

Germany: Günter Grass criticizes EU's treatment of Greece

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The German author and Nobel Literature prize-holder Günter Grass has published a withering critique of the policy of Germany and the European Union towards Greece. In his latest poem published in the Saturday edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Grass draws parallels with the NATO-backed junta of the colonels and the German occupation of Greece in the Second World War. He also responds to critics of his last poem, which warned of the dangers of an Israeli war against Iran.

Under the title “Europe’s Shame,” the 84-year-old author devotes twelve stanzas, each with two verses, to castigating the European elites for their treatment of Greece. Written in ancient Greek metrics, the poem portrays the manner in which the finance markets and European governments are destroying the country and its rich history. The first verse accuses the EU of bringing the country: “Close to chaos, because the market is not just, you’re far removed from the country which was your cradle.”

In this connection Grass refers to the austerity measures dictated by the EU which have resulted in wage cuts of up to 60 percent, an official youth unemployment rate of over 50 percent, mass starvation, and social despair. The social rights of workers have been systematically destroyed in order to rescue the loans of the international banks and increase corporate profits.

Meanwhile, there is a debate in broad circles of the European political elite about excluding Greece from the euro zone and forcing a return to the drachma. This would lead to hyperinflation and a corresponding devaluation of wages, pensions and social benefits, transforming the country into a low-wage haven for European corporations. The chancellery in Berlin has circulated a six-point plan, which calls for the selling

off of state assets to the highest bidder and establishing special economic zones, where workers are paid rock bottom wages and deprived of all their rights.

Given this development, Grass quite correctly draws parallels in his poem to the occupation of Greece by the German Wehrmacht, which cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Greeks. The German Reich plundered the country economically. It acquired from Italy and Bulgaria the contractual right to exclusively exploit all the zones in Greece it had occupied.

Grass’s reference to the dictatorship of the colonels, who took power in a coup in 1967 in order to prevent a victory of left parties, is also an entirely legitimate analogy. The undemocratic character of the EU austerity program was demonstrated last December when, following pressure from Brussels, the elected government was replaced by an unelected technocratic administration. Now the Greek electorate is being blackmailed by the international banks and institutions and pressured not to vote for parties which oppose the austerity measures. Behind the scenes a military solution to the crisis is being discussed.

Grass’s poem also notes that not all Greeks are equally affected by the austerity measures of the EU. The elite of the country, which he calls the “the Croesus-resembling followers” have long since deposited their money in “safe havens” abroad.

Finally, Grass notes that the Greek population decisively rejected the austerity measures in the last election. Socrates, he writes, returns the cup, full to the brim, which the EU commissioners had sought to force down the throat of the Greek electorate. Socrates drained the deadly hemlock out of respect for the law, but Grass allows the Greeks to return it. In so doing he

alludes to the social consequences of austerity for the whole of Europe.

Throughout the poem Grass seeks to make analogies with Greek history and mythology. He writes that the defiant Antigone wears black while the European elite seek to steal Mount Olympus. He evidently wants to show how in response to the growing aggressiveness of finance capital intellectuals and the educated elite have peremptorily ditched their former humanistic ideals drawn on the great thinkers of ancient Greece. “What was searched and found with one’s soul, is now considered to be as worthless as scrap metal,” he writes, in reference to Goethe’s Iphigenia.

Here Grass hits his target. Only a handful of intellectuals and artists have taken a serious stand against the barbaric measures used to drive the Greek population into poverty and despair. Instead, there is a massive chauvinist campaign launched by the German media against “lazy Greeks” or the “corrupt structures” of the country.

The reactions to Grass’s last poem two months ago had already made clear that sections of the German middle class are turning sharply to the right as German militarism raises its head and class tensions grow across Europe. Grass’s warning that Israel’s war preparations against Iran threatened world peace was almost unanimously condemned in German newspapers. While the editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, accused Grass of anti-Semitism, the presidential candidate of the Left Party, Beate Klarsfeld, went so far as to compare Grass to Hitler.

“Europe’s Shame” is not only an indictment of the barbarous policy of the German government and the EU, but also all those writers, journalists and authors who have lined up with German imperialism and seek to silence its critics. They have lost any right to appeal to humanistic ideals and are nothing less than apologists for a barbaric policy.

The host of defamatory responses to his latest courageous poem only serves to confirm Grass’s thesis. His criticism “misses reality,” declared the chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Bundestag, Gunther Krichbaum (Christian Democratic Union). “On the whole one should not take Günter Grass so seriously,” he added.

The Springer press daily, *Die Welt*, complained that Grass does not write about the surreptitious manner

Greece entered the euro area. “Not a word,” the paper wrote, “about the cheating afterwards to veil the growth of the debt mountain. Not a word about the desolate administration or the nepotism and mismanagement.”

Most papers preferred to ignore the content of the poem and instead concentrated on a tasteless jape by a certain Volker Weidemann, who claimed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* that the poem was in fact scripted by a well known satirical magazine. Its authors had “hastily scribbled down everything they could find in Google about the Greeks, Ancient times and Europe, and then rejigged the grammar slightly, lined up the most absurd genitive constructions and then it was ready.”

Weidemann even took up Grass’s brief membership of the Waffen-SS as a 17-year-old which, he declared, rendered “this gesture by the master of morality [...] due to his long silence, hollow, unbelievable, embarrassing and—at best—ridiculous.”

Weidemann, who has previously written for the Green newspaper *taz*, is a prime example of the layers Grass addresses in his poem. Against a background of acute class conflict and the increasingly barbaric character of bourgeois rule, they line up behind the state apparatus and are ready to silence critics with the most senseless and hollow of attacks.

The aggressiveness with which they fired salvos at Grass’s last poem, also stems from the fact that they are in a minority. In “Europe’s Shame” Grass once again speaks for the majority of the European population. It is commendable that he has refused to be intimidated, and has courageously faced up to his attackers to reveal their utter intellectual bankruptcy.



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