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Pseudo-History in Recent Writing on the Greek Military

The overthrow of the civilian government by the military in Greece on April 21, 1967, produced among its multiple consequences an intense foreign interest in that nation. Since that spring, over fifty books and more numerous articles on the Greek "junta" have been written to satisfy the curiosity of an international clientele. Included in this literary *mélange* are the works of journalists, scholars, celebrities, persecuted prisoners of the regime, and politicians. Together these authors tend to fall into the two broad categories of apologists for the post-April regime or—the larger group—its opponents. One may thus select from a plethora of impressions, opinions, and interpretations, with the knowledge that the works of professional scholars compose only a small segment of the total bibliography.

This outpouring has contributed to a better understanding of this strategic Balkan state, but the few serious historians of modern Greece must collectively shudder at some of the grandiose generalizations offered in an attempt to analyze decades of Greek developments in several paragraphs. The benevolent historian can overlook errors made by an actress, a composer, or even a journalist recounting the events of pre-1940 Greece. But he must dispute the right of sociologists and political scientists—immersed in contemporary problems and lacking historical perspective—to distort the past. The demand, real or created, for publications on Greece has lured persons conversant with current trends elsewhere to venture interpretations of the broad sweep of Greek history. Limited in their knowledge of modern Greek politics, these social scientists, their intricate methodology notwithstanding, have presented many statements of historical fact and conclusions that are questionable. The objective of this essay is to review critically the historical background sections of four articles which are among the few purporting to treat in a scholarly manner the role of the Greek military in politics since 1945. There will be no attempt to assess the main body of analysis on contemporary issues. Regrettably these four investigations are notable for their faulty information, misleading statements, and unsubstantiated historical generalizations.

The article by Professor George Zaharopoulos, of San Bernardino Valley College, is included in an anthology of twelve essays dealing with post-1967

Greece.¹ Concentrating on the military and Greek politics since World War II, he cites Greece's "level of political culture" as a fundamental cause for the army's intervention in 1967. In his introductory remarks, however, Zaharopoulos compresses Greek civil-military relations into three mistake-laden paragraphs. On page 20 he asserts: "The principal and most enduring source of political division in the history of modern Greece has been over the question of whether Greece should be a Republic or a Monarchy. . . . The army has always played a crucial role in the continuing dispute between Republicans and Royalists, most of the time before 1936 manifesting Republican sentiments. It was instrumental, for example, in the abolition of the absolute Monarchy of Otho, the first King of Greece, who was eventually forced to abdicate in 1862. In 1909 younger army officers with Republican inclinations organized a genuine revolution."

This summary coverage, by exaggerating the republican-monarchist division, oversimplifies the complex nature of Greek politics during more than one century of political development. In fact, the republican movement remained extremely weak until 1916 and became politically significant only after Greece's 1922 defeat in Asia Minor. Before 1922, antidynastic sentiments and the desire to curb the powers and privileges of the monarch and his family—which must be distinguished from republican attitudes—motivated officers and like-minded civilians to resort to extraparliamentary methods. Before the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 the Greek Chamber of Deputies never included more than five members who at any one time vigorously advocated the establishment of a republic. Despite the presence of a small radical minority with republican leanings and the demand for the dismissal of the princes from responsible employment in the armed forces, the 1909 Military League steered a moderate course, avoiding a military dictatorship and professing loyalty to King George I and the dynasty. Although the overall issue of whether the events of 1909–10 actually constitute a revolution is subject to interpretation, one must still question Zaharopoulos's statement that the 1909 officers "organized a genuine revolution."

A leading authority on American military sociology, Professor Charles C. Moskos, Jr., of Northwestern University, originally presented his article as a paper at the Seventh Congress of the International Sociological Association in Varna, Bulgaria (September 14–19, 1970).² Moskos's study centers on the political crisis from the summer of 1965 to April 1967 and stresses "personal

1. George Zaharopoulos, "Politics and the Army in Post-War Greece," in *Greece Under Military Rule*, ed. Richard Clogg and George Yannopoulos (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 17–35.

2. Charles C. Moskos, Jr., "The Breakdown of Parliamentary Democracy in Greece,

and volitional factors rather than broad cultural and structural determinants” for the breakdown of parliamentary government. However, his introduction, like Zaharopoulos’s, disappoints by yielding several erroneous observations.

On the 1909 revolt and its aftermath Moskos states: “A group of reformist young officers summoned the Cretan leader, Eleutherios Venizelos, to head the government. A new constitution was promulgated which reduced the powers of the monarchy and established a genuine parliamentary system. In Greece’s first modern elections held in 1912, Venizelos’ Liberal Party won a resounding victory” (p. 4). The Military League staged its coup d’état on August 28, 1909, and upon its request four months later Eleftherios Venizelos arrived in Athens to advise the officers on an honorable retreat from their political involvement. The lawyer-politician from Crete, however, declined the opportunity to assume the leadership of the government at that time. Upon the nomination by King George I, Venizelos became prime minister in October 1910, but only after he had won a seat in the Chamber of Deputies in the August 1910 elections. This victory at the polls came more than four months after the officers disbanded the Military League on March 30, 1910. The reference to a “new constitution” is completely wrong, since fifty-four nonfundamental articles of the 1864 Constitution—none of which dealt with the essential powers of the monarch, the ministries, or the Chamber of Deputies—were revised in 1911. Certainly the two phrases a “genuine parliamentary system” and “Greece’s first modern elections in 1912” require extensive clarification, if, indeed, they are valid.

In an additional error Professor Moskos comments: “Another military coup in 1924 abolished the monarchy entirely and transformed Greece into a republic” (p. 5). The establishment of a republic resulted not from “another military coup in 1924” but from the complicated sequence of events in the aftermath of the Asia Minor defeat and the Plastiras-Gonatas revolt in September 1922. Republican officers and politicians prospered in the reaction to the abortive counterrevolt of October 1923 by royalist (the majority) and liberal officers disenchanted with the policies of the military-led government. The royalist boycott of the December 1923 elections, a mass cashiering of royalist officers from the armed forces, and pressure from republican officers and politicians then led to the declaration of the Greek Republic by the National Assembly on March 25, 1924, a move confirmed by plebiscite on April 13.

A sociologist based in Geneva, Jean Siotis first read his article at the

1965–1967,” *Epitheorisis Koinonikon Ercvmon* [Review of Social Research], nos. 7–8 (January–June 1971), pp. 3–15.

1970 Congress of the International Sociological Association.³ Before proceeding to a detailed investigation of the social and political composition of the Greek officer corps and of the ideology and political institutions of the “colonels,” he offers noble words of caution: “In analysing the present day activism of the Greek armed forces, we must avoid a common error, or deliberate misrepresentation of history, which we find in many official or quasi-official pronouncements concerning the Greek dictatorship. Those who want to ‘explain’ the present situation by simply ‘reminding’ their audiences, who very often know little about Greek history, that ‘military dictatorships have been a recurrent phenomenon in Greek politics since the beginning of the twentieth century’ neglect to point out the very important fact that the present dictatorship represents a qualitatively different type of military activism” (p. 30). Despite his commendable insights into the singular characteristics of the 1967 coup d’état, Siotis unfortunately fails to heed his own admonitions, because his analysis of the earlier revolts is highly misleading, if not a “misrepresentation of history.”

Siotis selectively focuses on five interventions by the armed forces in politics: those of 1909, 1917, 1922, 1935, and 1943–44. In a footnote (p. 30) he dismisses other attempts by “small groups of officers to take over power.” This reviewer considers it impossible to discuss adequately, even in summary fashion, the military’s political involvement and its collaboration with individual political groups without mentioning the counterrevolt of 1923, the coup d’état by General Theodore Pangalos on June 25, 1925, and his subsequent establishment of a formal dictatorship on January 3, 1926, his overthrow by General George Kondylis’s forces on August 21–22, 1926, and the attempted coup d’état of republican officers under the leadership of Nicholas Plastiras on March 6, 1933. The reference to a military intervention in 1917 is never adequately explained. It would have been clearer if Siotis had instead referred to the formation of the Committee of National Defense by anti-Constantinist officers in Thessaloniki on August 30, 1916, and the consequent establishment of the Provisional Government four weeks later by Eleftherios Venizelos.

Among several questionable points is Siotis’s claim that “the ‘Military League’ was basically an expression of republican and nationalist bourgeois forces which brought to power Eleftherios Venizelos” (p. 30). As detailed above, the republican forces did not predominate in 1909 and the Military League’s actions only led indirectly after a series of intervening events to Venizelos’s prime ministership. Assuming, in line with Siotis’s logic, that these officers in 1909 represented the interests of emerging sociopolitical elites,

3. Jean Siotis, “Some Notes on the Military in Greek Politics,” *Epitheorisis Koinonikon Erewnon*, nos. 7–8 (January–June 1971), pp. 29–38.

one must then question his summation on page 32 that “up to the second world war, the military, whether or not they participated in political interventions, may be considered as servants and guardians of the establishment to which most of them belonged.”

In describing the officers involved in the pre-1940 revolts, Siotis states: “The military, who led these rebellions . . . were convinced that they were the guardians of Greece’s national interests and of Greek democracy. They were not seeking any personal benefits and most of them went into retirement considerably poorer than when they first became involved in political activities” (p. 30). In March 1933 a small group of republican officers attempted a coup d’état (not mentioned by Siotis) but failed in their attempt to nullify a conservative electoral victory. If one considers fair elections an accurate evaluation of the public’s will, does this action make these officers the “guardians of Greek democracy”? Directly related to the republican officers’ fear of a conservative triumph at the polls was the realization that their professional advantages, accrued through staunch defense of liberal and republican causes for nearly two decades, would be undercut and that with the restoration of the monarchy, they would inevitably be cashiered. Hence professional considerations and insecurity drove many republican officers to participate in the unsuccessful seditions of March 1933 and March 1935, an indicator of a desire to reap “personal benefits.”

Although Professor George Kourvetaris, of Northern Illinois University, also concentrates on the Greek military in politics since World War II, basing many conclusions on a series of interviews with active duty officers, he too devotes several paragraphs in his article to the prewar years.⁴ Embellished with the argot of sociologists, his generalizations for these earlier decades are at times confusing and misleading. For example, on page 97 Kourvetaris writes: “It is suggested that whenever the political and other social elites in Greece were incapable of using their power effectively to create a viable political system for economic and social development, they lost their legitimacy to rule and the military assumed political leadership.” An overstatement, this blanket generalization can be criticized from several directions, but here it will be pointed out only that before, during, or after the revolts in 1909, 1916, 1922, 1923, 1925, 1933, and 1935, rebellious officers used selected politicians in a symbiotic fashion or employed the military to exert pressure on recalcitrant politicians. Even from November 27, 1922, to January 11, 1924, when Colonel Stylianos Gonatas ruled as prime minister without a parliament and Colonel Plastiras, as “chief of the revolution,” dominated the political scene,

4. George A. Kourvetaris, “The Role of the Military in Greek Politics,” *International Review of History and Political Science*, 8, no. 3 (August 1971): 91–111.

cooperation between the army and individual politicians continued. Thus the responsibilities of political leadership were shared. The regime which governed Greece after April 21, 1967, is the sole example during the twentieth century whereby the "military assumed political leadership" in the absolute sense that Kourvetaris implies.

Referring to the momentous consequences of the 1909 revolt, Kourvetaris concludes: "From a sociopolitical perspective, this Military League was a new middle-class group of military modernizers, who invited the charismatic politician from Crete, Eleftherios Venizelos, to assume political leadership. As soon as the new political men replaced the old political oligarchy, the young officers retired from the arena of active politics. Venizelos became the architect of the Republican Party, introduced many novel democratic political ideas from Europe, and charted a program of social reform and social modernization" (p. 98). There is no existing study of the social background of the officers in the Military League to justify defining them as a "new middle-class group of military modernizers." Furthermore, their demands on the Chamber of Deputies and related activities did not mirror a class orientation. Simultaneous with its revolt in late August 1909 the Military League drafted a program of reform in a lengthy "Memorandum Addressed to the King, the Government, and the Greek People." This document reflected the chauvinist goals of the officers and their prime concern to strengthen the armed forces in order to pursue Greece's irredentist ambitions more effectively. This "Memorandum" was neither an expression of late nineteenth-century European liberalism nor an attempt to advance the cause of the bourgeoisie. It should be noted here, as above, that "new political men replaced the old political oligarchy" only after the elections of August 21, 1910, and December 11, 1910—several months *after* the "young officers retired from the arena of active politics." Venizelos, the leader of the new political clique, became the architect of the Liberal Party, not the Republican Party. Even during the 1924–35 period when the backers of Venizelos supported the republic, his party maintained its title "Liberal." It is hard to dispute the contention that Venizelos "charted a program of social reform and social modernization." But what does Kourvetaris mean by his assertion that the prime minister "introduced many novel democratic ideas from Europe"? Such a sweeping statement, unsubstantiated and vague, should define what constitutes such policies, since they are not apparent to this reviewer. Bearing in mind the context of European politics during the pre-1914 period, perhaps "liberal" should be substituted for "novel democratic."

Kourvetaris next proceeds to confuse the reader with a garbled seven-sentence account of the years from 1922 to 1935. However, his most flagrant historical errors emerge in the following paragraph: "In 1936, this pattern

of republicanism was upset when ex-General Metaxas gained political power through constitutional means but later he declared a dictatorship over the issue of communist support solicited by both republican and royalist parties. Metaxas reinstated the monarchy and removed the republican elements from the armed forces just as royalist officers had been demobilized during the republican era" (p. 99).⁵ Simply stated, Kourvetaris reverses the actual sequence of events. The abortive March 1935 revolt by republican officers signaled the imminent death of the republic. The conservative government prosecuted republican officers, politicians, and civil servants, imprisoning or dismissing more than one thousand persons. The diehard royalists among the conservatives consolidated their position through an overwhelming victory in the election of June 3, 1935, from which the republican parties abstained. A controversial plebiscite under the authoritarian supervision of George Kondylis resulted in an incredible 97 percent vote in favor of King George II's return under the terms of the revised Constitution of 1911, and the monarch arrived in Greece in late November 1935. Already by early 1936 the stalwart republicans in the armed forces had been cashiered. King George then appointed Ioannis Metaxas, a minority party leader, as prime minister on April 13, 1936. The king later authorized the establishment of a dictatorship under Metaxas's leadership on August 4, 1936, but justified his action on issues considerably more complex than the mere solicitation of Communist support by politicians.

Rather than berate Messrs. Zaharopoulos, Moskos, Siotis, and Kourvetaris for haphazard research, I prefer to classify them as victims deceived by existing monographs which reflect the low level of scholarship on modern Greece. With few exceptions most works on Greek politics for the 1864–1940 period fall into the category of broad surveys based on secondary sources—a pattern which perpetuates erroneous historical information, false conclusions, and myths. Even with the recent concern for the political interventions of the Greek armed forces, a detailed investigation of any of the military revolts before World War II has still to be published in English, French, or German; and the several books in Greek on individual seditions cannot be labeled well-researched history. The complex interwar period, so important for understanding the resistance movements, civil war, and post-1944 era in general, is unexplored territory awaiting the qualified specialist. The Greek Republic (1924–35), intricate and involved as it was, usually finds authors skirting

5. It should be noted that at the end of this paragraph Kourvetaris in parentheses refers to Keith R. Legg, *Politics in Modern Greece* (Stanford, 1969). No specific page reference is provided, but in checking a paragraph by Legg on page 189 it becomes obvious that Kourvetaris misinterpreted the ambiguous wording of Legg's brief comments on this period.

these years with short, superficial, and frequently invalid summations. For example, Professor Keith R. Legg in his *Politics in Modern Greece* (1969) has contributed the first lengthy investigation of the Greek political scene, yet he devotes only one paragraph (p. 189) to the extensive extraparliamentary activities of the military from 1922 to 1935. Journalist David Holden of the *Sunday Times* (London), in his controversial but provocative *Greece Without Columns* (1972), confines his observations on the Greek Republic to less than four pages (pp. 136–39) and does not use the opportunity to add to his long list of acerbic comments. Although when one considers his already large inventory of factual errors, he probably judged wisely.

As events in Greece continue to merit headlines, foreign interest in this troubled nation will doubtless be maintained. It is therefore mandatory that social scientists studying modern Greece coordinate their efforts to meet this intellectual challenge and strive for scholarly levels characteristic of monographs on other world areas. Within the last decade some researchers have undertaken intensive, systematic studies of specific historical, political, diplomatic, and socioeconomic issues. Most of this work, however, appears in Ph.D. dissertations in the United States and England. One hopes that revisions of these studies and other projects emphasizing original research will prove worthy of publication, thus replacing the generally mediocre bibliography on Greece now available.