

Introduction

The Greek Military Junta's Exceptionalism in Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Othon Anastasakis and Katerina Lagos



Greece as the so-called birthplace of democracy appeared an international oddity in the eyes of many Westerners when in 1967 a group of Greek colonels overthrew the civilian government. The 1967 coup d'état brought about the longest dictatorship in the history of modern Greece. Looking back further, it was not the only military intervention in modern Greece's past; indeed, the country had experienced short military coups since the mid-nineteenth century and had lived through another long dictatorship by Ioannis Metaxas between 1936 and 1941 at the height of fascism in Europe. Yet what was unique about the Colonels' regime—unlike previous cases in Greece or contemporary cases in the Southern Europe or Latin America—is that the 1967 coup d'état took place at a time of strong economic growth in Greece, with the country firmly in the Western capitalist bloc, including a very promising association agreement with the democratic European Economic Community (EEC).

The present volume discusses this paradox and looks at the complexity of the military rule in Greece through a selection of contributions that examine the origins, nature, ideology, policies, and foreign politics of the regime. A collection of scholars who are experts in the field—most of them historians, but others from political science, international relations, political economy, religious studies, and literature—approach the military regime from internal and external relations perspectives. The book analyzes the military regime not simply as a unique period in modern Greek history, with a start date and an ending, but also through the prism of evolving domestic

and international environments. The themes of continuity and rupture vis-à-vis the previous status quo are discussed throughout the book, whereby each contributor presents what was unique in the regime and what represented a continuity with past ideas, practices, and policies. While the book underscores the reactionary and often convoluted nature of the regime, it looks at what the Colonels did in order to remain in power, as well as their policies as governors responding to the exigencies of a country operating within the camp of modernizing Western liberal economies and societies.

The military regime in Greece has attracted the attention of many historians in the Anglophone literature. There are some noteworthy monographs on the political history of the regime from a top-down, elites perspective published during the 1970s and 1980s, with a fresh memory of the events (Clogg and Yannopoulos 1972; Andrews 1980; Woodhouse 1985, which is the most recent comprehensive analysis of the junta regime and provides a political history of the dictatorship). Other books include eyewitnesses and accounts with a more personal gaze at this period (“Athenian” 1972; Barkman 1989; Couloumbis 2004; Orestis 2009; Keeley 2010). In addition, there are analyses, which focus mostly on the origins and causes of authoritarianism in Greece, on the pre-1967 period, or the post-1974 transition to democracy (Papandreou 1970; Featherstone and Katsoudas 1987; Murtagh 1994). Finally, there are some more recent published books that touch on particular aspects of the regime, such as external bilateral relations, cultural issues, the junta’s failed civilian experiment, or on the role of the youth at the time (Pelt 2006; Miller 2009; Doulis 2011; Kornetis 2013; Nafpliotis 2013; Karakatsanis 2018; Maragkou 2019; Tzortzis 2020). The present edited volume is broader in scope and includes a parallel discussion of politics, ideology, foreign policy, economics, education, religion, culture, diaspora, and external relations under Greece’s military rule; as such, it can appeal to a more diverse audience. All these aspects are regarded comparatively, as part of an exceptional time in Greek history but also in connection with the country’s historical continuum.

The origins of the military involvement in Greek politics goes far back into the nineteenth century, when links between civilian and military elites were established, with the latter often becoming politicized and tying their corporate interests to particular parties. What was unique about the 1967 military coup d’état was the almost complete alienation of the middle-rank officers from their political patrons. As André Gerolymatos and Katerina Lagos explain in the first section of this book, the Greek Civil War was a critical period that led to the “autonomization” of the Greek army from politics and the strengthening of the most reactionary anticommunist and antidemocratic fractions within the army, the precursors of the military junta—that

is, the influential paramilitary organization known as IDEA (Ιερός Δεσμός Ελλήνων Αξιωματικών, Holy Bond of Greek Officers), whose members effectively imposed their coup in 1967.¹

Post-World War II parliamentary rule in Greece during the 1950s and early 1960s was in essence an illiberal, half-baked democracy, marked by the exclusion of the Communist Party, discrimination against those associated with left-wing politics, manipulations of elections, and the use of repressive mechanisms (imprisonment or exile) toward dissidents. The political power of the anticommunist state rested on the triarchy of crown, parliament, and army. Within this triangle, the king of Greece at times seemed to perceive his powers to be limitless, and, frequently overstepping his constitutional rights, he intervened in party politics to pursue his personal agenda (Alivizatos 1986: 203–71). The political Right, through parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities and with the help of the United States, managed to secure its dominant position in government for eleven uninterrupted years (1952–63).

The international environment, which is a theme discussed extensively in this book, was a very influential factor in Greece's turbulent post-World War II history, mostly as a result of the country's geopolitical significance. Postwar Greece was in many respects the microcosm of the international Cold War bipolarity, exemplified by the prolonged civil war in the 1940s and the victory of the Western over the communist forces. As a NATO member state from 1952, Greece acquired a special geopolitical position and was crucial to U.S. superpower interests in the Balkans and the Middle East; this contributed to the increasing role of the military and the strengthening of the institutional autonomy of the army in politics. Many members of the IDEA were educated in the United States, and they had espoused "new professional" doctrines of "counter-insurgency and internal security" (Stepan 1973: 50–53). As James Edwards Miller argues in his chapter, military assistance programs permitted the Greek government "both to strengthen its defensive capabilities through aid grants and to reallocate significant budgetary outlays to support important economic development programs." Eventually, U.S. economic assistance had to be reduced, which allowed for an increasing European influence in Greece's economy and society. Indeed, following the Association Agreement in 1961 with the EEC, the Greek economy was brought closer to the European fold—and with increasing bilateral economic links with the major Western European economies. As Alexandros Nafpliotis points out in his chapter, closer economic links with Germany, France, and Britain made it particularly difficult for these countries to sever relations with Greece when the military junta took over in 1967, and in some instances continued a "business as usual" practice.

Despite the hybridity of the democratic process and the ideological polarization, the Greek economy during the 1950s and 1960s recovered rapidly from the negative repercussions of the wars, with the help of American aid and direct foreign investment, and recorded impressive rates of growth. The main characteristics of this postwar “economic miracle” were the boosting of the manufacturing sector, the shift in investment from light consumer goods to durable and capital goods, the change in the structure of exports from agricultural to industrial goods, and a significant concentration of capital in industry (Mouzelis 1976). However, despite the impressive rates of economic growth, the main elements of Greece’s prewar socioeconomic structure continued to dominate, marked by the powerful state sector, the inability to develop technologically the agricultural sector, and the ever-increasing power of shipping capital. The state sector continued to provide the bulk of employment for the majority of the middle and lower classes. As Andreas Kakridis argues in his chapter, “The quest for development was translated into the dual pursuit of *stability* and *investment*; both entailed a heavy dose of state intervention, albeit within the overarching framework of a market economy.” While the economic changes of the 1960s did not affect in any radical way the peripheral status of the Greek economy in relation to the developed world, they brought about some qualitative changes in the standard of living of the population and strengthened the dynamism of the Greek society.

This rapid economic growth brought about the rise of a new middle class and with it the strengthening of a more demanding civil society seeking political change. The 1960s saw the ascendancy of the reformist Center Union government to power, and of its popular leader George Papandreou, challenging the domination of the postwar political triarchy. The Center Union professed a more progressive and inclusionary agenda, asking for the relaxation of the anticommunist state of repressive mechanisms, the submission of the armed forces under civilians, a more independent civil society, and a comprehensive educational reform. As Othon Anastasakis contends in his chapter on education, George Papandreou’s educational reform stands out as one of the most significant reformist initiatives in Greece’s educational history, entailing changes that challenged the decades old status quo to such a degree that the military junta made it one of its foremost priorities upon arrival in 1967 to overturn and break with this progress, as it clearly felt threatened by it.

Contrary to most Latin American counterparts, the breakdown of parliamentary democracy in Greece took place in the midst of an economic boom and not in the context of economic stagnation.² For this reason, the regime could not convincingly use a legitimizing developmentalist economic

language as an excuse for intervention. In fact, as Kakridis argues, one can observe a high degree of continuity with the past in the economic policies adopted by the military rulers. The regime had therefore to resort to a sterile ideological discourse as is discussed in Lagos's chapter, where she argues that the ideological framework of the 21 April regime was confined within anti-communist, Greco-Christian generalities in their extreme Cold War usage, the only common ideological denominator within an otherwise diverse politically and ideologically military institution. This ideological framework looked totally antiquated, and was a solid rupture with the new Western societal discourses and movements of the late 1960s.

The fact that the 21 April regime did not face any credible internal political opposition allowed the small group of middle-rank officers, under the leadership of Georgios Papadopoulos, to sustain their power for as long as they did. To do this, they had to create their own alliances and networks of opportunistic supporters, as well as control institutions with some influence on Greek society, such as the Greek Orthodox Church. But even in this domain, as Charalambos Andreopoulos and Athanasios Grammenos argue in their chapter, they were not able to keep a consistent policy and exported their own divisions into the Church itself.

The military rulers were helped by the international power politics of the Cold War, which is what Nafpliotis and Mogens Pelt argue in their chapters, showing how Western countries continued to maintain relations with Greece's authoritarian rulers, primarily because it suited their own strategic as well as economic interests. Moreover, as Miller states in his chapter, in the case of the United States, support for democracy was clearly sacrificed on the altar of Cold War politics. Yet, despite the working relationship with the international community, in the end it was a foreign policy matter in Cyprus that acted as a catalyst for the collapse of the regime, a story which is aptly presented by John Sakkas in his chapter on the junta's policy vis-à-vis Turkey and Cyprus. Ironically, it was yet another humiliating external defeat, following the earlier 1897 Greco-Turkish War and the 1922 Asia Minor catastrophe, that sealed the fate of the military in Greek politics, this time in the right direction, leading to a successful transition to democracy and sending the military to the barracks where it belonged, as the ultimate rupture with the past.

The present volume is divided into three sections. The first section entails two chapters that look at the military and ideological origins of the 21 April regime. Gerolymatos provides an overview of the Greek military beginning in the early twentieth century. He argues that while the antecedents of military intervention can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, the Greek Civil War in the 1940s proved to be a seminal moment in the history of the military, as the emergent Greek National Army was fraught with fac-

tions and was weak in comparison to the Democratic Army. This prompted British—and later American—involvement to reorganize the Greek military and ensured that the officer corps would be beyond the reach of the political leadership. Lagos picks up the theme of the military's autonomy from political oversight and examines the growing involvement of the military in political affairs. The officers of the Greek army presented themselves as the praetorian guards of the Greek state and made sure to prevent any communist or left-leaning political party from acquiring power. However, once the Colonels acquired political power, they struggled to maintain unity and could not articulate a unified vision or political agenda for their regime.

The second part of the book looks at different policies of the regime in such fields as the economy, foreign direct investment, education, culture, and religion. In the area of economics, the dictatorship did not venture far from the policies adopted in the 1950s and early 1960s, and the Colonels sought to maintain economic growth, which, according to Kakridis, did not change key policy ideas or economic personnel. In fact, the shifts that occurred were those of policy emphasis, not major policy realignments. The Colonels tied the regime's survival to economic growth and consumerism; the additional resources generated were used to "co-opt and placate different social groups—not just the rich and powerful" (chapter 3, this volume). This proved to be a double-edged sword as it placed the economy under an increasing strain, which eventually caused macroeconomic derailment in 1973–74. A similar situation occurred when the dictators actively sought out foreign investment to generate desperately needed revenue. This pursuit resulted in a Byzantine dance between financial suitors and the established economic oligarchy to secure investment contracts in Greece. As Nicholas Kalogerakos explains, "Greece's doors were open for business," but foreign investors soon realized that their projects would face the same internal gatekeepers as before on their path to gaining approval from the Ministry of Coordination's Committee on Foreign Investment. Between preferential treatment for certain company proposals and outright suppression of potential competition for domestic companies, foreign corporations could not secure a deal with the Greek government without considerable internal cooperation and support. Ultimately, Kalogerakos demonstrates that the junta's declaration of support for foreign investment was more smoke and mirrors than a streamlined process for foreign investors, especially American investors. The Colonels may have been desperate for international recognition and foreign investment, but they were unwilling—or unable—to dismantle the pre-junta power structure of vested interests within the economic establishment.

While the Colonels maintained the status quo for economic affairs, this was not the case with other government policies. Anastasakis explains that

in the field of education, the Colonels pursued a reactionary agenda that fundamentally overturned all of the attempted reforms that George Papandreou and the Center Union Party had proposed with the 1964 Education Act. In addition, the dictatorship passed new laws to facilitate oversight and control of the youth, especially student organizations. In the end, the latter proved to be the regime's nemesis, and the reactionary university policies of the junta left a long-lasting legacy on Greece's post-1974 democracy. At some point, the regime tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to adopt a more technocratic agenda in education to respond to the objective needs of a changing liberal economy, a point that showed more clearly the conflicting nature of military officers as rulers in areas where they were utterly incompetent and fundamentally repressive. However, as Foteini Dimirouli explains, there were instances where the dictators used means other than repression and censorship to achieve their aims. The Colonels employed cultural appropriation and the redeployment of literary texts in the regime's discourse to further their political agenda. Using the national poet C. P. Cavafy as her case study, Dimirouli traces how Cavafy's poems were reinterpreted and recast to assert dictatorial legitimacy, ignite nationalistic sentiment, and vilify opponents. She asserts that poetry, like other art, "can operate as a cipher for causes that have little in common with prevailing readings of the work or with the discursive fields in which it was originally produced."

In the eyes of the Church, the Colonels took a cavalier and dismissive approach to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Despite lauding the significance of Orthodox Christianity in the regime's social vision, the Colonels tried to control the ecclesiastical leadership for their own political purposes. Andreopoulos and Grammenos argue that the junta's interference in the Orthodox Church reached an unprecedented level. As they had done with their rupture in the field of education, within weeks after the coup, the Colonels replaced the Archbishop of Athens, Chrysostomos II, with a younger and more pliant Archimandrite Ieronymos and sought to control the Church in the name of its supposed salvation. However, Andreopoulos and Grammenos find that the Colonels' intervention was not one-sided; Ieronymos took advantage of his position to make changes within the Archdiocese hierarchy that violated Canonical law. As a result, tension and division developed within the hierarchy that ultimately led to Ieronymos's resignation in December 1973.

The third section of the book deals with external affairs and starts with a study of the linkages of the regime with a diasporic institution in the United States. Alexander Kitroeff examines the relations between the Colonels and one of the more prominent and often controversial leaders of the Church, Archbishop Iakovos of North and South America. Kitroeff highlights the mutual self-interest in fostering positive relations between the

Archdiocese and the junta regime. The Archdiocese Clergy-Laity Congress held in Athens in July 1968 was the high point of relations between Iakovos and the Colonels; the congress was a public relations success for the Colonels, as it projected a validation of the regime at a time when Greece had few allies. However, relations between the two declined in the face of the Colonels' dismissive and patronizing attitude toward the Greek diaspora and their blatant disregard of Iakovos's advice and offers of mediation with the U.S. government.

Staying with the United States, Miller explores the much discussed and most criticized role of the superpower. He challenges the notion that the Johnson administration helped bring the junta to power by examining both the years leading up to the coup as well as the initial relations between the two governments. Using recently declassified archival information, Miller argues that the United States, against what is often assumed, was not involved in the coup and expressed clear disapproval; yet the Johnson administration chose to keep steady communication with the dictatorship so that they could continue to influence the Colonels and persuade them to transition back to parliamentary rule.

Relationships with other Western actors, including Britain, West Germany, and EEC, are also examined in the book. More concretely, this volume delves into the major dilemmas of the Western European democratic states, confronted with the perennial question whether to engage with or break away from Greek military rule. While objecting to the dictatorial practices of the junta, the Western powers nevertheless had to consider security, economic, and political interests with an ally in a divided bipolar environment, and, with varying degrees of internal consent, they opted for continuity over rupture. Nafpliotis frames the discussion by examining Great Britain's relations with the military regime within the context of NATO, the Council of Europe, and the EEC, shedding light on how economic factors overrode political considerations in dealing with the Colonels. In the end, Western European countries tacitly legitimized the dictatorship by continuing to engage in diplomatic relations and trade agreements, overcoming their democratic sensitivities because it served their strategic and economic interests. As Nafpliotis demonstrates, Britain's behavior was not isolated; other European countries, such as France and West Germany, followed suit. Pelt picks up this theme in his chapter by analyzing West Germany's attempts to maintain a policy of nonintervention in Greek domestic affairs in the face of harsh criticism both at home and by some of Germany's allies in the Scandinavian region. As West Germany pursued a strategy "that on the one hand wanted to regain old markets and

which on the other was designed to tie Greece to the West,” Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger and Vice-Chancellor Willy Brandt could not disregard the concerns raised within their government as well as from neighboring allies. One of major considerations was West Germany’s weapons trade with Greece; they were loath to terminate these lucrative deals and merely reduced the volume of sensitive arms deliveries instead of suspending them.

Finally, this section of the book addresses the regime’s foreign policy in the utmost matter of national interest, Cyprus. Sakkas sheds light on the Colonels’ duplicitous handling of the Cyprus problem. While the Colonels had voiced their support of enosis (union) for Cyprus from the outset of the dictatorship, behind closed doors, they pursued a solution based on partition. The Colonels deplored Archbishop Makarios’s attempt to cultivate relations with the Soviet Union, and by June 1971 Papadopoulos sought to forge a deal with Turkey regarding Cyprus that he would impose on Makarios. Ultimately, the rift created between the junta and Archbishop Makarios continued to grow and came to a climax when Dimitrios Ioannides organized a coup d’état in the summer of 1974 to overthrow Makarios and forcibly unify Cyprus to Greece, leading to the collapse of the junta and the divided fate of Cyprus, which continues today.

In the conclusion, we discuss the meaning of the 1974 moment of the breakdown of the dictatorship and the subsequent legacies of the regime, arguing that July 1974 is mythologized in the minds of most Greeks as the moment of an irreversible transition to democracy and the victory of the latter over authoritarianism. Indeed, most of the actions by the first democratic governments were guided by the desire for the so-called dejuntification of Greek politics and society, as well as the rupture with the pre-1967 illiberal past, thus laying a solid foundation for democracy as the supposed only game in town. Yet, we also argue that the military regime left some legacies that continued to affect public perceptions toward democratic politics, civic resistance, and the role of external actors. To this day, the dictatorship remains a painful recollection for most Greeks with a living memory of it, many of whom are still alive to tell the story as they remember it, while others remain who prefer to forget.

This volume wishes not to forget but to build on the existing literature and revisit different aspects of the dictatorial period through research and investigation conducted by all of its contributors. It thus combines original archival information with in-depth scholarly analysis, in order to bring about innovative arguments on the nature of the regime. In the end, the book’s added value lies in three important outputs: first, it is an updated account of a contested national story that comes more than half a century

and two generations after the 1967 coup d'état; second, it provides for an interdisciplinary reading that covers different dimensions of the military regime, and in that sense the book stands as a unified interconnected narrative and at the same time provides for individual chapters with their own inherent value; and, last but not least, it is a reminder that there are many aspects of this turbulent period of Greek history that remain unexplored or underexplored and still require scholarly attention. In doing so, the Greek military regime stands out as a reminder of lessons learned from past political mistakes as well as irresponsible and dangerous leaderships.

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NOTES

1. The history of the IDEA had its roots in the period of the Nazi occupation of Greece. It was originally formed by Greek officers in Palestine under the name of the ENA (Ενωσις Νέων Αξιωματικών, Union of Young Officers) and in October 1944 was transformed into the IDEA, an ideologically “pure” union of officers, who sought to promote their influence within the army. In their initial proclamation, the members of IDEA asked for the “forceful exclusion from the armed forces of officers with internationalist beliefs and nationally doubtful convictions” (Stavrou 1976: 116).
2. In Latin America, perennial structural problems of high inflation, balance of payment problems, and a high degree of dependence on the international economy exacerbated social tensions to such an extent that parliamentary institutions were not able to cope (Kaufman 1979: 190–96).

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