

The crimes of the Nazis in Greece: Part one

Katerina Selin
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This is the first in a three-part series; parts two and three.

One can “no longer indulge the stubborn and fickle Greeks.” This remark could have come from the pen of a hack journalist, or from German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, for whom no austerity package for the impoverished Greek population goes far enough.

These words were in fact spoken by Dr. Otto Kielmeyer, a German linguist who assumed the role of director of the Deutsche Akademie, the predecessor to the Goethe Institute, following the occupation of Thessaloniki on April 9, 1941. “We are no longer the more or less unpopular but tolerated foreigners, but the masters of the country,” he proclaimed triumphantly following the invasion of the country by the Wehrmacht. (1)

Today the German “masters of the country” do not appear in uniform. However, the successive rounds of EU decisions, imposed above all by Schäuble and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have similar goals to the policies pursued more than 70 years ago: Greece is to be transformed into a protectorate or colony for German business interests, which stand to gain super profits from the destruction of infrastructure and the economy, and through the impoverishment of the Greek population.

It is no coincidence that many comments in the media use crude insults similar to the arrogant language employed by the occupiers during the Second World War, describing Greeks as “gamblers” or even “carpet salesmen” and other racist remarks.

An imperialist raid

Well over 100,000 partisans and civilians fell victim to the German occupation between 1941 and 1944. Around 90 percent of the Jewish population were murdered, while tens of thousands of Greeks suffered a horrific death by starvation, or froze because fuel and foodstuffs were confiscated. The plundering of the country destroyed infrastructure, mines and forests. Half of all industry and factories, three quarters of the road and rail network as well as nine tenths of the merchant fleet had been destroyed when the Nazis withdrew.

The Nazi occupiers responded to the powerful resistance from the Greek working class and rural population with extreme brutality. With massacres and acts of revenge they set an example for all occupied areas, particularly for the war of extermination against the Soviet Union, which began three months later.

The Balkan offensive against Yugoslavia, which began on April 6, 1941, was not originally part of the plans of Hitler and his general staff. During the preparation of the attack on the Soviet Union, the Nazi government sought to maintain its collaboration with the German-allied regime in Yugoslavia and the right-wing Metaxas dictatorship in Greece. However, Mussolini’s Italy, a German ally, attacked the Balkans in the autumn of 1940 and suffered a military debacle in Albania and Greece. British troops had landed in Crete. The situation prompted Hitler to

change his strategy.

The Wehrmacht began the invasion supported by Bulgaria and Italy, quickly occupying Yugoslavia and Greece. Greece was divided up into three occupation zones. The largest part, Epirus and central Greece, the Peloponnesian peninsula, and most of the islands was controlled by Italy until its surrender in 1943. Germany’s ally Bulgaria occupied east Macedonia in the north and two small islands.

The German zone covered the strategically important locations of Thessaloniki, western Macedonia, a large majority of Crete, some of the Aegean islands, a strip of territory on the border with Turkey and the area around Athens. Despite the three zones, Greece was effectively under the control of the German regime. This applied in particular to the exploitation of resources, the confiscation of goods as well as infrastructure and transportation routes.

The occupation of Greece coincided with Germany’s north African offensive. The Nazis confiscated all public and private food stores, as well as clothes, medication, military and transport material shortly after their arrival so as to strengthen the north Africa campaign.

For their part, the allies imposed a naval blockade on Greece, which prevented the import of essential foodstuffs such as cereals. This resulted in a terrible famine during the first winter of the occupation. In the regions of Athens and Piraeus alone, starvation claimed the lives of a thousand per day during the winter months of 1941-42. (2)

Hagen Fleischer, one of the most important historians on the National Socialist occupation of Greece, referred to “the intention of the new rulers to make use of the victory of the German military to strive for economic and cultural hegemony.” He explained, “The main interests were the tobacco harvest as well as the arms and mining industries, where the self-interested expertise of large German concerns could be utilised. The steel giant Krupp secured the chromium mines for the German war industry.” (3)

In this way, 28,000 tons of pure chromium were transported out of Greece between May 1941 and November 1944. This equated to a quarter of Germany’s demand during the same period for the metal, which is extremely important in arms production. (4)

Already prior to the Nazi invasion, close trading relations existed with Greece. Germany was its most important trading partner, followed by Britain. Although the country was characterised by growing urbanisation, the degree of industrialisation remained low. Along with mining, agricultural and small-scale production predominated, and the products were exported to industrial nations.

German heavy industry intensified its business with the Balkans and Greece from 1931 onwards. For this they relied above all on the Central European economic conference (MWT), founded in Vienna and Berlin after the First World War, as an association of interests to accelerate German exports to southern Europe and strengthen the import of raw materials for the arms industry. (5)

Prior to the invasion of the Balkans, the German economics ministry initiated the creation of the Society for Southeast Europe (SOEG) to integrate the Balkan policy more closely with the Nazis’ inner circle and prepare for war. This special type of academic think tank for the Balkan

region had a clearly formulated orientation:

"The Society for Southeast Europe must realise its special tasks abroad while maintaining its obligatory, societal front (exhibitions, fairs, etc.), however domestically be nothing more than a powerful instrument of the German Reich's economic leadership." (6)

The patron of the society was economics minister and President of the Reichsbank, Walter Funk, with Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach, who also served as the Reich's representative and guardian of Vienna from 1940, as president. Unlike in the MWT, where trading relations between the "Greater German area" and the "expansion area of southeast Europe" were still the main focus, the SOEG assumed the task of promoting outright imperialist robbery in the Balkans and Greece and ideologically justifying it.

Walter Funk explained the Nazi leadership's approach to the Balkans at an international press conference on June 25, 1940, as follows, "A currency and customs union can only be established with countries which have similar living standards to us. For example, in the southeast, this is not the case. It is absolutely not in our interest to introduce the same standard of living in the southeast as in Germany."

"Continental Europe" under German leadership should comprise the highly developed industrial states, Funk went on to explain. By contrast, the less developed states on Europe's periphery were to serve as sources for foodstuffs, labour power and the purchasing of raw materials—with their currencies linked to the Reichsmark.

He declared, "Within the European countries [that are] part of the German sphere of interest, two groups must be distinguished. The first group includes countries with similar price, wage, tax and income levels as in Germany. Examples are Denmark, Holland and Switzerland. The second category includes the southeast. While the first category is to be organised similarly to us and treated more freely in economic trade, the second category does not come into consideration for a currency and customs union due to the significant differences." (7)

The similarity of such formulations to the suggestion from the German finance ministry of a temporary Grexit is remarkable. Seventy years ago, these goals of the leading Nazi economists prepared the way for the utter destruction and plundering of the Greek economy.

The National Socialist occupiers worked closely with the collaborationist government led by Giorgos Tsolakoglou. While factories were subordinated to German control for industrial goals (mining, manufacturing machinery, and the chemicals industry), the Greek government led production for consumption, including foodstuffs, textiles, tobacco and soap, as well as the ration system, i.e., the state distribution of goods. Trading in goods subsequently totally collapsed. The owners and heads of consumer factories, as well as a large number of smaller middlemen, sold their products for usurious prices on the black market, from which the corrupt Greek government also profiteered.

By contrast, small Greek business owners were ruined by rising inflation, and working families, especially in the cities, were driven into poverty en masse. In order to finance the costs of occupation and the confiscation of goods, the occupation authorities forced the Greek central bank to agree to interest-free loans. In early 1945, Hitler's financial experts calculated precisely the size of these loans: 476 million Reichmarks. Up to the present day the Federal Republic refuses to repay these funds, which would amount to €11 billion for Greece. This issue once again played a role in the latest talks with the Greek government over austerity measures.

Significant opposition developed in the Greek working class to the Nazis' criminal economic policy, assuming revolutionary dimensions in 1943. Already in 1941, young workers seized the food supplies of the occupiers, who were profiting significantly at the expense of the population, and took over control of provision at a local level and in neighbourhoods with the help of workers' cooperatives.

Workers struggles also increased. In April 1942, communication workers struck against the occupiers and achieved a pay increase. This was the first strike in occupied Europe. Strikes increased in frequency during 1943. In February, a general strike of 3,000 workers was defeated. In March, 65 percent of administrative officials protested against efforts by the German occupiers to employ forced labour. (8)

The resistance inflicted painful defeats on the German rulers. The attempt to encourage workers to come to Germany proved unsuccessful. The widespread deployment of Greek forced labour failed due to mass strikes. Partisans, supported by the urban and rural populations, sabotaged industrial production directed to war purposes.

According to Fleischer, "despite looting and the use of the forced labour of 'mining Jews', the production and export [of chromium] sharply" declined during 1943-44, "due to the activity of the partisans, and the concern (Krupp) complained that it could no longer even recover the money it had invested." (9)

In September 1941, the National Liberation Front (EAM) was founded under the leadership of the Greek Communist Party (KKE). The Stalinist KKE oriented to the foreign policy of Stalin and after the German attack on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, adopted the policy of a people's front.

The KKE strictly rejected a revolutionary programme, based on the workers and peasant population and directed against the Greek bourgeoisie. Instead, it sought to draw sections of the national bourgeoisie into the resistance, a policy which decisively weakened the struggles of the partisans and civilian population.

However, the Greek ruling elite preferred collaboration with the occupiers, emigration or the formation of their own groups of partisans. Both the Nazi bureaucracy and the Greek bourgeois elite reacted with consternation to the growing class conflicts. For example, the representative of the Greek national bank warned in a report to the German occupiers on October 25, 1943 of the intensification of "class relations" and "complete social anarchy." They called on the occupiers to stabilise the country economically. (10)

With the growth of the Greek resistance in 1943, the collaborationist government established the notorious "security battalions," in which anti-communist Greek forces fought on the side of the Wehrmacht.

In many cases, the occupiers handed over responsibility to their collaborators to carry out executions, so as to mobilise right-wing forces in direct opposition to the working class. Supreme commander Alexander Löhr described his initiative as a "political measure in the context of [...] the struggle against communism, in which the anti-communist section of the Greek population must be fully involved, so that it is decisively consolidated and is driven into open hostility with the communist section." (11)

The security battalions, under the command of SS and police supreme commander Walter Schimana, played an important role beyond the end of the war in the civil war. They were ultimately integrated to a considerable extent into the national police and army. Even today, supporters of the neo-fascist "Golden Dawn" stem overwhelmingly from the ranks of the police and army, who hail the security battalion members as "national fighters" and "patriots."

To be continued

Notes

(1) Hagen Fleischer, "Die deutsche Besatzung(spolitik) in Griechenland und ihre 'Bewältigung'", revised summary of a speech at a symposium on the prehistory and founding of the Southeast Europe Corporation,

München (December 16-17, 2013), p. 6.

(2) Stavros B. Thomadakis, “Black Markets, Inflation, and Force in the Economy of Occupied Greece,” in: John O. Iatrides (Ed.), *Greece in the 1940s. A Nation in Crisis*, University Press of New England: Hannover/London 1981, p. 72

(3) Fleischer, p. 1

(4) Martin Seckendorf, Zur Wirtschaftspolitik der deutschen Besatzer in Griechenland 1941-1944, Revised summary of a talk from March 12, 2005 at a symposium of the Athens Economics University on the compensation of Greek victims of Germany’s occupation policies

(5) On the SOEG and MWT, see: Carl Freitag, Deutschlands “Drang nach Südosten: der Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftstag und der ‘Ergänzungsraum Südosteuropa’ 1931-1945,” Universität Wien. Zeitgeschichte im Kontext 7, 2012.

(6) Fleischer, p. 2

(7) Walther Funk, 25.07.1940, “Die wirtschaftliche Neuordnung Europas”, Quellen zur Neuordnung Europas 1, 12–21

(8) John L. Hondros: “The Greek Resistance, 1941-1944. A Reevaluation,” in: Iatrides (Ed.), *Greece in the 1940s*, p. 40

(9) Fleischer, p. 2

(10) Thomadakis, p. 78

(11) Citation from: Hagen Fleischer, “Deutsche ‘Ordnung’ in Griechenland 1941-1944” in: Loukia Droulia and Hagen Fleischer (Ed.), *Von Lidicie bis Kalavryta. Widerstand und Besatzungsterror. Studien zur Repressalienpraxis im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Metropol: Berlin 1999, p. 172.



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