The crimes of the Nazis in Greece: Part three

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14 September 2015

This is the conclusion of a three-part series. Part one was published September 11. Part two was published September 12.

Silence after the war

During the withdrawal of the German army in October 1944, the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS), the military organisation of the National Liberation Front (EAM), controlled almost the whole of Greece. Despite the revolutionary mood among the workers and partisan fighters, their Stalinist KKE leadership paved the way for the return of bourgeois government. Its betrayal led to the defeat of the Greek working class in the bloody battles against the British and Greek military in Athens in December.

After the left resistance movement was smashed in the Greek Civil War from 1945 to 1949, right-wing conservative governments pursuing nationalist and anti-communist policies were in power in the decades leading up to the Greek military dictatorship (1967-1974).

Both the German and the Greek governments tried to conceal the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators. The few former concentration camp prisoners fought in vain for the return of stolen property and had to wait until 1960 to be granted a merely symbolic compensation. The German government, under international pressure, agreed to pay a total of only 115 million marks (€57.5 million, US$64 million) to just a few of the victims of racist persecution.

Most of the survivors moved to Israel. In some cases even up to the present the fate of the Greek Jews has failed to find its way into school textbooks.

Such a sluggish pace of research also applied to investigations into the Wehrmacht's (German army under Hitler) war of annihilation. The appalling war crimes committed in the Balkan region came to the attention of the public only in the course of the exhibition from 1995 to 1999 on the war crimes of the Wehrmacht.

Summing up the three years of occupation terror, Hagen Fleischer writes: "The memory of tens of thousands of civilian victims of the occupation forces, of the 60,000 Jewish victims of racist genocide, was repressed. Well over 100,000 people perished miserably of hunger and the birth rate plunged into an abyss. One in three Greeks suffered from epidemic infectious diseases (malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, etc.); in some regions, 60 to 70 percent were affected, especially children."

According to Fleischer, it was scarcely possible to calculate "the losses caused by the hyperinflation and German wrecking of the infrastructure that resulted from the economic plundering of mines, forests, etc., and systematic destruction in the course of the [Wehrmacht's] so-called retaliation measures or during its withdrawal: most of the railway bridges were blown up, more than 80 percent of rolling stock ruined or hijacked; 73 percent of shipping tonnage scuttled, almost 200,000 houses totally or partially destroyed" (18).

The decades-long cover-up of Nazi mass murder in Greece was necessary for both the German and Greek political elite in order to protect the main perpetrators of crimes against legal prosecution, conceal their own cooperation with fascist cliques and avert any reparations.

In 1947 and 1948, the trial of the generals who had served in Southeast Europe took place, one of the 12 subsequent Nuremberg trials following the main Nuremberg trials. It was also called the "Hostages Trial" because the main charge concerned the murder of thousands of hostages in Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece.

Of the 12 defendants, one committed suicide in advance, a second pulled out due to illness, and two were acquitted. The remaining eight defendants received prison sentences of several years or life imprisonment. But they were all set free by the early 1950s. They were pardoned at the instigation of the US allies, who established the Greek federal republic as a bulwark against the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Cold War.

Among those convicted was **Wilhelm List**, who was sentenced to life imprisonment, but released in 1952, and who lived undisturbed in southern Bavaria until 1971. As commander-in-chief of the 12th Army, he had been responsible for the management of ground operations in Greece and Yugoslavia. He was subsequently Wehrmacht commander of the Southeast occupation forces. In October 1941, he had camps set up in Serbia and Greece where hostages were to be shot as reprisals for guerrilla warfare.

The German air force general **Hellmuth Felmy** also played a leading role in the war crimes committed on Greek soil. He received a sentence of 15 years, of which he had to serve only three. Until his death in 1971, he headed the "Old Eagle" military veterans' club.

Hubert Lanz, a mountain troops general, was in command at the massacre on Kefalonia on September 21 and 22, 1943. After the capitulation of Italy, the Germans murdered more than 5,000 Italian soldiers on the island. Just a week after the massacre, Lanz arranged for an act of reprisal to be perpetrated against the village of Lingiades. The Wehrmacht demolished the village with artillery fire and then massacred 82 of its inhabitants.

At the hostage murder trial, Lanz was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, but was released in 1951 and became a consultant for military and security affairs in the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in West Germany. For many years he was also actively and publicly engaged in the mountain troops veterans' circle, eventually becoming chairman of the 1st Mountain Division Association.

Together with Lanz, **Wilhelm Speidel** was released from the Landsberg war criminals prison in 1951, where he was originally intended to spend a 20-year prison term. Speidel was military governor of Greece from 1943, and was responsible for numerous directives authorising mass murders, including the massacre in Kalavryta.

Other Nazis who were responsible for crimes never appeared in court—for example, **Karl Student**, notorious for his despotism in Crete. He was arrested in 1945 but released a short time later, and spent the rest of his life in immunity in West Germany, where he became a leading figure in the veterans associations of former Wehrmacht soldiers.

After the war, what became of the "masters from Germany" who

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deported the Greek Jews? Only one of them had to pay for his crimes: **Dieter Wisliceny**, indicted at the Nuremberg trials in 1945, was delivered to Czechoslovakia and executed there in 1948.

Alois Brunner, however, lived and worked under false names in Munich and Essen. When his true identity was threatened to be revealed, he escaped to Syria with the help of former comrades. One of his assistants in the escape was Reinhard Gehlen, who led the Wehrmacht's Eastern European espionage division during the war, and expanded the German Federal Intelligence Agency at the behest of the US secret service in the post-war period. Brunner communicated intelligence information to Gehlen from the Middle East and is said to have died in Damascus a few years ago.

The Nazi administration director, **Max Merten** of Thessaloniki, was arrested in 1945. The United States suggested that he be extradited to Greece, but the Greek government refused to request it. Andreas Ypsilanti, Greece's military envoy in Berlin, even recommended Merten's release, stressing his "irreproachable conduct" and "valued service" when in Greece.

During the occupation of Thessaloniki, Merten had established contacts with Greece's political elite. Enmeshed in wartime collaboration with the Nazis, many Greek post-war politicians eagerly cooperated with their German political colleagues when it came to preventing exposure of criminal activities.

Merten was therefore able to return to his profession as a lawyer. Besides his work in the justice ministry, he tried to make a career in politics and was a co-founder of the All-German People's Party, which opposed close ties to the West and campaigned for a strong united Germany.

In 1957, Merten travelled to Greece, where he was unexpectedly arrested and, after two years in remand, sentenced to a prison term of 25 years. But during the Merten trial, collusion took place between the Greek and German governments behind the scenes. Even before the sentencing in 1959, they signed an economic agreement that included a secret additional clause. This involved a promise made by then-Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis to the Adenauer government in Berlin to renounce all charges relating to the war and hand over Mertens to Germany.

After only six months' imprisonment, Merten was able to return to Germany, where he was even compensated for the brief time spent in detention. Proceedings against him were discontinued and his case was finally terminated in 1968 (19).

Hundreds of German investigations into Greek war crimes came to nothing. Only one significant hearing, conducted in the Augsburg regional court, came to the public's attention.

During this trial concerning the execution of six civilians in Crete, the court took the view of the Wehrmacht that "the term 'partisan,' as used by the German side in 1944, would be understood to mean all civilians in the occupied territory who were suspected of committing even the slightest hostile acts against persons or property of the German military power." The shooting of suspects "on the orders of officers and without prior court rulings" was therefore classified as "legal self-defence". The accused Wehrmacht officer **Richard Sand** was acquitted.

Further lawsuits were blocked on the basis of this kind of reasoning, including one in Bochum against combat group leader **Franz Juppe**, who had participated in the Kalavryta massacre. The prosecutor described his crimes as necessary reprisals and "conduct permissible under international law" to "force (partisans) to comply with international law" (20).

Leading Nazi industrialists like **Hans-Günther Sohl**, who were largely responsible for the economic plundering of Greece, also continued their careers in the Federal Republic of Germany unscathed. Sohl had organised the procurement of chrome for the Wehrmacht's armaments. He had joined the Nazi Party as early as 1933 and took over management of the raw material division of Friedrich Krupp AG two years later. As board member of the Vereinigten Stahlwerke (United Steel Works) and business director of Reichsvereinigung Eisen (Reich Federation of Iron Producers), he was one of the main perpetrators of forced labour and natural resource robbery in the occupied territories.

After the war, he was imprisoned. Immediately after his release in 1947, however, he resumed his place on the board of United Steel Works and rose to CEO of Thyssen AG after five years. In the 1970s, he was chairman of the Federation of German Industries (BDI).

The fascist apologists for Nazi crimes in Greece settled themselves into the postwar world as though they had never been responsible for any anti-Greek or anti-Semitic inflammatory writing. The **Southeast Europe Association** simply reinvented itself in 1952—under the same name, but changing its short form to SOG. Until two years ago, it had never attempted to face up to its Nazi roots.

Regarding its "tasks and aims," the SOG declares on its web site that it has been "one of the important supporters of German foreign cultural policy since its foundation in 1952" and provides "a forum for dialogue between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Southeast European countries, with respect to policy advisory and policy relevant discussion."

This is an astonishing statement, because the SOG's founder in 1952 was **Fritz Valjavec**, a Hungarian-German historian and zealous blood and soil propagandist, who had been head of the Southeast Institute in Munich from 1935 and was later a professor in Berlin University's faculty of the German Foreign Affairs Academy, which had formerly been responsible to the Nazi Reich Security Main Office. He was an SS officer during the war, and played an important role in "enemy research". For example, together with Walter Schellenberg he created a "Handbook for Yugoslavia and Greece" with lists of people to be arrested. In July 1941 he participated as a "political adviser" and "interpreter" in the massacres of the notorious Special Unit 10b of Task Force D in the Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, where thousands of Jews and communists were killed.

Other former Nazis were also able to integrate themselves in the new SOG. These included **Franz Ronneberger**, the 1939 head of a department for the study of the Southeast European press and publisher of *Confidential Business News* on behalf of the Southeast Europe Association (then called SOEG), in which the exploitation and extermination policies in the Balkans were prepared and legitimised during the war. Ronneberger, who had also regularly contributed as an anti-Semitic propagandist to the Nazi Party's *Völkischer Beobachter*, held a seat on the SOG's steering committee and expert advisory board after the war.

For many years, journalist **Rudolf Vogel** was chairman of the SOG. As deputy chief of a Nazi propaganda company in Thessaloniki, he had written inflammatory anti-Semitic articles. After the war, he pursued a career in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In 1966, the SOG presented their loyal former Nazi with the so-called Rudolf Vogel Medal, which is awarded to this day to outstanding German journalists covering Southeast European issues. When Vogel's Nazi past finally attracted public attention in 2013, the award was simply renamed the "Journalists' Prize."

The list goes on and on. "No German," Hagen Fleischer concludes, "was ever condemned by a German federal court for war crimes committed against Greek citizens" (21).

Seventy years after the cataclysmic war in Greece, the German elite is once again trying to establish itself as the major power in Europe and the world, and to subjugate countries on Europe's periphery, such as Greece. The EU austerity measures, which these days are enforced at the insistence of the German government, have already led to hunger and misery on the streets of Greek cities, towns and villages. The newly agreed privatisation fund recalls the policy of the German elite in World War II, i.e., devastating Greece's infrastructure in order to bring the

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country under German control and plunder what is left of its economy.

Concluded

Notes:

(18) 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. 8.

(19) Susanne-Sophia Spiliotis, “‘An Affair of Politics, Not Justice’: The Merten Trial (1957–1959) and Greek-German Relations”, in: Mark Mazower (Hg.), After the War Was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation, and State in Greece, 1943–1960, Princeton/Oxford 2000, S. 293-302.

(20) Norman Peach, “Wehrmachtsverbrechen in Griechenland”, in: Kritische Justiz 3 (1999), pp. 380-97, here: 381.

(21) Fleischer, p. 10.

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