathbed. See R. H. J. Jenkins, *Dionysius Solomos* (Cambridge, 1940).

Ioannis Metaxas, although a direct descendant of a noble family, had in his veins the blood of the common people from his paternal grandmother and from his mother. When in later years the middle classes shunned his messianic fervour, Ioannis Metaxas remembered this humble side of his background and turned to the working classes in an effort to win their support. He claimed then that he, too, was a farmer's son and his publicists styled him, rather absurdly, *The First Labourer and The First Countryman of Greece*.



1 Ioannis Metaxas and his parents around 1875.

Metaxas' father was a tall, quiet, gentle person with aristocratic manners, who took special care of his long sidewhiskers. The Metaxas title was of very little value by this time. The Ionian aristocracy had been on the decline since the end of Venetian rule; the incorporation of the Ionian Islands into the Greek state in 1863 was the final blow. The Greek Constitution of 1864 laid down that in the case of Greek citizens titles of nobility or distinction were neither bestowed nor recognized -- with the exception of the Royal Family. Titles could be used only on the Ionian Islands, but by then these were too numerous to carry much weight. The shift of power to Athens preempted any value that they might still have possessed. Still, it must have been a great comedown for Count Panaghis Metaxas to seek and accept employment in Government service at a time when such positions were neither lucrative nor held in much esteem.

While Ioannis Metaxas' grandfather had married a girl of the people from necessity, Metaxas' father married a commoner from choice. Panaghis Metaxas met and fell in love with his future wife in Agrinion, where he was working at the time. She was Eleni Constantinou Trigonis, the daughter of a local landowner, but it appears that she brought little or no property to her husband. "I was born in poverty," Ioannis Metaxas used to claim in later years. His mother was a vivacious woman with a practical and assertive bent of mind, unlike his artistic and retiring father. Ioannis inherited some of the intellectual interests of his father's class, but he also possessed a peasant's obstinacy and determination and his mother's drive and ambition. In physical appearance he took more after his mother, who was short, with homely features and, with advancing years, an inclination to stoutness.

In 1879 his father lost his position in Ithaca and returned with his family to his native island of Cephalonia. The young Ioannis-Yiannakis attended the Gymnasium at Argostoli. His conduct was exemplary; he was a good student and excellent in mathematics. Otherwise he was a lonely boy who liked to go for long solitary walks in the countryside. At fourteen he left Argostoli and went to Athens, where he registered at the Military School (*Σχολή ευελπίδων*) on 24 September 1885. It was his own decision: perhaps because of family tradition, perhaps because he wanted to start earning his living immediately. He chose the Engineers Corps, where two of his relations, Gerasimos Metaxas (1816-1894) and Nikolaos Metaxas (1833-1903), the future Minister of War, had already distinguished themselves. Ioannis did well at the Military School, where he was "always promoted first among his fellow students," as recorded in the School Register next to the date of his graduation in August 1890.⁴ He

4 Kallonas, *Ιωάννης Μεταξάς*, p. 28. Until the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, the graduates of the Athens Military Academy (*Σχολή Ευελπίδων*) belonged to a social élite and their sense of *esprit de corps* was strong. Only youths from the wealthier families could afford to study there. In these families, the eldest son would usually become a lawyer and look after the family property and, perhaps, pursue a political career. The second son would choose a military career, especially in the artillery, which was the most prestigious. In Cephalonia where, before unification with Greece, the