

RESPECT FOR GREECE e.V.

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German War Guilt and Obligations Regarding Greece

Position paper / March 2019

We are a group of citizens who have become engaged in the movement to aid refugees in Greece. We work there on climate protection projects and on supporting self-help groups. Through working with our Greek colleagues we have come to see that, entrenched beneath a superficial facade, the crimes committed by Germans in the Second World War, are deeply rooted in the collective memory of the people. At the same time we need to recognize how shamefully poor has been Germany's readiness to assist Greece in rebuilding the land it destroyed, or to compensate those who suffered from its destruction.

For an amazingly long time Greece was viewed by most Germans simply as a holiday destination. The conflict between Germany and Greece over the debt crisis has had the side-effect of bringing both countries closer. But this new awareness about Greece also brings to the consciousness of those born after the events the long repressed terror of the occupation. And so there grows the insight that compensation for this is essential.¹

The crimes against humanity committed by Germany are not dimmed or diminished by the passage of time. Rather, as a result of increased knowledge, they appear even more egregious. That is how Greece now regards them. Therefore the obligations arising from war guilt are in no way settled, and with a sharpened perspective, in future they will still not be resolved.

Quite independently of this firmly based legal claims rest today on matters of political and moral liability, whether or not the disputed reparation questions will be negotiated once again in Greece and brought to a conclusion. Also, notwithstanding any possible reparations agreement or any precedent, they cannot simply be rejected.

Over the years the Federal Republic of Germany has always arranged with individual countries, indirect or extra legal, reparation contributions that were below the level of their legal entitlements, and for certain persecuted groups, funds or donations that were justified on humanitarian or moral grounds. None of this has been adequate. Nevertheless, this is where we start.

We make three demands on Parliament and Government of the Federal Republic of Germany that we hold to be necessary for urgent and contemporary fulfilment:

- 1. Repayment of the forced loans paid by Greece to the German Reich.**
- 2. Repayment of the ransoms paid for Jewish forced labourers in Thessaloniki.**
- 3. The establishment of a fund for the long-term development of the rural areas under special consideration of "Martyr Villages."**

¹ The most important historical dates to note concerning reparation /compensation questions are: **1953**, at the London War Guilt Conference, clarification of the demands of all countries with eligible claims at the time of adjournment of a peace treaty. **1960**, on the basis of a bi-lateral agreement Greece received 115 million DM as "voluntary payments" for victims of Nazi persecution (at approximately 100,000 permitted applications, amounting to an average of 1,187 DM per person, s Roth/Rubner, 2017, S. 131). **1990**, In the course of the reunification, the *de facto* concluded peace treaty – referred to as the "2+4 Treaty" – with the intention of avoiding payments of reparations and further compensation. Neither there nor in the related Charter of Paris was the subject addressed. Since then the Federal Government has repeated "The reparations question has been dealt with and anyway it has lapsed under the statute of limitations." Objections from Greece remained ignored and a complex picture of the legal position is conveyed involving; German Federal Parliament, Scientific services, Resolving Issues of war-related reparations on the basis of principles of international law under particular conditions of Greek-German relations, 26th June. 2013/WD 2-3000 -041/13

Repayments

Forced loans paid by Greece to the “German Reich”

The present government of Greece has renewed an old demand on Germany. It demands the repayment of loans that were extorted from Greece by the occupation forces. At the Paris Reparations Conference in 1945 – 1946 the Greek government had already taken it up as a “special case”, just as it was treated at all later negotiations about reparations and the burdens of war. Meanwhile, it is amply proven that this cannot be regarded as a cost of occupation but must be treated as an interest free loan. Reparations were contractually agreed. It is evident that the loans were already partly erased during the war. The remaining unpaid sums were described in the official German documents as “Reich Debts”. At the end of the war the remaining debt amounted to 476 million Reich Marks - at today’s value, without interest 7 billion Euros; with interest 11 billion Euros.

In local society, science and politics as well as in the media, more and more voices are raised demanding repayment on principle.² In order to reach a clarification, Germany should offer the Greek government to call jointly with them on the “Settlement and Arbitration High Court at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe” (OSZE). A jurisdiction should be made. Such a step would signal a readiness to discuss the issue, for which Greece has been waiting for decades.

Ransom for Jewish forced Labour in Thessalonika

On the 11th July 1942, which was a Sabbath, all Jewish men between the ages of 18 – 45 were required to report for registration at the “Platz der Freiheit”. They were brutalised and humiliated. That was the first act of public persecution of Jews in Thessaloniki. After this many thousands of Jewish men were forced to build military roads. In the work camps the most wretched and brutal conditions prevailed. There were epidemics and shootings.

In an effort to rescue their sons and men folk, the Jewish Community attempted to come to an agreement with the chief of the Wehrmacht administration, Max Merten: Buying the freedom of the forced labourers for a ransom of 3.5 billion drachmas (then 38 million Reich marks or 69 million US dollars). The Community, however, in the short period of two months could only raise 2 million drachmas. Unavoidably they were compelled to consent that due to the failed attempt to raise the ransom, the old Jewish cemetery would be destroyed and used as building land for the city of Thessaloniki. With marble-plated and other gravestones, a swimming pool was built for German officers. By the middle of December 1942, the instalments of the ransom were paid. 7,500 forced labourers were freed. A few months later however, they were transported together with 46, 000 other Jews from Thessaloniki, to their deaths in Auschwitz. The Jewish Community demanded that the money be returned. At today’s value it would amount to 45 million Euros. “Respect for Greece” supports this demand on the following grounds: it is already a crime to abuse human beings as forced labourers. To force a ransom payment from them, to release them and then shortly afterwards to murder them, is so terrible that all who have heard about this horrifying deed can never forget it.

² Thus, a repayment obligation was already recognized in the past. Federal Chancellor Ludwig Erhard “as early as 1965 assured the then Greek coordination minister Andreas Papandreou that (...) as soon as German unification was signed and sealed, the compulsory loans would be repaid. The Greeks said they were satisfied with the promise.” (Frankfurter Rundschau. 22.11.1995.)

Fund for the sustainable development of the rural areas under special consideration of “Martyr Villages”

During the occupation of Greece the German Wehrmacht and Waffen SS destroyed, totally or in part, more than 1000 villages and killed many thousands of civilians. The German commanding officer sought in this way to crush the resistance of the partisans to the occupation. In all respects it failed. On the orders of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht, for an attack upon a German soldier or for his murder, 50 – 100 hostages were to be shot. Over and above this the German troops were also authorised to kill women and children. Finally, the mere suspicion that villages had assisted partisans was enough to order them to be burned down and the villagers to be murdered.

The rebuilding of villages and towns was never supported by the German Federal Government although in the 1950s very many mayors asked for it. But otherwise, Greece received from Germany no support whatsoever with reconstruction.³ In the earlier post-war times and long afterwards the Federal Government placed the occupation-terror under the category “general consequences of war.” As late as 1995 the German embassy in Athens, in a letter to Argyris Stountouris described the massacre in Distomo “as measures in the course of warfare”.⁴ Meanwhile, not only Greeks, but more and more Germans regard such things as crimes against humanity. But also, the views of German politicians have changed. It is remarkable that the German ambassador in Athens, Jens Ploettner, in a speech on the 28th May 2018, from the start distanced himself from his predecessor: “Some official correspondence of the last decades – including correspondence of the German Embassy – contains an unbearable attitude. I am ashamed about this, and therefore, Herr Stountouris, I wish to apologize to you.” Since the crimes committed in Greece have become increasingly widely known, identified and remembered in German society and political life, the time is now ripe, without delay, and independently of the reparations question, for deeds to follow words.

An offer can be made to Greece of a development fund for the rural areas. It is of prime importance that the villages and small towns that suffered worst under the terror of German occupation should be considered before all others. Since 1998 such places in Greece have officially been referred to as “Martyr Villages”. Since the historical facts have been clearly established by a commission, they were included, according to strict criteria, in the list of “Martyr Villages and Towns of Greece”. The list comprises around 100. After 75 years we can now see, in this contribution to their sustainable development, the best response possible to the German massacre. The fund will be usable in all municipal areas –e.g.: in agriculture; in tourism; in trade – production; for renewable energy; in Kindergartens, schools and professional training; in social and medical services for older people. As the Martyr villages generally belong to an alliance of communities they will benefit whether the fund came directly or indirectly or whether neighbouring towns also receive assistance.

Differently from the German-Greek Fund for the Future that has existed since 2015 and which will be replenished annually with 1 million Euros, the fund proposed here is not directed explicitly at commemorative work or reconciliation. Its assistance through cooperative work in science, culture and education, is undoubtedly valuable, but is not sufficient.⁵ The development fund should be supplemented to improve the material basis for living conditions in the rural areas. And this is unrelated to whether the victims of Nazism and other inhabitants have become reconciled with “the Germans”, or have no wish to become reconciled.

³ Past loans for commercial customs conditions were at times declared by the Federal Government to be “contributions to reparations.” This is a point of view with which we cannot agree.

⁴ As a child in 1944 Argyris Stountouris had survived the massacre in Distomo. Since 1994 he has fought for compensation. There is a biography of him by Patric Seibel (2016) and a documentary film by Stefan Haupt. (2006)

⁵ In the years 2015, 2016 and 2017 only four Martyr Village communities received ca. 370,000 Euros of an available three million Euros – i.e. 12.3%, despite the fact that the proposal is one of the three crucial points of the Future Fund.

From: Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abg. Ulla Jelpke u.a. der Fraktion DIE LINKE, vom 25.07.2018/Drucksache 19/3557

The upper limit of help for each village or small town is set at 600,000 Euros, an average of 300,000. The estimated value of the amount needed for 50 approved villages is 15 million Euros, which during the next 5 years would make necessary a 3 million Euros addition to the Federal Budget.

Development measures directed towards improving the welfare of the communities and contributing to the common good, will encourage the participation of all members of the communities concerned. Decisions on these proposals will be made by a commission as well as independent, predominantly Greek experts and intermediaries from the network of Martyr villages and towns. A Greek non-state organization guaranteeing a transparent procedure will support and be entrusted with the development and execution of the project.

From the existing E.U. programmes the German fund should distinguish itself due to the versatility of its possible uses, and its simple procedural proposals. In addition to this, if it is desired, communities should be helped to attract additional grants and financial supports.

Important literature for the Position Paper

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Erstunterstuetzer

Aus der Politik u.a.

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Aus Kultur und Wissenschaft u.a.

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Aus Vereinigungen u.a.

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Jutta Weuwen, Geschaefsfuererin der Aktion Suehnezeichen Friedendienste e.V.

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