

Perceptions and Uses of the Land: Agrarian Rhetoric and Agricultural Policy in Greece under Metaxas' Regime (1936-1941)

Percepções e Usos da Terra: Retórica Agrária e Política Agrícola na Grécia sob o Regime de Metaxas (1936-1941)

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Abstract—This paper aims to explore the ways in which the concepts of 'Nature' and 'Land' were incorporated and mobilized in the rhetoric of the dictatorial regime established in Greece by Ioannis Metaxas on August 4, 1936. Firstly, it examines the links between the construction of a national landscape and the emergence of a novel nationalist ideology in interwar Greece. Then, it looks into different ways in which politicized ideas of nature informed agronomic researches and practices and were translated in Metaxas' political thought and policies. These ideological connotations of Land and Nature inscribe themselves in the philosophical and economic doctrine of the 'peasantist nationalism'. Based mostly on radical agrarianism and neo-romanticism, this discourse gained momentum in the early 1930s and permeated autarchic economic and agrarian policies, especially after the collapse of parliamentary rule. Along those lines, Metaxas' dictatorship and its perceptions of the environment arguably align with features and trajectories of the authoritarian regimes that flourished all around Europe in the interwar period.

Keywords—Agrarianism; Land; Nationalism; Greece.

Resumo—Este texto visa explorar as formas como os conceitos de "Natureza" e "Terra" foram incorporados e mobilizados na retórica do regime ditatorial estabelecido na Grécia por Ioannis Metaxas a 4 de Agosto de 1936. Em primeiro lugar, examina as ligações entre a construção de uma paisagem nacional e o surgimento de uma nova ideologia nacionalista na Grécia entre guerras. Em seguida, examina as diferentes formas como as ideias politizadas da natureza informaram as investigações e práticas agronómicas e foram traduzidas no pensamento e políticas de Metaxas. Estas conotações ideológicas da Terra e da Natureza inscrevem-se na doutrina filosófica e económica do "nacionalismo camponês". Baseado principalmente no agrarianismo radical e no neo-romantismo, este discurso ganhou impulso no início dos anos 30 e permeou políticas económicas e agrárias autárquicas, especialmente após o colapso do governo parlamentar. Nesta linha, a ditadura da Metaxas e as suas percepções do ambiente alinham indiscutivelmente com as características e trajetórias dos regimes autoritários que floresceram em toda a Europa no período entre guerras.

Palavras-Chave—Agrarismo; Terra; Nacionalismo; Grécia.

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1 Nationalism, Fascism, and Nature

ONE of the various approaches of environmental history concerns the study of "deliberate human efforts to regulate the relationship between society and nature, and between social groups in matters concerning nature" (McNeill and Mauldin, 2012). This theme certainly includes the ways in which political ideologies shape, affect, and determine human attitudes and policies towards the natural environment (Hughes 2006). However, the environmental perspective should not be considered as a lens that could be applied to other topics of history; more than this, it is inherently and inextricably entwined with them (Isenberg 2014). Aiming to bridge environmental and political history, this paper examines certain aspects of human thought and attitudes towards nature; it investigates the ways in which perceptions of the natural environment were incorporated in authoritarian agendas, shaping ideologies and promoting certain policies towards the land.

More specifically, our study focuses on the abstract ideological conceptions of the quasi-fascist regime established in Greece by Ioannis Metaxas from 1936 to 1941¹ concerning the natural environment and sketches the conversion of these ideas into major political and economic projects, such as public works and corporatist legislation. We claim that the ideology of peasantist nationalism, already predominant before the establishment of the dictatorship, reached a new peak and was institutionalized as a hegemonic ideology under Metaxas' rule, in a process which ultimately led to significant environmental transformations.

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1. In short, the dictatorship established in Greece by the former General Ioannis Metaxas on August 4, 1936 was the culmination of a prolonged political and constitutional crisis after the country's bankruptcy in 1932, with its deeper roots lying in the legacies of the cleavage of the National Schism. The demise of Greek parliamentarism should also be placed in the wider context of the rise of authoritarianism, both a symptom and a consequence of the crisis of liberal democracy in interwar Europe. See: Chatzivassileiou 2010

It is widely accepted that nationalism is fundamentally and deeply rooted in the soil, as national identities are forged on the basis of the human bond with the place someone inhabits. During the process of identity formation, the imagined "land" signifies "unique cultural traits, primordial roots, and a community of fate". In this view, experiencing the national landscape "makes the belonging seem natural, real, and tangible" (Herb & Kaplan, 2017). Romanticist perceptions of the "national soil" were commonplace in any ultranationalist, fascist, or far-right political movement in interwar Europe. According to their rationale, the notions of nature and soul were strongly connected; the "racial quality" of a people was thought to be "embedded in the national landscape".² This very landscape, in turn, was considered "as a by-product of both natural and historical forces" and allegedly expressed the "people's spirit" (Armiero and von Handenberg, 2013).

From this perspective, the soil was "organically tied" to the national body (Biasillo and Da Silva, 2021). In the national socialist "Weltanschauung", nature was celebrated as the sacred habitat of the German "Volksgemeinschaft" (Lee and Wilke 2005; Pois 1986). Introduced in the early '30s by the agronomist Richard Walther Darré, the "Blut und Boden" concept indicates the crucial position which the "religion of nature" held in Nazi ideology. This slogan "laid the foundations for a Nazified rural land ethic", endorsing the dissolution of the industrial societal and economic order and its replacement by an agrarian one (Lovin 1967; Lekan 2004).

The "cult of the peasant", advocating "a retreat into the unspoiled landscape, away from a society rapidly becoming industrialized and urbanized" (Mosse 1987) was not confined in Germany alone. The propagandistic celebration of the rural lifestyle was also lying at the core of Italian fascism as well. Agricultural labour was seen as a revitalising element in opposition to urban activities and ways of life, while cities were portrayed as "sterile" and "pathological" environments. Such premises led to the promotion of concrete, though controversial, initiatives, which

2. On the construction of a "national landscape" as a process by which "a nation-state decides to seize and alter a parcel of land to assert its control over a region" see also: Vlachos 2021

-in brief- can be reduced to the concept of "ruralizzazione" (Caprotti & Kaïka, 2008). In Mussolini's terms, the desired "regeneration" of the country's soil went hand in hand with the revitalisation of its people. This vision implied "both the return to some pristine origins and the creation of a completely new and human-made future" (Armiero 2014).

As recent studies suggest, the fascist "ideology of the land" should not be merely regarded as a reactionary or conservative conviction. As a matter of fact, it formed a distinct path in the "quest for modernity" (Fuller 2007); in that respect, significant projects like land reclamation works, were indeed part of what Tiago Saraiva (2016¹) has described as an "alternative modernity". The efforts of Salazar's "Estado Novo" to manage Portugal's natural resources serve as a typical example of the modernist dimension of these developments. In this Iberian version of fascism, the soil was transformed into a "national economic resource" by technology and ideology alike. Agrarian ideals were also embedded in the context of "traditionalist corporatism", which Salazar's dictatorship embraced (Saraiva 2016²; Guimarães 2020).

As for the Greek case, despite some essentially different characteristics that defined its particularity, the "4th of August" regime was substantially influenced by the fascist and the national socialist paradigm, sharing several ideological components, such as anti-parliamentarism, anti-liberalism, anti-communism, and corporatism. It also promoted the principles of radical agrarianism, idealizing the peasantry and rural life (Ploumidis 2016). In that sense, although we should not overlook the significant differences between the agrarian aspects of fascist and authoritarian regimes (chronological diversity, the role of agriculture in each country's economic development, differentiation of their rural structures and class stratification, varying degrees of political mobilisation of the peasantry, technological and scientific potential, clashing expansionist interests), arising from the disparate national frameworks, the Greek dictatorship follows most of the norms respecting the agrarian policies of the interwar "fascisms": ruralism, self-sufficiency as an essential goal, state interventionism, a technocratic approach to the agrarian sector, paternalistic cor-

poratism, militarism, as well as the prevalence of an agrarianist discourse (Fernández-Prieto, Pan-Montojo, and Cabo 2014).

In regard to the structure of our paper, its first, introductory section sets out the economic and social background of interwar Greece, highlighting the significance of agriculture for the country's development and the rise of agrarianism as a modernizing agency in the late 1920s. Following, the main part of the essay is two-fold; at first, it delineates the bedrock of Metaxas' peasantist ideology, as well as the basic features of the regime's agrarian discourse. Secondly, based essentially on quantitative evidence, it shows how these ideological features materialized into certain economic policies in the agricultural sector. Since it examines the ideology, the discourse and the policies of the "4th of August" regime, apart from revisiting the already plentiful literature on the nature of Metaxas dictatorship, our paper relies on key primary sources, such as newspapers, journals, the dictator's speeches, as well as state officials' works on agricultural and economic policy.

2 Rural economy and the rise of agrarianism in interwar Greece (1922-1936)

In the early 20th century, Greece was going through major social and economic transformations. The consolidation of national integration after a decade of wars and territorial adjustments (1912-1922) demanded new modes of governance and the expansion of state regulation and planning. Entering the interwar period through the cataclysmic aftermath of the Asia Minor catastrophe in 1922, the country was facing an unprecedented refugee crisis. In these circumstances, dirigisme, already thriving in post-WWI Europe, seemed essential for the state authorities (Liakos 2020).

At the same time, Greece remained a predominantly agricultural country. The drastic measures of the agrarian reform which was finalised after 1922, in the face of the urgency of the refugees' settlement, contributed greatly to the

regulation of the agrarian issue³, which in turn led to the appeasement of social tensions in the Greek countryside (Mavrogordatos 2017; Dertilis 2019). These developments had a significant impact on the country's social stratification; there was neither a "strong landed upper class" nor a rural proletariat that could have turned into a potential revolutionary mass (Zink 2000). Instead, by the early 1930s, the partition and distribution of the erstwhile Ottoman lands had resulted in the creation of an abundant stratum of smallholders. Fully dependent on the land they worked, these agrarian populations undeniably developed a special bond with their natural surroundings (Franghiadis 2007; Kostis 2019). The significance of the agrarian reform was evident to the political elites as early as 1920, when Eleftherios Venizelos himself underlined its conservative essence. The redistribution of land, he claimed, would prevent the danger of "seeing the peasants and the industrial workers of the cities coming together to violate the rule of law, attempting to shake its foundations".⁴

At the same time, the peasants, constituting the majority of the country's population, were well aware of their critical function, claiming that they "held the country's economy in their own hands".⁵ However, the extreme fragmentation of the land distributed by the agrarian reform combined with the underdevelopment of Greek agriculture resulted in the poor income and living conditions of the small landowners. According to their discourse, these people were suffering great injustices; high taxation and inadequate tariff protection were leading large masses of peasants towards starvation, in contrast with the privileges

enjoyed by the "parasitic bourgeois classes". Such grievances blamed the state apparatus for showing "an immoral indifference and contempt for the agrarian productive class" (Συνεταιριστής 1927). In the political arena, though, the minor agrarian parties established mostly by cooperative syndicalists during the 1920s were all short lived, with the exception of the Agrarian Party of Greece (AKE), which achieved notable parliamentary representation until its dissolution at the end of 1932 (Panagiotopoulos 2010).

The feeble and somewhat stagnant process of industrialisation in the early 1920s meant that the Greece's prosperity was to depend on the growth of its agricultural production and the increase of its income.⁶ The shift towards the agrarian economy was also propagated by the emerging technocratic elite of agronomists, who believed that the enhancement of agriculture was necessary from a social point of view as well, as it was the only way "to fight the alarming development of urbanism and its consequence, parasitism". In that context, the attempt of the fascist regime to achieve Italy's grain sufficiency (Battaglia del Grano⁷) was imitated by the Greek officials as well (Ploumidis 2011).

After Venizelos returned to power in 1928, his modernising vision of making Greece "unrecognisable" marked the intensification of state interventionism in the agrarian economy. The Liberal government undertook some ambitious land reclamation projects, focusing particularly on the newly integrated northern region of Macedonia. These public works, promising to yield plentiful arable land, were seen as the most essential tool for the country's economic growth, which rested on the increase of agricultural production. According to the Prime Minister, the effort to support agriculture, which was the "most important source" of the country's wealth, would prevent the peasants from "leaving the fields and moving to the cities, where the parasitic occupations thrived" (Mazower 2009).

3. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the agrarian issue in Greece was related to the unequal distribution of land and the presence of a large number of tenant farmers. It was mostly linked with the region of Thessaly, where the large ownership prevailed. Macedonia and Epirus, the regions annexed to Greece after the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 had also a similar land tenure system but unlike Thessaly, there had not been any social tensions. The land issue was largely settled with the radical agrarian reform of February 1923, emerging as an outcome of the settlement of more than a million refugees in the country, after the defeat in the Asia Minor campaign.

4. This was part of a speech of Venizelos in Patras, several days before the elections of 1920. See: *Ελεύθερος Τύπος*, 26/10/1920, 2.

5. *Συνεργατισμός* 1930, 90; 1931, 534-536; *Δελτίον Γεωργικού Επιμελητηρίου Μεσσηνίας* 1929, 27.

6. In October 1928, the Minister of Agriculture, Ioannis Kanavos, stated in a press interview that the products of the Greek soil "were the basis of our whole economic life". See: *Ελεύθερον Βήμα*, 4/10/1928, 3.

7. On Italy's quest for self-sufficiency in grain, codified in the "Battaglia del Grano" slogan, see: Carillo 2021, 566-597.

The campaign of reinforcing the agricultural sector employed a plethora of educational methods, such as the circulation of journals, newspapers, and booklets, aimed at "the enlightenment of the peasants, the dissemination of knowledge about all the agricultural sectors and the raising of the cultural level of the peasants, so that they can cultivate their fields in a more scientific, efficient and productive way" (*Αγροτική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* 1935, 243). Special branches of agricultural schools were also founded, in order to impart the adoration of the soil to the children. This educational process was totally in accordance with the dominant doctrine of anti-communism, typified by the "Idionymo" legislation (1929), which penalised communist propaganda. The commitment of the youth to their homeland was thought to alienate them from "virulent Bolshevik ideas" (*Αγροτική Ζωή*, 1929, 15). Apparently, the political discourse of the agronomists as well as the state policies headed towards building a conservative class consciousness in the peasantry in order to tackle urbanism, a phenomenon which purportedly led to communist leanings (Ploumidis, *ibid.*, 147).

During the early '30s, the devastating repercussions of the Great Depression inevitably struck the Greek economy. Subsequently, the default of April 1932 brought about the suspension of the land reclamation projects in Northern Greece. As a result of the crisis, Greece turned towards a new economic pattern. The collapse of global trade and the significant fall of the imports quota led to the expansion of the domestic markets and strengthened state interventionism (Franghiadis 2020). Given the grim prospects of the economic crisis, the ideological premises of the agronomists developed into a dire political necessity. Following the moratorium on the Greek debt, the devaluation of the drachma, along with the exhaustion of the exchange reserves foreshadowed the state's inability to import grain and other essential goods. Therefore, extra-ordinary measures of economic protectionism together with a further boost to agricultural production were the greatest objectives in the pursuit of rural self-sufficiency (Kostis 2019; Ploumidis, *ibid.*).

3 Peasantist nationalism and the corporatist aspirations of the Metaxas regime

As mentioned above, romanticist views contrasting urban and rural everyday life, abounded in the interwar agrarian discourse:

*"The extravagant costumes and the varied furniture of intelligent seamstresses and craftsmen... are completely absent from agricultural communities... A luxurious piece of furniture... cannot compare to the blissful feeling of lying down on the grass... The multi-talented, overweight and unhealthy bourgeois... cannot experience the pleasure of the sun-baked, robust and rosy peasant, who lies down on the greenery after a laborious day of ploughing or gardening..."*⁸

Several years later, this kind of rhetoric developed into a fundamental feature of the Metaxas regime's ideological nexus, aptly described as "peasantist nationalism". As the dictator himself noted, the peasants were "the healthiest part of the Greek society in body and soul, and the incomparably more numerous. Therefore, its prosperity reflects on the whole population". The rural world was also regarded as "the first and foremost producer of goods and therefore of our national wealth" (Metaxas 1969a). The moral dimension of the agrarian class was also reflected in its contribution to the safeguarding of the traditional values and the territorial integrity of the country. For that matter, the peasantry was deemed to be the basis of the social pyramid and Metaxas was at the top of it as the "First Peasant" (Ploumidis 2011).

The economic and social priorities of the regime were also arrayed in a romantic discourse that idealised rural life and praised the virtues of those who made a living through such occupations. The land was described as the people's "mother", who nurtured them, producing all the necessary goods. The peasants, its labourers and servants were also pictured as "the eternal source from which the residents of the cities spring" (Metaxas, *ibid.*, 305). In his public speeches, Metaxas pointed out that the primary cause for

8. *Αγροτική Ζωή* 1929, 4.

agriculture's well-being was the peasants themselves. It was only "when they loved the land like their child and feel that the land loves them back" that they "could they fulfil our agrarian ideals". This was the reason why he put in an extra effort to "alleviate the peasantry of their hardships" (ibid., 209-210).

In this regard, it is obvious that nature and human beings formed an organic unity in the regime's discourse. In the first issue of the newspaper of the National Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives, Babis Alivizatos (Deputy Governor of the Agricultural Bank of Greece, General Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, and a close associate of Metaxas in the drawing-up of agrarian policy) claimed that, above any technological and industrial progress, there was an inextricable link between nature and humans: "In agriculture, everything is life, pulse, and motion; from the weakest grass, which, has its own biological cycle, to the peasant, who digs with his knobbly hands deep into the soil in order to unveil its treasures; from the humble farmer, who is still struggling with the plough, to the agronomist who seeks to enlighten the countryside with the force of Science" (*Αγροτικό Μέλλον*, 26/11/1938).

Metaxist journals were also propagating the opposition to urbanism. The following abstract from *Νεολαία* (2/12/1939), the journal of EON (National Youth Organisation) is quite typical of this rhetoric:

"While prosperity was all around us... we ran after illusions. We imitated other countries that favoured industry, while we neglected our fields and hills. For many years nobody was motivated to plant a tree, which is a source of health and an obstacle against floods and natural disasters, a source of wealth and fruitfulness. Our mentality towards our fatherland led us straight to catastrophe. The peasants... left the countryside to work in the cities' factories... Subsequently, unemployment rose, while on the other hand, the land was left uncultivated and unexploited".

As state officials asserted, the urging to youth's agricultural labour "was not just a slogan aimed at the economic exploitation of the land; it was also a spiritual call". According to George Mylonas, the chief of the "Ideological Enlighten-

ment" Department of the Central Administration of EON, Metaxas's orders "provided us, townspeople, with the opportunity to get in touch with Mother Earth and its workers, by assisting them in cultivating their lands and at the same time cultivate our soul and theirs as well". Moreover, agricultural labour helped people to familiarise themselves with "the countryside, the mountains and the plains, the rivers, the forests, the sea, which all have their own history and share a special beauty; thus the love for our homeland can grow inside us" (*Νεολαία*, 7/10/1939).

The ideals of peasantist nationalism were embedded in the amalgam of the "Third Hellenic Civilization", an eclectic ideological mix advocating national regeneration through the adherence to traditional values (see the slogan "Homeland-Religion-Family") against the modern "plights" of individualism and materialism (Sarandis 2012, 47-50; 62-64). Conforming to his organic perception of the state, Metaxas' efforts aimed at ensuring capital-labor cooperation, hence social and political stability, through the institution of collective labor agreements, social insurance and welfare. Moreover, placing science and technology "in the institutional framework of organized scientific regulation", his ultimate goal was to increase national production and achieve Greece's self-sufficiency (Bogiatzis 2012). From that point of view, the dictatorship followed and expanded the path of venizelist modernisation, not only in the field of agriculture, but also in the anti-communist struggle, intensifying the "Idionymo" legislation (Beaton 2020).

In order to earn the support of the peasantry, Metaxas also promoted measures, such as the relief of its debts, part of a wider populist agenda, that is emphatically underlined in the relevant literature (Vatikiotis 2005). According to Mandatory Law 677 (1937) on the settlement of peasants' debts, all the delayed interest payments for private debts, which had arisen before 1 January 1935, were written off, while, at the same time, the main debt would be paid off in 12 annual instalments at an interest rate of 3% (Alivizatos 1938). Furthermore, Metaxas subordinated every kind of collective organization to the regime. As stated in Mandatory Law 1154, published in 28 March 1938, all the agricultural co-operatives were to

be incorporated in the newly-established National Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives of Greece (NCACG). This confederation ought to contribute to the implementation of the policies mapped out by the Ministry of Agriculture. Some of its more crucial tasks were the overall management, organisation, direction, and representation of co-operatives, the co-ordination of their action for the improvement of production conditions, as well as the diffusion of the co-operative idea.

The regime also introduced a new type of collective organisation in the countryside. According to Mandatory Law 1481 (1938), the "Houses of the Farmer" replaced the formerly ailing agricultural chambers and fell under the NCACG in administrative and financial terms. Their main objectives had to do with the study of any agricultural, livestock, or forestry issue, the submission of expert opinions and reports, the advancement of the occupational training of farmers, as well as the improvement of living conditions in the countryside (*Εφημερίς της Κυβερνήσεως*, 26/11/1938, issue 440, 2687-2693). The establishment of the "Houses of the Farmer" was the most important effort of the regime to apply corporatist theories to the rural space. However, the spread of this particular form of collective organisation and of the corporatist ideas in general was extremely limited in Greece, compared to other European countries. The influence of religion and the Orthodox Church as a form of collective entity, as well as the inadequate industrial development of the country are regarded as the main factors impeding the spread of corporatist ideals (Ploumidis 2014).

4 Agricultural transformations: self-sufficiency policies and technical works

Overall, the centrally planned agricultural policy of the regime aimed at "the formation of a strong, mentally balanced, morally and spiritually healthy rural class, and its confinement in the countryside" (Ploumidis 2011). These principles were in fact translated into concrete policies. Inaugurated after the crisis of 1932, the trend towards economic nationalism intensified under the dictatorial regime. As his ultimate goal was to achieve autarchy, Metaxas prioritised the growth

of agricultural production over the industrial sector, which had to be limited to the processing of agricultural goods (Metaxas, *ibid.*). The intensification of land cultivation was also "an urgent and imperative need" (Alivizatos 1938), due to the advanced fragmentation of the agrarian property, the relative scarcity of land fit for cultivation, and the rapid growth of the country's population.

The global economic crisis brought every country face to face with common problems, such as a colossal market crisis, the sharp fall in rural income, and new challenges, such as the adoption of protectionist measures and the support of national production. The Metaxas era (1936-1941) marked, in our view, the first systematic effort to turn such theories into practice. Two critical parameters illustrate the reasons behind the adoption of the discourse of self-sufficiency and the enhancement of the national productive forces by the "4th of August" regime. On the one hand, the pursuit of autarchy was thought to contribute to national regeneration and the country's economic independence. On the other, as the entanglement of Greece in a new European war seemed quite probable, Metaxas sought to prepare in case of the containment of the country's commercial relations and - by extension - the suspension of its imports.

However, the vision of a self-sufficient rural economy was in contrast with the structural deficiencies and the delayed agrarian development of the Greek countryside. In order to confront this situation, the regime employed specialised scientific and technical personnel which could contribute to the regeneration of the countryside. As Metaxas stressed at the end of 1937, the Ministry of Agriculture gave "the maximum attention to the re-organisation of the agronomic sector and makes every effort to employ an adequate number of agronomists not only in the capitals of the prefectures, but also in small municipalities and villages" (Metaxas, 1969a). In Alivizatos' (1938) view, the agronomists' work was rather a "social and national enterprise"; their mission was not confined to giving advice on cultivation and other technical issues; on the contrary, they were the agents of a "superior ethical culture", able to forge a strong bond with the agrarian population, besides contributing to the enhancement of Greek agriculture (*Δελτίου* A.T.E. 1938).

Another aspect of the regime’s agrarian policies concerned the introduction of new kinds of crops and the reduction of the single-crop farming (Metaxas, 1969a). Above all, the eradication of the monoculture, as well as the replacement of fallowing with crop rotation, were registered in the general framework of the production’s improvement process, the greater variety of agricultural products and the expansion of cultivated lands. Given that in regions like Thessaly, 1,000,000 stremmata (100,000 hectares), that is to say, almost 30% of total cultivated areas, remained uncultivated due to fallowing, Metaxas considered imperative the intensive work of the peasants for the maximum exploitation of the land (ibid., 141).

The pursuits of Metaxas regarding the increase of the cultivated areas seemed to have been achieved to some extent. As shown below in Table 1, they increased in 1936 and 1937, but decreased slightly in 1938. This development, however, should be registered in the context of an upward trend displayed throughout the interwar period. According to the same table, the cultivated areas doubled between 1922 and 1938. The urgency of the Asia Minor refugees’ settlement should undoubtedly be related with the expansion of the cultivated lands, as well as with the intensified efforts to carry out the land improvement works, an issue to be analysed later.

Table 1: Cultivated areas in thousand hectares, country total, 1922-1938.

Year	1922	1927	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
Cultivated areas	12,452.6	15,200.8	15,446.3	17,789.3	19,319.1	19,209.7	20,810.9	21,444.9	21,909.5	23,156.0	24,155.0	24,095.5
Index 1922=100	100	122.07	124.04	142.86	155.14	154.26	167.12	172.21	175.94	185.95	193.98	193.50

Source: ELSTAT, *Annual Statistics of Agricultural Production of Greece, 1922-1938*.

On the other hand, the attempt to introduce new crops had some positive results, but less than Metaxas himself desired. Table 2 reveals the relatively small changes which took place during the 1930s regarding the introduction of new crops. Wheat was the dominant crop throughout this period, while the other cereals continued to account for a significant amount of the total cultivated

lands. Following the serious drop in tobacco cultivation after the crisis of the early 1930s and the sharp fall of its exports, 1936 shows a considerable increase which, however, did not continue in the years to come. The areas used for the cultivation of animal feed, cotton and rice increased after the establishment of the dictatorship, but their proportion in the total cultivated lands remained particularly low.

Table 2: Cultivated areas of basic crops in thousand hectares, country total, 1922-1938.

Crop	1922	1927	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
Wheat	4,298.6	4,989.0	5,007.8	5,795.4	6,111.3	6,069.7	6,933.4	7,918.5	8,467.6	8,358.5	8,566.5	8,617.4
Barley	1,489.8	1,883.7	1,446.0	2,172.8	2,240.3	2,169.1	2,243.4	2,130.6	2,062.8	2,066.8	2,119.9	1,954.5
Maize	1,659.8	1,970.5	2,034.9	2,211.3	2,509.3	2,655.9	2,616.3	2,396.5	2,254.3	2,586.6	2,792.1	2,800.5
Oat	692.0	1,031.6	1,023.5	1,371.3	1,404.2	1,341.6	1,381.1	1,359.4	1,321.5	1,354.7	1,454.9	1,369.6
Rice					10.6	12.6	11.5	10.4	12.9	13.1	18.1	37.0
Tobacco	320.0	923.1	1,012.2	966.7	844.6	633.8	775.8	732.6	803.2	1,106.8	953.2	841.3
Cotton	74.9	145.8	202.4	204.0	185.8	202.9	291.4	366.9	446.4	623.7	721.8	685.8
Animal feed	355.7	532.4	627.6	459.3	689.5	865.3	881.5	857.2	948.6	1,144.6	1,209.3	1,329.1
Vineyards	1,224.1	1,144.0	1,371.3	1,467.4	1,605.6	1,656.1	1,702.3	1,695.2	1,798.6	1,824.0	1,970.8	1,852.4
Currant	708.3	641.9	590.1	685.6	692.0	700.1	735.5	736.0	757.6	785.3	778.5	796.9

Source: ELSTAT, *Annual Statistics of Agricultural Production of Greece, 1922-1938*.

Inextricably linked to the process of expanding the cultivated lands was the effort to improve the cultivation methods by introducing new machinery and a more systematic use of chemical fertilizers. The state officials placed particular emphasis on the need to replace the traditional wooden ploughs with modern tools, which would simplify and accelerate the farmer’s work. As seen in Table 3, the 1929-1939 period shows a fall in the numbers of the wooden ploughs employed, as well as a parallel increase in the use of other machines: iron ploughs and harrows, seeding machines, petrol powered ploughs and sprinklers. This trend was certainly observed throughout the 1930s and did not confine to the years of the dictatorship.

Table 3: Agricultural Machinery, country total, 1929, 1939.

Type of machine	1929	1939
Petrol Powered Ploughs	700	1,578
Iron Ploughs	241,548	333,775
Wooden Ploughs	286,534	270,198
Iron harrows	20,321	42,700
Seeding Machines	181	9,500
Lawn Mowers	454	910
Lawn Presses	1,061	3,635
Threshing Machines	606	1,072
Combine harvesters		42
Granaries	1,562	4,800
Winnowing machines	123	5,810
Sprinklers	83,691	145,000
Maize Shelters	75	3,109

Source: Evelpidis 1944, 37.

The progress made since 1936 is better shown in Table 4, which presents the range of the value of imports of agricultural machinery from the late 1920s until the late 1930s. Following a slight decline in 1936, the Metaxas era marked a sharp rise in the imports of agricultural machines, especially ploughs and harvesters. A similar trend may also be detected in the consumption of fertilizers. As Socrates Petmezas notes, despite the fact that the quantity used per hectare was low by the European standards, a systematic utilisation of the chemical fertilizers had been observed since 1920 and especially after the mid-1930s (Petmezas 2012).

Table 4: Imports of Agricultural Machinery (value in GRD), 1913-1938.

Year	Harvesters	Threshing Machines	Ploughs	Other Machines	Total
1913				72,130	72,130
1924	348,200	130,100	121,750	6,424,315	7,024,365
1925	3,009,500	233,350	161,500	10,669,260	14,073,610
1926	5,268,850	2,757,000	2,854,600	11,715,375	22,595,825
1927	7,193,800	7,322,400	6,591,586	12,535,280	33,643,066
1928	11,548,550	18,441,925	4,411,050	21,307,735	55,709,260
1929	8,402,250	7,670,000	8,500,300	17,334,085	41,906,635
1930	4,728,400	7,094,900	11,519,750	13,988,202	37,331,252
1931	1,745,557	2,229,547	7,627,067	11,950,062	23,552,233
1932	280,130	689,620	8,356,847	8,568,937	17,895,534
1933	2,234,000	1,820,519	7,507,645	5,759,867	17,322,031
1934	734,270	7,342,392	11,038,036	14,076,505	33,191,203
1935	2,234,390	19,019,341	31,050,105	18,122,481	70,426,317
1936	3,363,849	16,871,821	30,736,127	14,149,407	65,121,204
1937	4,099,737	22,050,634	53,866,330	22,651,361	102,668,062
1938	6,916,352	15,341,630	78,920,110	34,226,776	135,404,868

Source: ELSTAT, *Statistical Yearbook of Greece*, 1930-1939.

Table 5 reveals the considerable increase in the imports of chemical fertilizers from 1936 onwards. As in the case of agricultural machinery, the period from 1929 to 1932 was characterized by a continuous decrease in the amount of fertilizers' imports. It is worth mentioning that the amount spent in 1929 was just surpassed in 1936. In this instance too, a steady increase in the value of fertilizers' imports is observed during the dictatorship years, reaching its upper interwar limit in 1938.

Table 5: Imports of Chemical Fertilizers (value in GRD), 1913-1938.

Year	Super phosphate	Other fertilizers	Potassium sulphate	Potassium chloride	Total
1913	--	518,375	--	--	518,375
1924	--	--	--	--	--
1925		69,181,603			69,181,603
1926	5,678,848	19,508,400	6,900	4,000	25,198,148
1927	21,048,585	7,465,000	26,480,050	27,500	55,021,135
1928	37,303,750	6,375,250	14,736,600	58,600	58,474,200
1929	28,482,445	4,807,700	26,582,200	250,000	60,122,345
1930	22,360,489	772,100	8,772,120	5,800	31,910,509
1931	8,390,410	54,100	17,135,570	67,950	25,648,030
1932	1,099,985	121,450	9,073,200	643,300	10,937,935
1933	--	23,464,950	16,656,800	47,700	40,169,450
1934	--	39,269,058	14,267,902	605,662	54,142,622
1935	--	40,380,589	14,827,970	3,261,700	58,470,259
1936	--	53,480,179	22,495,000	1,014,000	76,989,179
1937	--	45,688,930	33,164,200	129,600	78,982,730
1938	--	54,117,332	27,936,040	15,920	82,069,292

Source: ELSTAT, *Statistical Yearbook of Greece*, 1930-1939.

Regarding the public works promoted by the "4th of August" regime, the Mandatory Law 358 (1936) ratified the agreement for the financing, design, implementation, administration, and management of hydraulic works throughout the country. Moreover, Mandatory Law 485 (1937) "on the approval of the grants from the Agricultural Bank of Greece (ABG) for the projects in progress" boosted the accomplishment of these infrastructure works (Alivizatos 1939).

The overwhelming majority of these projects concerned the regions of Central Greece, Thessaly and mainly Macedonia (ibid., 622-623). As far as the latter is concerned, the land improvement works were highly significant for many reasons. Firstly, the plains of Macedonia were covered at about 60% by lakes, swamps, marshes and flooding. Thus, these projects would improve the sanitary conditions in the whole region, limiting the infection and death rate of malaria and tuberculosis. Secondly, as noted before, the land reclamation projects were linked to the colonization of the refugees, a high number of which settled in the rural areas of Macedonia. Finally, the borderland status of this region, combined with the large number of Slavic speakers who remained there after its annexation to Greece in 1913, illustrates the paramount impact of these works in the process of the country's national integration.⁹

The first contracts for the hydraulic works in the plains of Thessaloniki, Drama and Serres were signed in the mid-1920s, but the actual works had not yet started until the end of the decade. Consequently, the first arable lands were available only in the early 1930s. The hydraulic projects continued after August 1936, when the dictatorship initiated the maintenance and improvement of the works, the utilization of the revealed lands, as well as the improvement of the mountainous areas, assigned to the Special Fund of Hydraulic Works of Macedonia. According to our sources,

9. During the interwar years, the issue of the Slavic minority's integration into the Greek state was entangled with the nationalist fears of a revisionist Bulgaria coveting the region of Macedonia. This potential threat led to the rejection of the Politis-Kalvov protocol by the Greek Parliament in 1925. According to this protocol, the Slavophones in Greece were to be characterized as "Bulgarians". See: Ploumidis 2011, 247-250; Mavrogdatos 2017, 244-245.

15.000 hectares of land were revealed in the three aforementioned plains, flood protection projects were implemented in 8.000 hectares and irrigation works were carried out in 15.000 hectares from 1937 until 1941. Apart from these projects, aimed at the improvement of the water and soil conditions of the Macedonian plains, particular emphasis was also given to the reforestation of the mountainous areas, the improvement of mountain forests, the implementation of technical works for the fixation of the torrents' slopes, the retention of debris and the prevention of erosion (Settas 1961).

Apart from the legislative measures, the intensification of the technological modernisation of the countryside and the most efficient use of land is also illustrated by the considerable increase in the medium and long-term loans from 1936 to 1939, as seen in Table 6.¹⁰ This amount of money was intended mainly for the carrying out of irrigation, drainage, flood-prevention and drying projects.

Table 6: Total amount of medium and long-term agricultural loans in GRD, 1930-1939.

Year	Total amount of medium and long-term agricultural loans	Year	Total amount of medium and long-term agricultural loans
1930	17,175,863	1935	80,186,489
1931	35,837,944	1936	147,753,782
1932	20,857,944	1937	315,269,929
1933	26,655,762	1938	416,381,163
1934	47,684,230	1939	417,893,000

Sources: Tserpes 1938, 71; Papagaryfallou 1973, 188; ELSTAT, *Statistical Yearbook of Greece*, 1930-1939.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 escalated the regime's appeals for a nationwide struggle to achieve self-sufficiency. In a warlike tone, Metaxas compared the cultivation of the land to military service; both were essential duties of the people. As the war theatre expanded into the Mediterranean during 1940, disrupting trade and food supplies, the Greek economy inescapably fell under emergency conditions. Agricultural production had to increase significantly in order to ensure the sustenance of the country's

10. According to Catherine Bregianni, the increase in the granting of loans during the Metaxas era should be interpreted in the light of the fluctuations of the exchange rates in the 1930s. (Bregianni 2007, 340-341).

population. Every part of the country had to turn into a "rural camp"; every courtyard, every inch of free land had to be cultivated, and all the kinds of crops had to be put into production (Metaxas 1969b).

After 1939, the regime's propaganda concentrated its efforts on endorsing the "battle for national autarky", conducted with "the harrow and the plough" (*Νεολαία*, 23/9/1939). Except for naturalist tales concerning the Greek landscape, which were published systematically in its pages, the journal of EON introduced (as early as 1938) a special section entitled "Rural Life", in order to contribute to the agricultural education of the youth by giving out "valuable practical instructions" concerning fauna and flora, fruit and vegetables, gardening, cultivation methods, and stockbreeding (*ibid.*, 22/10/1938).

Following Italy's attack on Greece on 28 October 1940, Ioannis Metaxas proclaimed an "agrarian call to arms" in parallel with conscription for the Albanian Front. In his words, two battles laid ahead of the people: "the first is the battle in Albania; the second is the cultivation of the fatherland". Concerning the latter, he insisted that "we must rely mostly on our own products and import only a few". Therefore, it was the duty of the civil population to cultivate the land of the conscripts. This effort "should be systematically intensified so that no property would be abandoned". Calling upon their solidarity, he required that "those who are left behind and their families as well must help those who are leaving" (Metaxas, *ibid.*).

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to focus on two points. First, as far as the Metaxas regime's discourse regarding nature is concerned, we can ascertain that it was infused with traditionalist ideals inherent in the conservatism of the dictatorship. Nonetheless, as presented in the introduction, the "reactionary" qualities of the "ideology of the land" are no longer sufficient means of interpretation concerning the fascist attitudes towards the environment. Therefore, the aforementioned policies of the Metaxas regime should be embedded in the broader context of the "intensive environmental management", which was "at the

core of fascist modernist experiments" (Saraiva 2016²).

This brings us to our second point. The pursuit of self-sufficiency, Metaxas' highest aspiration, was essentially linked to economic prosperity and national independence. Examining the regime's policies enacted to this end, we detect not just a mere continuum, but rather a critical and qualitative peak of the interwar tendencies. Except for the early 1930s, the use of machines and fertilizers followed an upward trend throughout the interwar period. The cultivated areas were also growing at a steady rate, while the basic crops remained largely the same; the attempts to introduce new crops had a limited degree of success. Finally, the process of technical modernization of the countryside through the implementation of land reclamation works, which had begun in the mid-1920s, continued after the establishment of the dictatorship. From 1936 to 1940, the contribution of the Agricultural Bank of Greece to these works was particularly decisive, significantly increasing the medium and long-term loans, which were intended for the completion of technical projects and the improvement of the agricultural infrastructure.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, the discourse of peasantist nationalism was thoroughly militarised. The politics of national self-sufficiency aimed at securing the sustenance of the Greek population, but rural autarchy never reached its full potential. Neither did the corporatist vision of Metaxas, as the dictatorial regime inevitably collapsed after the Wehrmacht invaded and occupied Greece in April 1941. On the whole, the Greek quasi-fascist experiment was, in Mogens Pelt's (2014) terms, an "unfinished business", although it undeniably made its mark on the regulation of the human-nature relationship.

To sum up, Metaxas' "authoritarian paternalism" was common to the royal dictatorships of the Balkans. His regime consisted of "a patchwork of elements borrowed from the fascist regimes of Italy and Germany and his own idiosyncratic theories of corporatism" (Gallant 2017). The agrarian and economic policies of the regime regarding the land can be identified as an escalation and climax of their venizelist counterparts during 1928-1932 (Panagiotopoulos 2020). Above all, the convictions of its leader and his associates were

strongly influenced by the authoritarian paradigm in Italy, Germany and especially from Salazar's "New State", but they were channeled accordingly to fit the idiosyncrasy of the Greek economic and societal order, resulting in a "hybrid" political phenomenon (Kallis 2010). In any case, by the time Metaxas passed away in late January 1941, the agrarian transformation of Greece that he envisaged was far from fulfilled.

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