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The importance of ideology and external factors in Greek foreign policy: the case of Ioannis Metaxas (1936-1941)

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Acknowledgments- Abstract

I would like to thank Mr. Dionysios Tsirigotis, Assistant Professor of the Department of International and European Studies of the University of Piraeus, for his valuable help and advice during the completion of this analysis. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the foreign policy of Ioannis Metaxas (1936-1941), taking into consideration the major international events of this period as well as the strategic factors which played a pivotal role in shaping it. The paper will attempt to check the following theses:

The degree at which Metaxas' foreign policy was shaped by a realistic interpretation of the structural strategic environment of the period and not by internal factors, such as ideology or the role of other political institutions in the shaping of Greek foreign policy, such as the monarchy.

After examining Metaxas regime's case, whether the structural factors which shaped his foreign policy are still crucial for Greek strategy, due to their irreversible or hard to reverse nature and the subsequent pressure they exert on foreign policy makers, diminishing the role of internal political factors in determining Greek foreign policy.

The paper will use the international relations theory of structural realism, taking into consideration the factor of geography and its influence in shaping a state's foreign policy, as the theoretical framework for analyzing Greek foreign policy.

1. Introduction

The coming of the Great Depression had dire consequences for the Second Hellenic Republic, which started in 1924 with the abolition of the monarchy, as a result of the military defeat of Greece in the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922). The deteriorating economic situation of the country was one of the main reasons which led to the fall of the government of Eleftherios Venizelos in 1932 (the government was elected in 1928) and in the political deadlock that ensued, no party could effectively form a government. The rising tensions led to the re-emergence of the National Schism, the political conflict which divided the Greek population between supporters and opponents of Venizelos during the First World War. Aiming to reclaim power and crush their opponents, a group of pro-Venizelos military officers orchestrated a coup attempt in 1935, which failed and led to the return of king George II and the restoration of the monarchy in the same year, via a heavily rigged referendum. Elections were held in 1936, but once again no party could form a government and the creation of a coalition government consisting of pro- and anti-Venizelos parties was impossible, while the Communist Party gained more influence. In April, with the country in turmoil due to workers' strikes and protests, king George appointed Metaxas to the position of Prime Minister, with the consent of the Parliament. But amid fears of an imminent communist uprising and with George aiming to secure his politically weak position, Metaxas imposed his dictatorship in August 4, with the cooperation of the king and with no serious opposition from parliamentary parties. The Second Hellenic Republic was officially over¹.

Metaxas' foreign policy still remains particularly interesting for Greek historians and political scientists, due to its seemingly contradictory nature. Metaxas studied in the Military Academy of Berlin and was deeply influenced by the conservative authoritarian and nationalist ideologies prevailing in the German elite. He was staunchly pro-German during the First World War and actively worked to undermine Venizelos' pro-British foreign policy, in order to keep Greece neutral, as the interests of Germany dictated. Metaxas played a crucial role in the events of the National Schism and went to great lengths in order to prevent the Greek government from allying with the Entente (the anti-German alliance led by Great Britain, France and Russia)².

¹ (Μαυρογορδάτος 2017: 57-84)

² (Μαυρογορδάτος 2015)

Yet, as dictator, Metaxas followed a pro-British policy and led Greece to war against Italy and Germany, despite his ideological similarities with the Fascist and Nazi governments and his earlier pro-German stance. Metaxas officially followed, until the declaration of war by Italy against Greece in October 1940, a policy of neutrality. But despite the lack of a formal alliance commitment between Greece and Great Britain from 1936 until 1941, when Greece was occupied after a combined German-Italian-Bulgarian offensive, his pro-British policy was obvious. Why did Metaxas abandon his earlier pro-German stance and follow a pro-British foreign policy similar to that of his greatest opponent, Eleftherios Venizelos, during the First World War? Were internal or external strategic factors that contributed most to this policy and which were them?

2. Theoretical framework

Structural realism, in conjunction with taking into consideration Greece's significant geostrategic position, will be used as the theoretical framework for analyzing the subject. Structural realism, developed by political scientists such as Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013), is a branch of the realist school of international relations thought. Realism emphasizes on the state as the dominant form of political organization in an anarchical international system, in which there is no authority to set laws governing the states' behavior towards others. As a consequence of this situation and the subsequent insecurity and inability to be sure of other states' intentions, states aim to maximize their power in order to guarantee their security against possible threats from other states and thus their survival and other important interests, with the use of violent force if necessary. The pursuit of the state's survival and its other interests (*raison d'etat*) lies at the center of realist theory. International anarchy, power, security and survival of the state and its primacy in the international system are basic principles of the realist theory, however, there are several branches of realism³. Classical realism emphasizes the role of human nature's intrinsic violent and aggressive tendencies and thus views the behavior of the state and the condition of the international system as simply a reflection of this⁴, while neoclassical realism considers internal politics as essential in shaping a state's foreign policy⁵.

³ (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2007:116-120)

⁴ (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2007:121-124)

⁵ (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2007:125-126)

Structural realism too considers the pursuit of power to be of prime importance in international relations. However, it rejects that its root cause is human nature. It also considers internal political factors to be relatively insignificant. In contrast, structural realism emphasizes on the importance of:

-International anarchy, which creates the possibility that a state might use violent force against others. This in turn generates insecurity in states, and makes them pursue the maximization of their power in order to guarantee their security and safeguard their vital interests, as they can never be sure of other states' intentions. Increase of power can be attained either through internal (economic development, military strengthening, demographic improvement etc.) or external means (alliance with more powerful states)

-The allocation of power among states, which determines the number of Great Powers and the form of the international system (unipolar, multipolar or bipolar), the forming and dissolution of alliances, and conflict, war and cooperation between states. The fact that power is allocated inequally among states often forces the weaker ones, whose vital interests are under greater threat, to align themselves with powerful states, as a means of externally increasing their power⁶.

Thus, according to structural realism, international anarchy, the allocation of power and the desire to maximize power and thus security, shape a state's foreign policy and neither the inherently violent human nature (classical realism) nor internal political factors (neoclassical realism), play an important role. The geographical position of a state is also a factor of critical importance, as it determines the ability of other states to project power against it, its resources or lack thereof and its significance for the fulfillment of the strategic objectives of other states.

3. Greek foreign policy from the end of the Greco-Turkish War until Metaxas' dictatorship

In order to better understand Metaxas regime's foreign policy, the foreign policy of Greece during the Interwar period must also be analyzed. At the end of the Greco-Turkish War in 1922, Greece was left militarily devastated and economically impoverished, also having to address the problem of the millions of refugees who fled from Turkey after the Greek defeat and the subsequent population exchange in 1923. In addition, Greece's relations with its

⁶ (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2007:124-125)

neighbors, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and Turkey, were not good. Yugoslavia was aiming to gain privileged access to the Aegean Sea through Thessaloniki. Bulgaria, which was part of the defeated Central Powers during the First World War and thus a revisionist power, had the perpetual goal of regaining territory in Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace, lost to Greece after the war. Turkey was refusing to cooperate in the settling of disputes caused by the population exchange of 1923. Greece's relations with Albania were worsened due to the mistreatment of the Greek population in Northern Epirus by Albanian authorities. Greece thus was a status quo power, with the goal of protecting its territorial sovereignty amid deteriorating economic situation, military weakness and bad relations with neighboring states⁷.

When Eleftherios Venizelos returned to power in 1928, he followed a policy aiming to neutralize the external threats and avoid getting entangled in Great Power coalitions, preserving Greece's neutrality. A crucial part of this policy was balancing between Italy and Great Britain, the two main naval powers in the Mediterranean⁸. The Greco-Italian Pact was signed in 1928, pressuring Yugoslavia to improve its relations with Greece and abandon its aspirations in the Aegean, fearing encirclement from Italy in the Balkans, as Italy already had influence in Hungary (also a revisionist power) and Albania⁹. To counter Bulgarian revisionism, he initiated a rapprochement with Turkey, which was also a status quo power threatened by Bulgaria. At the same time, Venizelos maintained good relations with Great Britain. This policy proved effective, and by 1933, Greece did not face any serious threat from its Balkan neighbors and its disputes with Turkey were settled¹⁰.

This policy of maintaining the balance of power in the Balkans was not interrupted after the end of Venizelos' government in 1932. In 1934, the Balkan pact was signed between Greece, Turkey, Romania and Yugoslavia, which all aimed at preserving the status quo in the Balkans and countering Bulgarian, Hungarian and Albanian revisionist ambitions. The four countries guaranteed the protection of their Balkan borders. The Balkan Pact was the result of increasing pressure on the postwar European balance of power by the revisionist policies of Nazi Germany¹¹.

⁷ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:363-370)

⁸ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:370-389)

⁹ (Σφέτας 2011:46-51)

¹⁰ Οπ. π. στ. 8

¹¹ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:233-237,240-245)

4. The foreign policy of Metaxas: A “pro-British neutrality”

After coming to power in 1936, in a time where tensions in Europe were increasing because of the rapid strengthening of Germany and its revisionism regarding the Treaty of Versailles and the postwar European order, Metaxas officially declared a policy of neutrality and maintenance of the status quo in the Balkans, similar to that initiated by Venizelos. This policy was also endorsed by the fact that, at that time, Greek neutrality benefited both British and German interests. Germany was seeking to avoid the creation of an anti-German coalition in the Balkans. Britain wanted to avoid bilateral alliance commitments with other countries, due to its declining military position¹². Italy, with which Metaxas sought to maintain good relations, was also satisfied¹³. It must be noted that Metaxas’ pro-German past and his ideological similarities with Hitler and Mussolini worried the British, who were suspecting that the Greek security services were handing confidential diplomatic information to the German authorities. Greece and Germany also had close economic ties, which were part of a wider policy of Nazi Germany to increase its economic and political influence in the Balkans¹⁴. But at the other hand, Metaxas firmly led Greece to joining the British sphere of influence. Despite Greece’s close economic ties with Germany, he actively prevented those ties from evolving into a significant dependence on the German economy¹⁵. In 1936, he declared that Greece would align itself with Britain, in case of war¹⁶. In 1938, after the Munich Agreement and the subsequent invigoration of Germany’s position in Europe, Metaxas expressed his wish for an alliance with Britain¹⁷. In April 1939, after the Italian occupation of Albania and the subsequent threat of an Italian attack against Greece, Britain, along with France, guaranteed Greek sovereignty¹⁸. In June 1939, Greece was granted a loan of 2,000,000 pounds by Britain, for the purchase of military equipment¹⁹ and in September, the renewal of the Greco-Italian Pact was cancelled, after British pressure on the Greek

¹² (Τσιριγώτης 2013:402-404)

¹³ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:143)

¹⁴ (Τσομπάνης 2016:51-52)

¹⁵ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:260)

¹⁶ (Μαυρογορδάτος 2017:90)

¹⁷ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:74)

¹⁸ (Κολιόπουλος 1987:370)

¹⁹ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:422)

government²⁰. With agreements in October 1939 and January 1940, after the beginning of the Second World War, Greece reduced its exports to Germany and leased a great part of the Greek commercial fleet to the British²¹. Metaxas resisted German pressure to accept the Italian ultimatum of October 28th 1940²², with which Italy demanded the occupation of strategic locations inside Greece and led Greece to war against Italy, with British support.

The contradictory nature of Metaxas' foreign policy is obvious, as he was trying to keep Greece neutral and out of a European war, while continuously moving it closer to Britain. The strive for neutrality can be explained by the fact that Metaxas was worried that the participation of Greece in such a war would lead to great destruction and hardship for the country and also threaten the sustainability of his regime, which lacked any popular legitimacy, as it was established mainly by the machinations of king George²³. He also seemed to believe for a time that his ideological affinity with the German and Italian regimes would prevent them from striking Greece²⁴. He attempted to maintain good relations with Germany and Italy and avoided pursuing any official and formal alliance commitment with Britain, in order to not anger the Axis Powers²⁵. Greece developed close economic relations with Germany and, despite multiple Italian provocations after the entrance of Italy into the Second World War in June 1940²⁶, did not declare war on Italy first. Even after the beginning of the Greco-Italian War in October, Metaxas sought to keep the conflict in the context of Greco-Italian bilateral relations and keep Germany out of the war, avoiding any action which Germany could deem as a *casus belli*²⁷. How can his official goal of neutrality be reconciled with his pro-British actions?

An often-stated reason, which emphasizes on internal political factors, is the Metaxas' regime dependency on king George for its political survival. As previously stated, Metaxas established his dictatorship in cooperation with the king and without popular support, as the king sought to consolidate his power by eradicating democratic institutions²⁸. Metaxas'

²⁰ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:411-412)

²¹ (Κολιόπουλος 1987:383)

²² (Τσομπάνης 2016:53)

²³ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:402-403)

²⁴ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:409)

²⁵ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:77)

²⁶ (Πετράκη 2015)

²⁷ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:286)

²⁸ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:399)

dictatorship, lacking any popular legitimacy as there had never been a mass fascist movement in Greece, was thus dependent on the will of the king²⁹. King George was staunchly pro-British and he served as guarantor for the interests of Britain in Greece³⁰. The king was in control of the armed forces and critical positions in the government were held by pro-British figures. According to this view, Metaxas, despite his ideological affinity with the Axis Powers, was forced to follow a pro-British policy, else he would be immediately toppled by the king. But while it is true that the Greek monarchy was always influential in shaping the country's foreign policy and that king George II was a committed anglophile, it would be wrong to argue that Metaxas was just "forced" by the king to adopt a pro-British foreign policy and his own objectives were of secondary importance. In 1934, even before taking power, Metaxas had declared that Greece could not join an anti-British bloc³¹. And as Greek historian George Mavrogordatos stated, Metaxas could have simply resigned after the Italian ultimatum, throwing the country into political chaos and then returning to power, after the defeat of the Greek army, as leader of a pro-Axis puppet government³². Instead, he chose to resist the Axis attack and remained loyal to Great Britain, even without serious British support in the war. The motives behind his pro-British stance should thus be sought elsewhere.

When examining Greek foreign policy from 1936 to 1940, in conjunction with the major shifts in the European balance of power during that period and using structural realism as an analytical framework, three main interconnected reasons for that can be identified:

4.1 The revisionist shift in Italian foreign policy

The first and probably most important reason is the shift in Italian foreign policy that occurred during that period. Despite the commonly held view, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany did not become allies (mainly) due to ideological affinity. Italy's relations with Germany after Adolf Hitler took power could even be described as adversarial. The Italians were worried about Nazi Germany's expansionist ambitions, especially its goal of annexing Austria³³. But the appeasement policy followed by Britain and France towards Germany, as they let Germany rearm and violate the Treaty of Versailles, was perceived by the Italians as

²⁹ (Μαυρογορδάτος 2017:84-86)

³⁰ Οπ. π. στ. 28

³¹ (Πετράκη 2015)

³² (Μαυρογορδάτος 2017:93)

³³ (Weiss 2009:198)

a sign of their weakness and persuaded Italy to take advantage of this weakness and pursue its own revisionist and expansionist goals in the Mediterranean and Africa. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia, with the League of Nations imposing sanctions on Italy, and Britain and France condemning the Italian attack³⁴. This led to the worsening of Italy's relations with Britain and France and its gradual rapprochement with Germany, leading to the gradual formation of the Axis in 1936, after German troops occupied the demilitarized zone of Rhineland and the Spanish Civil War erupted³⁵. Greece, along with the other Balkan Pact members, also imposed sanctions on Italy, as its revisionist and hegemonic policy in the Mediterranean was viewed as a threat by the status quo Balkan powers³⁶. But Greece under Metaxas still maintained good relations with Italy, as the Italian government had declared in 1937 its "peaceful intentions" towards Greece, also satisfying Britain³⁷, which was anxious to keep Italy out of German influence. Greece was considered by Italy as part of its own sphere of influence, but the situation in Europe did not allow any aggressive action. This situation rapidly changed with the rise of German power and the subsequent destabilization of the European order, as Germany annexed Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and then fully occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939, virtually unopposed by Britain and France. This convinced Mussolini to invade and occupy Albania in April³⁸. Greece thus now practically had a common border with Italy and the risk of an Italian invasion became much greater. Britain and France abandoned their policy of appeasement and guaranteed Greece's security. Mussolini had already decided to attack Greece³⁹, as control over its territory was critical for Italy's imperial goals⁴⁰, and Italian forces started to build up at the Greco-Albanian border. But Italy was still not ready for war and thus did not enter the Second World War in September, once again reassuring the Greek government of its "peaceful intentions"⁴¹. When France was defeated by Germany in the summer of 1940, Italy, convinced of an imminent German victory, rushed to enter the war on Germany's side and

³⁴ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:23-25)

³⁵ (Κολιόπουλος 1987:368-369)

³⁶ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:246)

³⁷ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:262)

³⁸ (Λιναρδάτος 1993: 83)

³⁹ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:145)

⁴⁰ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:272)

⁴¹ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:147)

achieve some easy territorial gains⁴². In August, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop informed the Greek ambassador in Berlin that Germany considered the Mediterranean as a region of Italian interest and that Greece should satisfy Italy's demands⁴³. Germany was unwilling to prevent Mussolini from striking Greece, due to fears that this would result in Italy abandoning the Axis⁴⁴, especially after Hitler's attempts to bring Franco's Spain into the alliance had failed⁴⁵. In October, after multiple provocations during the previous months, Italy sent its ultimatum and declared war on Greece, as part of its wider campaign to gain control of North Africa and the Mediterranean.

It is obvious that Italy's expansionist and hegemonic goals in the region were a threat to Greece's security. The increasing Italian ambitions for domination in the Mediterranean pushed Metaxas closer to Britain in search of external sources of power and security, with the alternative being Greece effectively becoming an Italian client state. A question arises: Why did Metaxas not try to balance between Britain and Italy, like Venizelos, to protect Greece's neutrality? During the 1920's, Italy and Britain, despite being competitors, had developed a kind of peaceful co-existence in the Mediterranean and the European balance of power was relatively stable. But in the second half of the 1930's, due to the aforementioned reasons, Italy and Britain were leading members of opposing factions, the Axis and the Allies respectively, and Europe was firmly inching towards war⁴⁶. Greece's strategic position was important for both sides and thus Italy already had the goal of assuming control over Greek territory. For Greece, geography made choosing a side inevitable. Which brings us to the second reason:

4.2 Geographical determinism

A traditional doctrine of Greek foreign policy has always been that Greece, due to it being primarily a small-to-medium naval power because of its geographical position, surrounded by sea from three sides, should keep close relations with the major naval power of the Mediterranean⁴⁷. Up until the end of the Second World War, this naval power was Britain. British interest in Greece began during the Greek War of Independence and Greece's

⁴² (Λιναρδάτος 1993:151)

⁴³ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:75)

⁴⁴ (Σφέτας 2011:209)

⁴⁵ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:173)

⁴⁶ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:266)

⁴⁷ (Κολιόπουλος 1987:360)

geostrategic importance for British policy in the Eastern Mediterranean led to active British involvement in Greek political affairs during Britain's major wars against other European powers, namely the Crimean War against Russia and the two World Wars against Germany. Greece was vital for control of the Eastern Mediterranean, which connected Britain with its holdings in the Middle East, North Africa, India and Australia, through the Suez Canal⁴⁸. As Churchill noted, even if the rest of Greece had fallen to the Axis, Crete (the most strategically important of the Greek islands for Britain) should be held by the British at all costs⁴⁹. Italian (and later German) interest in control of Greece stemmed from the same concerns. The Italian and German governments feared that Britain could use Greece as a Balkan base of operations against Axis forces (Germany was worried about the British conducting, through Greece, air campaigns against the Romanian oil fields, which were of high importance for the German war machine⁵⁰. Italy had similar worries about its mainland and the Dodecanese, its strategic holding in the Aegean⁵¹). As mentioned earlier, Mussolini had already decided, after the occupation of Albania in 1939, to invade Greece as part of the Italian plan to establish dominance in the Mediterranean⁵² and crush the British.

But Greece's geographical position made it not only a prime target of Italian and German expansionism, but also vulnerable to reprisals from Britain in case that it joined the Axis. With the British navy dominating the Eastern Mediterranean, Greek islands of vital strategic importance, such as Crete, would be quickly occupied⁵³. The British could then impose a total naval blockade on Greece, resulting in famine and terrible hardships for the Greek population⁵⁴. So not only would Greece become an Italian client state, but it would also suffer painful British reprisals. As Metaxas put it, if the Italian ultimatum had been accepted, Greece would become a "voluntary slave" and have its hands "cut off" by the Axis (by becoming an Italian client state and losing land to Italy and Bulgaria - more on that below), while the British would "cut off its legs"⁵⁵, by occupying strategic islands and blockading its maritime supply routes. Before and after the beginning of the war, Metaxas admitted that

⁴⁸ Οπ. π. στ. 28

⁴⁹ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:129)

⁵⁰ (Σφέτας 2011:210)

⁵¹ (Κολιόπουλος 1987:382)

⁵² Οπ. π. στ. 13

⁵³ (Λιναρδάτος 1993:180)

⁵⁴ Οπ. π. στ. 24

⁵⁵ Οπ. π. στ. 52

Greece's geography forced it into alliance with Britain. It can be concluded that Greece, as a small country whose position was of vital importance for Great Power rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean, was "doomed" to abandon its neutrality, despite its will to the contrary.

4.3 Disintegration of the Balkan Pact, increasing Axis influence in the Balkans and the Bulgarian threat as leverage

The third reason was the gradual disintegration of the Balkan Pact and the decline of the system of collective security formed by it. The Balkan Pact was signed due to the concerns of the status quo Balkan powers (Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia and Turkey) about the revisionist policy of Nazi Germany, which was also empowering the other revisionist states of Central and Southern Europe, namely Hungary and Bulgaria. The Pact guaranteed the security of its member-states' Balkan borders and was supported mainly by France⁵⁶, who was also concerned about the aforementioned developments and sought to maintain the status quo by promoting the creation of a system of collective security in Southeastern Europe. But since its beginning, it was plagued by the same problems which would eventually lead to its downfall. The first clash between the member-states was caused by a secret protocol, according to which, if one of the Pact's member-states was attacked from a non-Balkan power and if a Balkan power assisted the attack, then the Pact's collective security system would be activated against this Balkan power. That primarily served the interests of Yugoslavia and Romania, which were under the threat of Italian and Soviet attack respectively, due to their interwar disputes with those states. Greece, who aimed at maintaining good relations with Italy, declared that it would not be dragged into a war against a Great Power due to the Pact's obligations. Turkey declared the same regarding the Soviet Union, with which it kept friendly relations⁵⁷. These actions constituted a serious blow to the Pact's credibility. The member-states were not willing to risk their ties with the Great Powers in order to fulfill the obligations stemming from the Pact.

The Balkan Pact was further undermined by the policy of appeasement followed by Britain and France towards Germany and Italy. As Germany remilitarized, Italy began to expand its influence in the Mediterranean and Africa, and Bulgaria also took advantage of the situation by beginning its own rearmament and moving closer and closer to Germany, the Pact's member-states faced a security dilemma: remain committed to the Balkan Pact's multilateral

⁵⁶ (Σβολόπουλος 1992:236)

⁵⁷ (Σφέτας 2011:66-67)

cooperative framework for balancing the external threats, with little support and weak guarantees from their main patron, France? Or engage the Axis and the Western Powers in a bilateral context, thus further weakening the Pact? The latter approach prevailed. Yugoslavia, frustrated by France's unwillingness to adopt a more hardline stance against German revisionism and doubtful about French commitment to its security, began a rapprochement with Italy, Germany and Bulgaria, in order to neutralize the threat of an Italian-German-Bulgarian revisionist alliance against it. The Bulgarian-Yugoslavian Pact was signed in 1937 and was supported by Germany, with Bulgaria abandoning its expansionist ambitions against Yugoslavia and Yugoslavia in return supporting Bulgaria in its territorial disputes with Greece. Older Yugoslavian ambitions regarding Thessaloniki and access to the Aegean reemerged. Romania also adopted a more pro-German policy. These were combined with German policies to establish economic domination over the Balkan states. The formation of an anti-Greek Yugoslavian-Bulgarian front reduced the Balkan Pact's importance for Greece's security even more, as Bulgaria was considered the primary threat against Greece, until the Italian occupation of Albania in 1939. This forced Metaxas to develop even closer ties with Turkey in order to counter the threat stemming from Bulgaria and now also Yugoslavia, and a Greco-Turkish defensive alliance was signed in 1938⁵⁸. Turkey, like Greece, was worried about Italian expansionism in Africa and the Mediterranean and the rapprochement between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria and thus developed closer relations with Britain⁵⁹.

The improvement of British-Turkish relations also served as leverage for the British government to exercise control over Greek foreign policy. A less pro-British stance would harm Greece's relations with Turkey, and since the Balkan Pact was deteriorating, would thus leave Greece totally isolated against the Bulgarian threat⁶⁰. Neither could cooperation with the Axis guarantee Greece's security versus Bulgaria, as Bulgaria was already under strong German influence⁶¹. Metaxas stated after the beginning of the Greco-Italian War, that, after talks with Germany, it was made clear to him that territorial concessions to Bulgaria were necessary for Greece in order to join the Axis Powers⁶². So, by becoming a member of the

⁵⁸ (Σφέτας 2011:74-79)

⁵⁹ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:421)

⁶⁰ (Τσιριγώτης 2013:409,422)

⁶¹ (Σφέτας 2011:136-139)

⁶² Οπ. π. στ. 53

Axis, Greece would probably have suffered the same fate as Romania, which, after the fall of France in 1940, was forced to cede territories to German allies Hungary and Bulgaria as a condition for becoming an Axis Power.

4.4 Metaxas' foreign policy and structural realism

Metaxas' foreign policy could thus be characterized as a "pro-British neutrality": Greece would be neutral towards rivalries of the European powers until attacked, but simultaneously closer to Britain, and in case that it was forced to enter a war it would do so in alliance with Britain. The "tragedy" of his foreign policy was that, on October 28th 1940, he was practically forced to choose between two dire options: either avoid war by submitting to the Axis, turning into a client state and very possibly suffering territorial losses and British reprisals, or enter the war allied with Britain, which could offer no real support, possibly suffer an occupation by the Axis Powers and hope that the British win the war, in which case Greece could also be rewarded.

Structural realism's fundamental hypothesis that the pressures of the international system are more important than internal political factors in shaping the state's foreign policy is thus confirmed in Greece's case: the shifts in the European balance and allocation of power due to German policies from 1933 onwards, in an anarchical international system where multilateral cooperation frameworks, such as the League of Nations, were declining rapidly, led to the disintegration of collective security in the Balkans and amplified the threats of Italian, Bulgarian and Yugoslavian expansionism against Greece, who also faced military and economic weakness. In addition, Greece's geographical position made it strategically valuable for the European Great Powers and also vulnerable to the naval power in control of the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece aimed at staying neutral, in order to avoid the consequences of entering a war, but at the other hand, due to its aforementioned weakness and the threats from other states, it was forced to seek external sources of power to safeguard its survival, security and vital national interests. At the same time, as the shifts in the balance of power led to the gradual emergence of a bipolar system and two competing blocs in Europe (Germany, Italy vs Britain, France), for a small and strategically important country like Greece remaining neutral became increasingly harder as tensions were increasing. And as a rapprochement with the German-Italian Axis would constitute a threat to vital national interests (loss of sovereignty, no guarantees versus Bulgaria and possible territorial concessions, British reprisals), seeking to externally increase power and ensure security

through an alliance with Britain, the dominant power of the Mediterranean, was the inevitable and rational choice, regardless of Metaxas' ideological principles, the role of king George or other internal political factors. The structural pressures exerted by the international system de facto severely limited the Greek government's room for maneuver.

5. Conclusions

After examining Greek foreign policy during Metaxas' regime, two conclusions can be reached:

First, Metaxas' foreign policy was defined primarily by structural strategic imperatives, with internal political factors such as his ideological affinity with the Axis Powers and his dependency on the anglophile king George not being of much importance. His pro-British policy was defined by realist interpretations of the strategic environment of the time and not by him being "forced" by George to follow such a policy against his will. It is hard to see what could be done differently, in the case that the king's role in Greek politics was of less importance. Aligning with the Axis and abandoning Britain was dangerous for vital Greek national interests, for the aforementioned reasons. And as mentioned before, a policy of balancing between the Great Powers, like that followed by Venizelos in the late 1920's, was not possible in a period when tensions between the European powers were increasing and two opposing geopolitical blocs were emerging, forcing smaller powers which occupied strategic geographical positions, such as Greece, to pick a side.

Second, the factors which led Metaxas to align with Britain (geography, economic and military weakness, external threats) cannot be limited to his era. Considering the irreversible nature of geography, Greece is at the one hand vulnerable to the naval power in control of the Eastern Mediterranean and at the other is of critical importance for the Great Powers, either through its neutrality, in times of more peaceful rivalry, or its alignment or control, during times of increased tensions, due to it being a vital link connecting Europe to the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East through the Balkans. Due to these, in conjunction with its perpetual economic and military weakness stemming from being a small country and the threats from neighboring countries faced by Greece through most of its existence as an independent state, Greece's security is highly sensitive to changes in the balance of power and structural pressures of the international system, as the case of Metaxas' foreign policy suggests. Thus, ideological and other internal political factors seem to be of little importance

in the shaping of Greek foreign policy, with it being determined primarily by structural pressures. These pressures limit the extent at which internal politics can exert influence in the conduct of Greece's foreign relations.

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