

Why is Syriza demanding reparations from Germany?

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In the dispute over the Greek national debt, the government in Athens has demanded that Germany pay reparations for war crimes committed in the Second World War.

In his government statement on February 8, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called the demand for German reparations a “moral duty” to the Greek people, to history and “to all the people of Europe who shed blood in the struggle against fascism.” Over the ensuing weeks, Tsipras and other Greek government officials have repeatedly raised the demand for German reparations.

Now they have placed a figure on this demand. Last weekend, Deputy Finance Minister Dimitris Mardas announced that the reparation claims amount to 278.7 billion euros. This sum was calculated by a six-person commission that purportedly based its calculations on more than 50,000 documents. On March 13, *Spiegel Online* reported that some of the documents were confiscated from Germany in 1945 and “passed by the US to the Greek government on film reels.”

The sum stipulated is almost as high as Germany’s annual budget of 299 billion euros and Greece’s total debt of 320 billion euros. It includes reparations for destroyed Greek infrastructure, compensation payments for individual victims, and the repayment of a loan extorted from Greece by the German occupying forces, which the commission reckoned to total 10.3 billion euros, based on current values.

The German government has categorically rejected this demand. “The question of reparations and compensation payments is legally and politically closed,” said government spokesman Steffen Seibert a month ago. Finance Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who presides over the Social Democratic Party (SPD), called the linking of debts and reparations “stupid.” Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble has likewise rejected any compensation for the war crimes of the Nazis.

The Syriza-led government in Athens justifies its demands on the basis of the devastation the German occupiers caused in Greece between 1941 and 1944. They killed 130,000 partisans and civilians in gruesome massacres, deported 70,000 Jews to death camps, and confiscated fuel and foodstuffs, leading to the death of 300,000 Greeks from starvation and cold. By the time the occupying forces departed, half of all industrial and commercial operations, three quarters of all streets and railroads, and nine-tenths of Greece’s entire commercial fleet had been destroyed.

Hardly anyone has faced legal consequences for these crimes. The German government that legally succeeded the Third Reich has repeatedly blocked compensation and reparations demands from Athens. The only exception is the modest sum of 115 million euros it transferred to Greece in the 1960s, primarily to the Jewish victims of the Nazi terror.

The demand for reparations for such crimes resonates amongst sections of the Greek, as well as the German, population. The arrogance with which the media and politicians in Germany are demanding drastic social cuts in Greece plays a role in this. It recalls the ruthless behavior of the Nazis. Moreover, the surviving victims of Nazi crimes are especially hard hit by the austerity measures in Greece.

Many people are indignant that the German government is demanding repayment of all Greek debts while denying that it is responsible for repaying the war-time loan for which, in the view of many legal experts, it is liable.

That being said, the Greek government’s demand for reparations has nothing to do with compensation for past injustice and even less to do with “moral duty” or opposition to fascism, as Tsipras claims. Rather, the Greek government is using the issue to put pressure on Germany in the ongoing debt negotiations, while seeking to divert attention from its own reactionary austerity policies. It uses reparations demands to channel popular anger into a nationalist blind alley.

Imperialist war and reparations

Demands for reparations are inappropriate means of combating fascism, war and social attacks. They do nothing to address their causes, but rather serve to reproduce them. They provide a fruitful breeding ground for chauvinist propaganda and international tensions.

The best-known historical example of this is the post-World War I Versailles treaty of 1919, in which the victorious powers imposed high reparation payments on Germany. These payments did not improve the situation of the populations in England, France or the other recipient countries. They destroyed the German economy, sharpened contradictions in Europe, provided the Nazis with an abundance of material for agitation, and played a significant role in creating the conditions for the Second World War.

The recognition of Greek reparations demands on the scale of hundreds of billions of euros would not only poison the political climate in Europe, it would also set an international precedent.

If the present Greek government is to be fully compensated for the crimes of the Nazis 70 years ago, what then is to be done with Turkey, which killed or expelled hundreds of thousands of Greeks after the First World War? What about the victims of the atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Or the millions of Germans who had to leave the eastern part of the defeated German Reich after World War II? What about the Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Kosovans, etc. who lost their lives or their homes in the Balkan wars, the First World War, the Second World War and the dissolution of Yugoslavia?

The list is endless. There is historical material for irresolvable conflicts in every region of the world. Which demands are justified and which are not? Is there a statute of limitations for such demands?

Both the First and the Second World Wars were imperialist wars. Their deeper causes were bound up with the contradiction between world economy and the historically outmoded nation state system on which capitalism is based. Every imperialist power tried to solve these

contradictions by fighting to impose its own interests and assert its own dominance over its imperialist rivals.

German imperialism played an especially aggressive and criminal role. This was a consequence of its belated capitalist development, the rapid growth of its productive forces and its geographical position in the center of Europe. However, the other great powers and their smaller allies on both sides of the front lines similarly fought for imperialist goals and perpetrated war crimes.

Reparations for these crimes would not solve the contradictions of imperialism. They would exacerbate them and contribute to the eruption of new wars. The only way to prevent imperialist war is to abolish its root cause, the capitalist system.

The Greek bourgeoisie and the reparations question

Greece was not simply a victim in the Second World War. Like Germany, where the workers' movement became the first victim of Nazi rule, Greece was divided into classes.

After the war ended, the right-wing government in Athens for three-and-a-half years continued the bloody repression that had been carried out by the Nazis against leftist partisans. It did so with the tacit support of the British and American governments. Under pressure from the US and in exchange for military support from Washington, which needed Germany as an ally in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, Greece dropped its pursuit of the reparations it had been granted at a 1946 conference in Paris.

The Greek military junta, which overthrew the elected government and maintained a brutal dictatorship between 1967 and 1974, with the full backing of NATO, adopted the methods of the Nazis in repressing the working class.

Subsequent governments used the question of reparations as leverage to secure a place for the Greek bourgeoisie at the table with the major European powers, at the expense of the working class. There is a direct connection between the fact that Germany supported the acceptance of Greece into the European Union in 1981 and the euro zone in 2001, and the fact that the Greek government did not demand reparations after German reunification in 1991. Berlin cites this today as legal proof that all compensation demands, including those of individual victims, have been forfeited.

Tsipras' government is following in the footsteps of previous bourgeois regimes in Greece. While Germany abandons its previous restraint in foreign policy, builds up its military strength, and strives once again for dominance in Europe, the Greek government uses the question of reparations as a lever to secure a place at the side of German imperialism.

The Syriza-led government combines bombastic demands for reparations with obsequious flattery. Speaking in Athens, Tsipras calls the demand for German reparations a "moral duty." But in his first official visit to Berlin, he declared that "today's Germany, democratic Germany, has nothing in common with the Germany of the Third Reich, the cause of so great a death toll."

Foreign Minister Kotzias has signaled that the Greek government is looking for a symbolic solution to the reparations question, and Finance Minister Varoufakis has indicated that a settlement could be reached for the token sum of one euro.

The demands for reparations by the Greek government are merely the reverse side of its subservience to the financial markets. Since it assumed power two-and-a-half months ago, it has broken all of its election promises and reassured the troika (the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) that it will pay back all of

Greece's debts and achieve a permanent primary budget surplus. This is possible only through an intensification of austerity.

In order to suppress and intimidate opposition to this austerity course, the government is encouraging Greek nationalism. This was already evident when Syriza, an acronym for "Coalition of the Radical Left," named the ultra-nationalist Independent Greeks (Anel) as its coalition partner.

Tsipras' government statement overflowed with nationalist rhetoric. He swore he would bring about the "restoration of the dignity of our people," hailed "the inexhaustible strength of a united and confident people," and evoked "the vision of an economically autarkic, socially just and nationally proud Greece."

The connection between the deepening of austerity and the stoking up of nationalism with demands for reparations is so obvious that it did not escape the notice of the most right-wing observers. The private US intelligence agency Stratfor wrote: "Athens will likely have to introduce painful measures to secure European funding and bargain with its creditors—led by Germany. In the face of this mounting crisis, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his Syriza party are trying to hold together a parliamentary majority and sustain public popularity... This means feeding Greek nationalism with anti-German sentiments."

The compensation for past injustice—like the fight against the austerity dictates of the troika and the struggle against war and fascism—is inseparably bound up with a socialist perspective. It demands the unification of the European working class on the basis of a revolutionary program, with the goal of abolishing the European Union, establishing workers' governments, turning the large corporations and banks into public institutions, and reorganizing society within the framework of the United Socialist States of Europe.

On this basis, it will be possible to marshal the immense wealth and technical and human resources of Europe to develop the entire continent and raise the living standard of all workers to a far higher level.

Syriza and the pseudo-left groups that support it decisively reject this perspective. They speak not for the working class, but for a section of the Greek bourgeoisie and the privileged upper-middle class, who seek their own place in the ranks of the imperialist powers and their own share of the fruits of the exploitation of the Greek working class.

While Tsipras and Syriza stoke up nationalism in Greece and flatter the representatives of finance capital in Berlin, Brussels and Washington, they adamantly oppose any appeal to the European and international working class to take up a struggle against capitalism.



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