

Kazantzakis's abortive foray into politics in liberated Athens, 1944-46

Peter Bien
Dartmouth College

When Kazantzakis immersed himself in the grit of everyday affairs in Athens in 1944, he was really not abandoning the imaginative life he had led in Aegina during the German occupation; rather, he was acting out the vision that he had created there in his imagination. His “action” during both the occupation years and those immediately following was “imaginative” in so far as in each case it was directed towards an imagined goal in the future. However, there is a significant difference between 1940 to 1944 in his life and 1944 to 1946: his efforts in the first period produced lasting results; his efforts in the second did not.

1940 to 1944 was a period of remarkable literary productivity for him: *Zorba*; *Buddha*; the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and Dante translations; the *Prometheas* trilogy; *Kapodistriasis*; *Konstantinos Palaiologos*. When he emerged from his Olympian isolation in October 1944 and came to Athens, his reputation was at its zenith. Far from being condemned for non-participation in the resistance, he was admired (except of course by extremists of both the right and the left) as a dispassionate philosopher, one who – precisely because he had devoted himself so single-mindedly to the civilized life while civilization all around him was disintegrating – was particularly qualified to play a role in re-establishing civilization now that the Germans had departed. This is the time when he was elected president of the Society of Greek Writers, was proposed for the Academy, nominated for the Nobel Prize, appointed a minister of state, invited to England by the British Council, and accorded the honour of having his play *Kapodistriasis* premiered by the National Theatre on Independence Day, 25 March 1946.

But we are moving ahead of our story. When Kazantzakis left his writing and arrived in Athens in October 1944 immediately after liberation, he entered upon the longest sustained period of practical activity in his career. Along with many others, he believed that this was the moment when a new era of justice, concord, and creativity was about to be established.

His activities may be divided into two compartments: "cultural politics" and "party politics". The former occupied him from the very start of his stay in Athens until the very end, whereas the involvement in party politics occupied him only from May 1945 until January 1946, nine months out of a total of twenty. I shall treat the cultural involvement first, proceeding afterwards to Kazantzakis's activities as the founder of a political party and as a minister of state.

Writers in Greece were in particular distress after so many years when normal outlets had been closed to them. One of the very first acts of the George Papandreou government after liberation was its attempt to secure an income for Kazantzakis. The prime minister's plan was to introduce legislation providing that stipends be paid to members of the Academy, and then to see that his friend became a member. The law was duly passed, and before the end of October 1944 it was announced that Kazantzakis had become an Academician by virtue of an "honorary decree". It is hardly surprising that this extraordinary procedure met with so much opposition that it had to be invalidated. Kazantzakis eventually submitted his candidature for the Academy in the normal manner but without success, as we shall see.

Papandreou's next move was a plan to dispatch Kazantzakis, and also Angelos Sikelianos, to the United States. On 3 November 1944 the press announced that the two authors were being sent to help secure funds in aid of reconstruction. The trip never took place; instead, the *Dekemvriana* took place, and Papandreou's government fell. But, as we shall see, the plan flared up again later. Kazantzakis had formulated detailed plans for a United States Institute of Greek Culture, and hoped to travel to New York to spread the word. "Not just the political and economic situation

but also the intellectual and moral situation is extremely serious in Greece,” he wrote to Börje Knös on 14 November 1946; “this Institute would become the battleground for a few exceptionally pure Greeks – writers, artists, scholars – who might stir up on foreign soil the intellectual flame of Greece today.”¹ It need hardly be added that neither Kazantzakis’s journey nor the proposed institute ever materialized.

All cultural activity was of course halted by the December civil war. Afterwards, Kazantzakis and others tried to take up where they had left off, still believing in the possibility of cultural, political, and economic rebirth. In January 1945, he moved with his partner, Eleni Samiou, to the home of Tea Anemoyanni, which became the site of literary soirées practically every Saturday. There were sometimes as many as sixty individuals who came to “talk about Kazantzakis, or a certain canto in his *Odyssey* or a certain theme in his work, to read extracts from his epic and then comment upon them.”² The atmosphere apparently also became boisterous on many occasions, with everyone shouting at the same time, each advancing with passion his or her own interpretation of a given passage. As for Kazantzakis, “he was silent, for he liked to see and hear how others understood him.”³ His *Odyssey* was not the only work discussed. Professor Yannis Kakridis came on several occasions and recited from the new Kakridis-Kazantzakis translation of the *Iliad*. In addition, young writers brought their poetry and prose to Kazantzakis, and he would listen to them reading their works, “always with the same patience and goodwill” even when the works were of little value. Mrs Kazantzakis tells us that occasionally one of the younger, “modern” poets would get up in disgust and leave during a recitation from the *Odyssey*. “Nikos,” she comments, “respected the repugnance

¹ Eleni N. Kazantzaki, *Le Dissident: biographie de Nikos Kazantzaki* (Paris: Plon 1968), p. 472; cf. Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography based on his letters* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1968), p. 460. (I cite letters from the original Greek or French.)

² K. I. Despotopoulos, *Φιλολογικά* (Athens: Fexis 1964), p. 84.

³ Colette Janiaud-Lust, *Nikos Kazantzaki: sa vie, son œuvre (1893–1957)* (Paris: Maspero 1970), p. 436.

felt by the disciples [of T. S. Eliot] for his epic, which they judged so antimodern. Indeed sometimes it was clear that he enjoyed seeing them jostle him while he opposed them in silence."⁴

It should be clear from all this that Kazantzakis, even for those who felt estranged from his ideas or style, was a great figure, a personality, a kind of impassive god surrounded by incense-burners. Admission to the Academy, this time by the normal procedure of election, was accordingly the first question that he attempted to take up again after the December-January violence. A place fell vacant. Kazantzakis submitted his candidature on 5 March 1945, backed by a bibliography that included five travel books, eight plays (with four more ready to be printed), three philosophical treatises, one epic in verse, two novels in Greek, two novels in French, one literary history, numerous volumes of translations from German, French, English, Spanish, and Italian, one novel for children, countless translations and adaptations of foreign books for children, 174 articles in the Eleftheroudakis Encyclopaedia, and 111 contributions to domestic and foreign periodicals. He was short-listed by the review body for his division and on 18 May was given their highest endorsement. Only two days later, we should note, Kazantzakis announced his entry into politics, and by the end of May had published his political credo, in which he advocated democratic socialism. Two weeks after this, on 15 June, his candidature came before the full body of the Academy. Out of thirty votes cast, he received fifteen. Eighteen votes were required for election; thus he failed by only three votes, and this because the three additional Academicians who had declared themselves for him were unable to participate, one because of illness and two because they were obliged to attend a meeting of the ministerial council at the same hour. I cite these details in order to counteract the repeated assertion that Kazantzakis was always a prophet without honour in his own country. On the contrary, it is clear that even in this period when the hatreds formed in the initial engagements of the

⁴ Eleni N. Kazantzaki, *Νίκος Καζαντζάκης, ο ασυμβίβαστος* (Athens 1977), p. 502; cf. Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, p. 427.

civil war were fresh, and when Kazantzakis had publicly declared himself a socialist, his prestige as a thinker and creative artist was still so high that, but for the unfortunate absence of three supporters, he would have been accorded Greece's highest public honour.

In the spring of 1945, he was appointed by the new prime minister, Admiral Petros Voulgaris, to serve on a four-man committee charged with verifying the German atrocities in Crete. Each of the four men was instructed to pick up a new second-hand suit from UNRRA so that he would not look so shabby, plus some first-aid supplies from the Red Cross. What the committee members saw in their forty days in Crete was horrible, yet paradoxically encouraging because, along with grim accounts of mass executions, entire families and villages being taken hostage and exterminated, there was repeated evidence of Cretan nobility. "I expected to hear weeping and to see hands stretched out begging for help," Kazantzakis wrote afterwards. "And I found unsubdued, unyielding souls, and half-naked, famished bodies that were unbending [...]. Truly, the Cretans love life passionately, but at the same time never fear death [...]. Like all brave souls, the Cretans find deliverance at the extremity of despair [...]. What strength and endurance this is, I reflected. Where do these bodies find so much soul?"⁵ I cite this statement because the chief importance of Kazantzakis's experience in Crete seems to have been an artistic one. His renewed admiration for the peasantry, coupled with experiences during the occupation that enabled this admiration to be truly felt and not just another "big idea", effected a remarkable alteration in his style of writing.

Kazantzakis departed Crete on 6 August 1945. Although evidence for his cultural activities from August through November is lacking, the plan to send him to America with Sikelianos must still have been alive because on 11 November 1945 an extraordinary thing happened: Kazantzakis got married! Mrs Kazantzakis has explained that although she and Kazantzakis had lived together for

⁵ Nikos Kazantzakis, "Η Κρήτη", *Νέα Εστία* 66 (Christmas 1959) 39.

eighteen years without the need of any ceremony, it was now decided to legitimize the relationship so that she could accompany him to the United States without undue complications. Two weeks later the government of Themistocles Sofoulis was established and Kazantzakis was sworn in (on 26 November) as minister without portfolio. At the back of Sofoulis's mind was the desire "to send Nikos to the United States, Mexico, and England to plead the cause of reconstruction".⁶ This plan for a mission abroad was duly announced by the press on the next day in its coverage of Kazantzakis's appointment. Within hours he was in the thick of things, for only a day or so later he was writing to Eleni Samiou (now Mrs Kazantzakis): "Impossible to describe how tired I get and how much I suffer. Everyone is pouncing on me to get a position."⁷ He seems to have assumed various duties, but the chief one was still to prepare for the mission abroad, which meant choosing colleagues. Although everyone was after him to get a position, at the same time he was collecting "material for America – essays, articles, photographs, films of the famine, etc. [...] Thousands of high society types are asking to go [he continued in his letter] [...]. Many people want to become Academicians [...]. They want medals, awards, positions, missions, and they rush about burdening me with their hopes and desires [...]. It's a heavy thing to have to live with human beings [...]."⁸

The mission to America never materialized. However, Kazantzakis continued to be a factor in Greece's cultural politics, even if unwittingly, because of the furore aroused over his play *Kapodistriasis*, premiered on 25 March 1946, and withdrawn a month later owing to vitriolic condemnation by the right-wing press, not to mention the threat by a certain general who showed up at various ministries promising to rally the Maniots to burn down the National Theatre because the play touched his family esteem! Kazantzakis weathered this, remaining in Athens even after the

⁶ Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, p. 432.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

⁸ Eleni Kazantzaki, *Ασσυμβιβαστος*, p. 509; cf. Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, pp. 433-4.

elections of 31 March gave power to the royalists, apparently still hoping to play some active role in his nation's cultural revival. We learn from Professor Peter Topping's (unpublished) diary that Kazantzakis and Emmanuel Hourmouziou were trying to bring into existence "a new organization to give impulse to the arts, with theatre being the basic thing but no discipline to be ignored". They hoped to see a corresponding organization established in the United States. Professor Topping, who, together with Kazantzakis, the theatrical director Karolos Koun, and others, attended organizational meetings on 11 and 13 April 1946, fortunately recorded some of the details:

Kazantzakis explained the men involved must be good, optimistic – no one with misgivings or doubts should be part of the nucleus either in Greece or abroad. Money needed – a substantial amount. Faith and brains not enough. "Το χρήμα γίνεται πνεύμα" [money turns into spirit]. The men of the nucleus must have both φλόγα and μυαλά, [ardour and brains], a rare combination. There are plenty of people (Kaz. went on) with brains in Greece, good writers and artists [...]. Greece is small, unimportant politically and economically. Her only contribution can be intellectual and spiritual [...]. (A little breathtaking to hear the group talking about a renaissance of the arts and the spirit.) Half a dozen outstanding men working together, Kaz. and Hourmouziou agree, can create a renaissance [...].

Peter Topping's diary speaks for itself. It makes us realize more intensely than ever the full tragedy for Greece of that sharp political division between left and right that forced people like Kazantzakis to live abroad, and made them "traitors" in the eyes of the ill-informed.

But we still have not reached that point. Although the royalists were now in office and were preparing the way for the king's return, Kazantzakis still enjoyed not only prestige but also official recognition, albeit from quarters other than the Greek government. The British Council arranged for him to visit England as a cultural V.I.P. The invitation came at the end of April, shortly after Kazantzakis had returned with relief to Aegina. He left in June

1946 – for good. Meanwhile, however, the esteem accorded him did not wane; despite his residence in Aegina he continued to play a public role in Greek cultural life. President now of the Society of Greek Writers, in this capacity he presided at the official celebration to honour the French surrealist poet, communist, and hero of the resistance, Paul Eluard. This celebration took place on 26 May 1946 in the Attiko Theatre before a huge audience. Kazantzakis's speech of welcome is of interest to us because it treats the relation between art and politics. Here is some of the text:

[...] In our age, the poet no longer suffices [...].

Poets step out in front and sow words. But today these words must be filled with explosive matter. Anaemic intellectuals are afraid; they think that freedom can come one lovely morning like the springtime, without violence [...].

[...] the poet who remains above the fray is performing a disgraceful act.⁹

Should we accuse Kazantzakis of hypocrisy? He had just completed what he felt was a successful political intervention as a democratic (i.e. non-violent) socialist. There is no doubt where the Greek democratic socialists stood regarding the question of means. Yet in the speech welcoming Eluard, we find him scorning “anaemic intellectuals” for their belief that freedom can be achieved without violence. Whether this is hypocrisy or simply the pull of rhetoric one must decide for oneself. I will try to defend Kazantzakis against this charge because there is evidence that when he was not shunted off-centre by enthusiasm, the glamour of the podium, or personal discouragement, he avoided extreme views. For example, in a letter written in October 1947, while he was in Paris, he states, “Here the two camps are organizing themselves, extreme right and extreme left. The middle road, the correct one, has been lost.”¹⁰ All his life Kazantzakis resisted a narrow concept of political commitment, while he maintained at

⁹ *Nέα Εστία* 39 (15 April 1945) 493.

¹⁰ Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, p. 472.

the same time that art must not be autonomous. Occasional statements such as in the Eluard introduction are not the best reflection of this complicated position; the novels are.

I began this discussion of the Eluard introduction as a way of showing the esteem accorded to Kazantzakis (although not by the far right, of course) even after the elections of 31 March, and the role that he continued to play in Athenian cultural life despite his return to Aegina. The next cultural event in his life – and the final one before his departure for England – was his candidacy for the Nobel Prize.

On 30 April 1946, the governing board of the Society of Greek Writers had decided to nominate Angelos Sikelianos for this honour. Kazantzakis, the society's president, had applauded this decision. After this, however, various people close to Kazantzakis lodged complaints, saying that the candidacy should be a joint one. Kazantzakis, obviously placed in an embarrassing position, and not wishing to diminish Sikelianos's chances, examined the problem carefully. According to Mrs Kazantzakis:

[...] Nikos and his friends had studied the statutes of the Nobel Prize; they saw [...] that sometimes it was divided in two [...]. Each nation submitted 4-5 names [...].

[...] he went to ask Sikelianos himself if he agreed that they should seek the prize together. Angelos was very pleased: "I shall set my crown upon your head and you shall set your crown upon my head."¹¹

As a result, the governing board at its meeting of 27 May resolved after heated debate to submit Kazantzakis's name as well. It is hardly surprising that this caused a great amount of controversy. We already know that a campaign of vilification by rightist newspapers had been launched against Kazantzakis owing to the National Theatre's mounting of *Kapodistrias*. In addition to the expected vilification from the right came a campaign by certain of

¹¹ Eleni Kazantzaki, *Αστυβιβαστος*, pp. 516–517; cf. Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, p. 438.

Sikelianos's friends, who accused Kazantzakis of undermining Sikelianos's chances in order to promote his own. This propaganda apparently influenced Sikelianos himself to turn against Kazantzakis and to try to dissolve the joint candidacy. There is no doubt that Kazantzakis wanted the Nobel Prize desperately, not only for Greece's honour but for his own, and it is clear that he left no stone unturned in his attempt to contact important personalities who might be influential in his behalf. But there is no doubt, as well, that Kazantzakis sincerely desired to share the prize with Sikelianos. In the event, of course, neither was successful, nor was Greece honoured in this way until the award went to George Seferis in 1963.

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Kazantzakis's involvement in cultural politics lasted, as we have seen, from the moment he arrived in Athens until the moment he left that city. The plunge into *party* politics, something we must now consider, was not in his plans when he departed for Athens immediately after liberation; it was forced upon him by the turn of events, and grew directly out of the literary soirées held each Saturday at Tea Anemoyanni's home. The total duration of this plunge, less than a year, was long enough to teach Kazantzakis that he should never involve himself in such a way again.

The basic cause was the right wing's labelling of EAM (the National Liberation Front) as communist. This led certain moderate socialists who had formerly cooperated with EAM to form a new party that advocated a socialist economy as the solution to Greece's problems, but determined to reach that solution through parliamentary means, not through violence. Led by Professor Alexandros Svolos, this group was small, powerless, and weakened by its own factionalism. Kazantzakis's hope was to make democratic socialism a viable third force by overcoming this factionalism thanks to a pan-socialist congress.

The original idea and many of the original members of the new movement came, as I have said, from Tea Anemoyanni's

literary soirées. In early May 1945, the decision was taken at one of these meetings to found a new socialist party and to work for such a congress. After several additional gatherings at Anemoyianni's home, more than one hundred members of various socialist parties, coming from all areas of Greece and representing all classes of society, met on 20 May in order to select a central committee charged with making the proposed congress a reality. Kazantzakis was elected chairman of this committee. On the same day, he drafted a statement meant to allay fears that the newly formed group was unpatriotic:

From its very nature, the socialist ideology is universal and the aims of a Socialist Party embrace the full human family, independent of racial, religious, and ethnic differences. However, this does not mean that the Socialist Party sacrifices national rights on the pretext of socialism's international aims.¹²

His next move was to make the necessary announcements in the press, proclaiming the aims of the new party together with his own political credo. This he accomplished by means of a front-page interview on 29 and 30 May in the right-wing newspaper *Akropolis*. The interview occasioned an ominous leading article signed "M" under the headline "A hermit", which begins by hailing Kazantzakis as a "great philosopher" whose international reputation is assured. All these years, "M" continues, Kazantzakis has renounced the world, preferring to live on Aegina in his own little world of books. Why is he suddenly giving all this up? The answers, he says, can be found in today's interview – whereupon "M" proceeds to attack Kazantzakis's statement as just empty words that ignore the country's real problems. In conclusion, he predicts that the hermit will soon find politics very discouraging and dirty, will fail in his objectives, and become embittered. "One day the poet will discover how unpleasant politics are, how evil human beings are, and he will leave once again for his island."

¹² Nikos D. Poulipoulos, "Η πολιτική φυσιογνωμία του Νίκου Καζαντζάκη", *Καινούρια Εποχή* (Autumn 1958) 285.

We should remember this prediction when we find Kazantzakis back in Aegina eleven months later, sighing “How did I ever bring myself to leave, and why?”

In the interview, Kazantzakis analyses Greece’s problems, outlines a solution, and concludes with his own responsibilities as an intellectual. He begins with a clear declaration:

Only socialism as the goal and democracy as the means will be able to provide a satisfactory and equitable solution to the terrible, frightfully urgent problems of the age in which we are living.

He then challenges the various socialist factions to surpass their bickering and to unite. To achieve this purpose, he calls for a socialist congress. At the end he speaks about his own role:

I felt that an intellectual person, one who never involved himself in politics, has the right – and not only the right, but the obligation – to speak his mind like everyone else in a time of crisis, to intervene just as others do, and to assume responsibilities [...]. If I hadn’t done this, I would have been a deserter.¹³

Kazantzakis launched his intervention at a particularly dramatic moment, for 30 May 1945 was also the day when Nikos Zachariades, the leader of the Greek communist party, returned to Athens after having been found in Dachau by Allied troops. The very next day, *Rizospastis*, the communist newspaper, printed Zachariades’s call for the establishment of a People’s Democracy in Greece, convincing many Greeks that the only choice was between communism and monarchy. This was the atmosphere in which Kazantzakis’s group began to function. Its first bulletin was dated 15 June. It contained the party’s platform, expanded by Kazantzakis from previous statements and signed by 852 supporters. It also contained the following words of appreciation for

¹³ Thanasis Papathanasopoulos, *Γύρω στον Καζαντζάκη* (Athens 1985), p. 68.

Kazantzakis's involvement:

The "Bulletin" believes that it is expressing the pleasure of the pioneering forces of the Greek people in hailing the recruitment of the great European thinker Nikos Kazantzakis to the militant camp of Socialism and Democracy. His decision to enter the arena of ideological struggle at this critical time when the nation is fighting to find its salvation, and to join his forces with socialistic forces [...] shows his great ethical stature and his sincere intellectual intention. He did not weigh the practical personal benefits in order to decide. He did not calculate which party was the most certain to be insured against the danger of failure. He was not an opportunist or self-seeking schemer like most of the Greek thinkers who involved themselves in politics in the past. He simply listened to the voice of his heart and, disregarding the danger, threw himself completely into the great obligation. Socialism and Democracy are gaining a Great Comrade at this moment and Nikos Kazantzakis is gaining the admiration and love of the pioneering forces of the Greek people.¹⁴

Shortly afterwards, the committee established an actual political party called the Σοσιαλιστική Εργατική Ένωση (S.E.E.; Socialist Workers' Union). In due course the party published a manifesto written not by Kazantzakis, as was commonly supposed, but by its secretary-general, Angelos Prokopiou. The main long-term goal remained the convocation of the pan-socialist congress as a means of uniting all socialist factions. Kazantzakis had left Athens at the end of June, we remember, in order to verify the atrocities committed by the Germans in Crete. By 7 August he was back in the capital; a week later the cadres of the new party met in caucus in order to map out their future actions. The first item on the agenda was an address by Kazantzakis in his capacity as president of the S.E.E. In this, he attempted to summarize where the party stood – that is, its accomplishments to date, and the next steps needed:

¹⁴ Poulipoulos, "Η πολιτική φυσιογνωμία", p. 286.

Dear comrades and friends,

Our meeting tonight is crucial; this meeting of ours can and must constitute a creative milestone, not just for the initiative that we have undertaken, to unite the socialist forces of our land, but also for Greece's entire political life.

Remember that at the start, and even just a few months ago, we were few and weak. We applied to exalted personalities [...]. All of these personalities hesitated, lost their nerve, and in the end refused. They did not know if our efforts were destined to succeed, and they did not accept to endanger their moral capital by placing it in an uncertain enterprise. We applied to organized socialistic groups. Some refused openly and objected, others held their accession in reserve, waiting – they, too – to see first if our energies would be fruitful.

The fruit came more quickly than even we ourselves had expected. People from every social class, unorganized socialists, souls saddened by our troubled, anarchic homeland, joined our side without reservation [...]. That which the purest and most enlightened Greeks had craved for years, they found suddenly now in the extremely clear and simple slogan that we were giving: "Socialists of Greece entire, unite!" [...]

What we sought a few months ago with such opposition, such pain, and such ardour, is being realized in these days [...].

This success is owing to two fundamental factors:

1) Our purity. We did not set out to form a political party; we did not condescend to work in order to gratify personal ambitions. In epochs that are immoral and out of joint, as is this age when the capitalistic world is disintegrating, there is no weapon stronger and more effectual than purity, and that is what we have.

2) We succeeded, in addition, because our effort was a widespread, objective need. We did nothing but formulate with clear, practical words what the most enlightened [...] socialists in Greece desired: to unite [...].

The first step is finished. Tonight we are calling on you, all together, united, to effectuate the second step. This day can and must become historic. It depends upon us. From the decisions that we will make tonight, a new situation may be created, the beginning of a new, superior political life in our land [...].

We are living in a great, critical time; let us appear worthy of it.¹⁵

The important thing to realize is that Kazantzakis and others of the moderate left were still hopeful, indeed enthusiastic. If we smile condescendingly (and from hindsight) at their naïveté, we must on the other hand admire their resilience.

The Voulgaris government fell on 9 October, inaugurating a period of chaos. It was in the midst of this that Kazantzakis, still hoping to be sent to the United States, finally married Eleni Samiou. On 13 November, two days after the wedding, the British envoy Hector McNeil began effecting the “bloodless coup” that led to Sofoulis’s coalition government, a turn in events that initiated the next stage in Kazantzakis’s political involvement. Sofoulis wished to bring about an atmosphere wherein free elections could take place. His attempt to rehabilitate EAM was meant to be a step in this direction; so was his invitation to the democratic socialists to join his government. Kazantzakis, as president of S.E.E., was invited into the government as minister without portfolio. This was not without opposition. Professor Svolos stood against his decision to accept, and eventually put pressure on him to resign. Pressure was also apparently applied to prevent Kazantzakis from being given the ministry of education, as had been announced in the evening papers the day the government was to be formed. In any case, he was sworn in as minister without portfolio on 26 November and began work immediately.

It is hard to know exactly what Kazantzakis’s assignment was supposed to be. The newspapers of 27 November note that he was slated for a mission outside of Greece. We know that this trip abroad did not materialize, although Kazantzakis had at first occupied himself in preparing for it. Beyond this, we have his own testimony, already cited, of how he was pounced upon by self-seekers desiring awards, medals, positions. We possess as well the testimony of one of Kazantzakis’s fellow ministers that he worked

¹⁵ Pandelis Prevelakis, *Τετρακόσια γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη στον Πρεβελάκη* (Athens: Galaxias 1965), pp. 523-6.

“with ardent zeal on the ministerial council, which [...] was attempting with unimaginable labour to rebuild the ruined State”.¹⁶ As the weeks went by, however, Kazantzakis’s precise role in the government must have become more anomalous, for we hear that by the time he was called upon to resign he had become thoroughly discouraged with a position that did not permit him to accomplish anything, since Sofoulis had not assigned him any area of jurisdiction.

We must remember that Kazantzakis’s tenure as minister was exceedingly short – only forty-six days. It seems clear that, once the proposed journey abroad was cancelled, his prime task was to use his governmental position to help bring about the pan-socialist congress. This was duly convened in the first week of January 1946.

At the congress, the greater proportion of socialists in Greece did unite into a single coalition, which of course brought about the dissolution of S.E.E. The question that remained was: What should be done with Kazantzakis? Professor Svolos had been elected president by the congress; his followers were the dominant group. Accordingly, the congress proposed to Kazantzakis that he resign. This proposal he accepted readily. Svolos then suggested that Kazantzakis be elected to the new central committee “by acclamation” (as opposed to the secret balloting required for other members). This was done, and Kazantzakis therefore found himself not only without a party but also without any real position except one that needs to be termed “honorary”. The official announcement of his resignation as minister came in due course, on 11 January. It was promulgated to the public the following day by the newspaper *Makhi* in a long article under huge headlines and complete with a photo of Kazantzakis holding his pipe and looking extremely gaunt behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. In his letter of resignation to Sofoulis, he stated that he had intervened initially in politics for one and only one reason: to help

¹⁶ Yeorgios Athanasiadis-Novas, “Νίκος Καζαντζάκης: Η πολιτική και ο πνευματικός άνθρωπος — Η Ακαδημία”, *Νέα Εστία* 66 (Christmas 1959) 61.

unite the various socialist parties, because “I had and have the unshakeable conviction that the historic moment for the socialist idea has arrived [...]”¹⁷ This purpose having been achieved, he now wished at long last to release himself from party ranks; furthermore, lest it be thought that he was taking personal advantage of his former activity, he wished as well to leave the ministry and to return to his true climate: solitude.

With this, Kazantzakis’s party activism (as opposed to cultural activism) came to an end, for although he was now on the central committee of the new coalition, he did not take part in its deliberations and eventually requested to be “excused”.

Kazantzakis’s willing and hasty resignation after only forty-six days as minister has been interpreted (as one might have expected) in conflicting ways. A colleague took Kazantzakis’s own statement at face value and commented enthusiastically:

Which of the political figures of present-day Greece [1958] would remain so faithful and consistent to the line he had declared, and would give up his ministerial post without the slightest objection?

Kazantzakis’s attitude should constitute a model of political behaviour and an exemplary basis for the rebirth of our political life, which has entered a period of complete moral decadence.¹⁸

This is fine so far as it goes. But it is clear that Kazantzakis did not resign solely because he wished to remain faithful and consistent to the line he had declared. Kazantzakis’s most persistent detractors insist that he resigned because here, as elsewhere in his career, he refused to occupy a subordinate position: if he could not be president or director he would always withdraw completely. Nikiforos Vrettakos, who is generally sympathetic to Kazantzakis and whose criticisms therefore carry more weight, sees in the entire episode one more example of Kazantzakis’s self-deceiving

¹⁷ Photo and French translation in Georges Stassinakis (ed.), *Le Regard crétois*, no. 26 (Décembre 2002) 2-3.

¹⁸ Pouliopoulos, “Η πολιτική φυσιογνωμία”, p. 283.

ability to view himself as a social reformer, and his tendency to withdraw at the first setback, after he could no longer fool himself about the unimportant, infinitesimal position held by the socialists, even following their unification.

There is presumably some truth in all of these assertions; chiefly, however, it would seem to me that Kazantzakis resigned (a) out of a sense of relief because he had accomplished a limited objective, joined paradoxically to (b) a simultaneous sense of frustration and wearied disgust because he knew that his long-range goals – the goals conceived by the imagination – were completely out of reach. The relief, at any rate, is indisputable. I. M. Panayiotopoulos remembers meeting Kazantzakis opposite the National Gardens on 11 January:

He was walking with rapid steps, like a child. I hadn't seen him so cheerful for a long time. "I have just this minute handed in my resignation," he told me, "and I feel terribly free. It's as though I'd had a lengthy illness and were now beginning my recovery."¹⁹

His experience in party politics – eight months in all – was a kind of Karaghiozis drama in which the visionary hermit of Aegina projected his shadow onto the screen of public life – or, if one wishes a more Western analogy, tilted against windmills. The truth, of course, was that Kazantzakis's party was powerless, that the socialists as a whole were powerless as well, and that the country was moving inexorably towards renewed civil war. For years Kazantzakis had craved one more chance to "stretch blue-eyed Idea down / on earth like a chaste bride and fill her full of seed" (*Odyssey* XIV.1378-9) – to build his City just as his Odysseas had done, even though he knew all too well what the end would necessarily be. Now, chastened not only by his experiences in politics but also by the fate of *Kapodistrias* on the stage, he returned to boundless solitude, his true climate, bringing

¹⁹ I. M. Panayiotopoulos, "Ο ένας Καζαντζάκης, ο ταξιδιώτης", *Καινοδρία Εποχή* (Autumn 1958) 142.

another cycle of his life to a close and fulfilling the rather malicious yet perceptive prediction made by “M” when Kazantzakis had first published his political credo eleven months earlier: “One day the poet will discover how unpleasant politics are, how evil human beings are, and he will leave once again for his island.” Thus the following letter to Prevelakis from Aegina:

Paradise, April 28, 1946

Dear Brother,

[...] Paradise here. How did I ever bring myself to leave, and why? As soon as I arrived, I began to work: *Constantine Palaiologos* [...]

Sunshine, the sea, solitude [...].²⁰

²⁰ Prevelakis, *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*, p. 527.