

# German President Gauck visits Greece

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Last week, German President Joachim Gauck travelled to Greece for a three-day state visit. The trip served to strengthen the Greek government in its attacks on the rights and social achievements of working people. The anti-communist former pastor from East Germany exhibited all of the dishonesty and hypocrisy which have become his political trademarks.

He was very concerned at having to hear “what so many Greeks have to put up with in the seventh year of the crisis, and how those suffering most under the crisis did not cause it,” Gauck asserted. In the same breath, he stated that the austerity measures, which were in large part dictated by Germany, were tough but necessary, and that the path pursued thus far had to be maintained.

At the end of his trip, he shed crocodile tears in the village of Lingiades, the scene of one of many war crimes by the German army in Greece in World War II, and asked Greeks for forgiveness while briskly rejecting calls for reparations for the victims.

The surroundings of Gauck’s trip recall state visits conducted to totalitarian states. As was the case with the visit of German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble last June, large areas of the city centre of Athens were sealed off and a ban on demonstrations was enforced. When around 500 people approached the exclusion zone to protest against mass layoffs, they were attacked by police with batons and tear gas.

Gauck later indirectly thanked the government in Athens for its suppression of any expression of democratic opinion. He also praised the government for having prevented “chaos and anarchy”, also “in delicate phases.” He also explicitly thanked the trade unions for not using “their power to blockade,” and said they had thereby served Greece.

At the same time, Gauck noted repeatedly in his speech the need for “painful reforms,” and opposed describing them as a “dictate from outside actors”. In a

discussion with opposition leader Alexis Tsipras, he stated that the reform measures were not an austerity program but an aid program.

In fact, it is an aid program for the country’s banks and creditors. They have been compensated for their toxic investments while Greek state debt has exploded, the social achievements of the working class have been destroyed and broad sections of the population have been ruined.

On average, wages have fallen by 40 percent over the past four years. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been destroyed and the education and health care systems have been decimated. At a rate of 28 percent, unemployment has reached a new record. Out of over one million registered unemployed, only 16.4 percent receive state support and health care.

As a result, every new layoff or spending cut is a question of life and death. Health minister Adonis Georgiades declared at the end of February that emergency patients would continue to be treated for free. However, according to the health minister, who was previously a member of the extreme right-wing Laos Party, “illnesses like cancer are not considered urgent, unless you are in the final stages.”

Gauck not only defended these measures, but called for their expansion throughout Europe. The Greek government is currently negotiating with the European Union (EU) over new cuts. According to reports, EU representatives are demanding the layoffs of 4,000 state workers by the end of the month, the easing of protection against sackings in the private sector and the cutting of public sector wages.

Gauck announced in an interview with the Greek daily *Kathemerini* that “painful reforms to stimulate the economy and employment,” enforced in Germany as part of the Agenda 2010 program of reforms, were to be carried out throughout Europe. “Although there is no reform blueprint,” the German President said,

“wherever we can provide meaningful German experience, we will help and do so gladly.”

Gauck linked his call for the plundering of European workers with a revival of German militarism. In a repugnant manner he used the victims of the Nazi regime for this purpose.

On Friday, Gauck visited Ioannina, a town in the northwest of Greece, and the nearby village of Lingiades, where in October 1943 the German army committed a horrific war crime.

After an officer from the notorious 1 Alpine division Edelweiß was killed by Greek partisans, General Hubert Lanz ordered the extermination of the entire population of the village in retaliation. Wehrmacht soldiers herded the villagers into cellars, shot them and finally set the buildings ablaze. 82 people died, mainly women and children. The youngest was two months old. Lanz was convicted of war crimes at Nuremberg, but spent only four years in prison before becoming defence expert for the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and honorary chairman of the association for Alpine troops.

German soldiers deported 1,725 Jews from Ioannina and the surrounding area to Auschwitz, of whom only one tenth survived the concentration camps.

Gauck held a speech in Lingiades and laid a wreath at the memorial for the murdered villagers. Germany was doubly guilty, said Gauck, because the perpetrators had not asked for forgiveness for a long time. He wanted to do this on their behalf now.

The hypocrisy of these words was hard to swallow. Only a day earlier, Gauck emphatically stated that no legal right to compensation for the victims could be deduced from Germany’s moral guilt.

When Greek President Karolos Papoulias, who fought the German occupiers at the age of 14, declared at a joint press conference on Thursday that Greece had never given up on reparation payments, Gauck responded, “You know that I can only answer that by saying that I believe the legal process has been concluded.”

Among the Greek demands is a loan imposed by the occupiers in 1942 on the Greek state through blackmail. Even the Third Reich recognised this loan as an official debt worth almost 500 million Reichmarks. But the federal republic declared it null and void and today takes the view that all Greek claims were satisfied in

the global reparations agreement from the 1960s. At that time, Germany transferred the derisory sum of 115 million marks to Athens. The German government is also of the opinion that the bailout received by Greece as an EU member has invalidated all claims for reparations.

Gauck has made the visiting of memorials marking Nazi crimes a central part of his trips abroad. Prior to Lingiades, he visited Oradour in France, Lidice in the Czech Republic, and Sant’Anna di Stazzama in Italy. In the process he has systematically used the horrific crimes of the Nazis to justify the revival of German militarism.

While Green Party foreign minister Joschka Fischer once justified German participation in the war against Serbia by reference to Germany’s responsibility for Auschwitz, Gauck now legitimises every German military intervention, including the German government’s current collaboration with fascists in Ukraine, by claiming to be preventing alleged crimes.

“We can never believe”, Gauck said two weeks ago in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, “that after German brutality, German criminality, Germany’s murderous acts were defeated that the danger has been banished. It is absolutely not. And we have seen in Europe, in Srebrenica, that sometimes just talking doesn’t help. And in Rwanda we have seen what happens when we don’t intervene.”

Germany could no longer use the crimes of the Nazis as a “justification” to hold back from military intervention, Gauck said.

In the same interview, Gauck explicitly justified the intervention in Ukraine, where the German government has worked closely with the fascist Svoboda Party, which bases itself on the anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and enjoys close ties to the German fascist National Democratic Party (NPD). As the strongest power in Europe, Germany could not afford to take a back seat, the president declared. “There are no reasonable grounds which could be brought forward against our intervention.”



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