

GREEK OCCUPATION

Athens and the Nazi Atrocities

Greece has finally come up with a figure. It claims Germany still owes €278 billion for the brutal Nazi occupation during World War II. Germany considers the matter closed. The timing couldn't be worse, as Athens seeks a deal with its creditors, including Germany.

BY SIOBHÁN DOWLING



Alexis Tsipras places flowers on the National Resistance Memorial in Kaisariani on January 26.
Source: DPA

The past is the present, and in Greece that is truer than ever.

[Efforts to win reparations](#) for the brutal Nazi occupation during World War II have preoccupied the new radical left Greek government since it came to power in January.

Now Athens has come up with a figure. The deputy finance minister, Dimitris Mardas, told the parliament on Monday night that Germany

WHY IT MATTERS

Germany is the biggest contributor to the Greek bailouts, and is unlikely to be impressed by massive war reparations claims that it regards as unfounded.

FACTS

The Greek deputy finance minister says Germany owes the country €278.7 billion in compensation for the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944.

Germany paid Greece 115 million deutsche marks in 1960 and considers the matter closed.

The Greek experience under Nazi occupation was particularly brutal, yet its history is not well known in Germany.

owed Greece a total of €278.7 billion, or \$304 billion. It is an amount that would allow the Greek government to pay back all its debt to European and international creditors since the 2009 crisis.

It is also a sum that Greece is not likely to get: The German government considers the issue of reparations closed after it paid 115 million deutsche marks to Greece in 1960. Greece sees that sum as just the initial payment in a far larger compensation figure.

“Germany has never properly paid reparations for the damage done to Greece by the Nazi occupation.”

ALEXIS TSIPRAS
GREEK PRIME MINISTER

The Greeks claim that Germany owes it reparations for the occupation, as well as the repayment of a loan enforced by the Nazis and for the value of stolen archaeological artifacts. The loan alone,

which the Bank of Greece was forced to give the occupiers in 1941, would amount to €10.3 billion in today's money.

Ulf Brunnbauer, a historian at the University of Regensburg, said he believes the war reparations issue has been concluded. “The Greeks could, however, justify their claim to compensation for the forced loan,” he told Handelsblatt Global Edition.

“The issue of compensation for victims of war crimes and their relatives is more a moral than a legal issue and should be separated from the reparations,” he added. Compensation would not be money that the Greek government itself could access.

There have already been indications that although Berlin considers the reparations issue closed it might try to find other means to make good on the past.

Michael Roth, a junior foreign minister, said in March that he was open to the idea of increasing contributions to an existing German-Greek Future Fund, created to encourage reconciliation between the two countries.

Mr. Brunnbauer also pointed to the creation of a fund to pay compensation to forced laborers from Eastern Europe, as an example of what the German government could do for Greek victims of Nazi war crimes.

The reparations issue has long dogged German-Greek relations but has been brought to the fore in recent years as Greece struggles with an

economy that has contracted by nearly a quarter, causing massive unemployment and hardship.

The recently elected prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, told parliament in March that “Germany has never properly paid reparations for the damage done to Greece by the Nazi occupation.”

“After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the legal and political conditions were created for this issue to be solved. But, since then, German governments chose silence, legal tricks and delay,” he added.

Now, a parliamentary committee which was set up to deal with the reparations issue has arrived at a figure, basing its findings on an existing study from earlier this year. The committee and the country’s top court are now looking into how to pursue these claims.

To back its argument for reparations, Greece has referred to the 1953 London Agreement on German External Debts, a treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and creditor nations stipulating that obligations from the war were to be deferred until “after the signing of a peace treaty.”

However, Berlin believes that the 1960 agreement between Germany and Greece, and Greece’s recognition of the Two-Plus-Four treaty of 1990 that marked the unification of Germany and was effectively regarded as the final peace treaty, means that there are no more legal claims to be made on it regarding World War II.

“The Greeks could justify their claim to compensation for the forced loan.”

ULF BRUNNBAUER
HISTORIAN, UNIVERSITY OF REGENSBURG

Greece could use the money, as it continues to battle with European creditors, including Germany, who have held out giving Athens additional aid until the new government agrees

to maintain the course on tough structural reforms.

At the end of last year the economy had started to grow slightly after years of recession. The election of the anti-austerity party Syriza in late January, however, has caused a flight of capital and [great uncertainty](#) about whether the country can continue in the euro zone.

While the government has sought to renegotiate the conditions of its bailouts from international creditors, which amount to €240 billion, it has been thwarted in its efforts in particular by the hard-line approach from Germany.

Germany as the biggest contributor to the billion bailouts of Greece has been perceived as spearheading the push for austerity in Greece. Berlin wants the country to reform its economy in return for the financial lifeline that has kept the country afloat for five years.

Many Greeks [tend to blame Germany](#) for the misery they have endured and there have been frequent depictions of German politicians such as Chancellor Angela Merkel and her finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, as Nazis in both the press and on placards during anti-austerity demonstrations.

The Nazi occupation of Greece was particularly brutal. More than 300,000 people starved, while 130,000 were killed in reprisal executions, and the country's Jewish community was almost completely wiped out. That wartime suffering is still a deep part of the country's collective memory.

While Germany has made enormous strides to deal with its Nazi past and to achieve reconciliation with the countries its forces occupied, as well as with the Jewish communities and the state of Israel, the details of just how harsh the Greek occupation was are not particularly well known in Germany.

"There is no denial, there is just not a great awareness of it," said Mr. Brunnbauer, the historian. "Even amongst historians there, there is a great lack of knowledge about this."

That is something that has added insult to injury for many in Greece.

While Syriza campaigned primarily against austerity, it has also long been vociferous in seeking redress from Germany on this issue. Mr. Tsipras raised the question of reparations two years ago when, as then opposition leader, he first met with Wolfgang Schäuble.

Tellingly, his first action on the day he was [appointed prime minister in January](#) was to lay roses at the National Resistance Memorial, in Kaisariani, the spot where 200 political activists - mostly communists - were executed by the Nazis on May Day 1944.

In general, relations have soured between Greece and Germany since the election of Syriza. The Greek outspoken finance minister, [Yanis Varoufakis](#)' relations with his German counterpart have been particularly strained.

And calls from the Greek justice minister, Nikos Paraskevopoulos, to seize German assets in Greece, did not help smooth relations.

He called on German properties, such as the Goethe Institute in Athens, to be seized to help pay compensation to families of Nazi victims, such as the 218 people massacred at the village of Distomo in 1944, one of the worst atrocities of the war.

Nevertheless, for Germany, the Greek insistence on repeatedly mentioning the war, is infuriating, coming as Athens is in long drawn-out negotiations to unlock an additional €7.2 billion in bailout funds, ahead of negotiating another aid package when the current one runs out in June.

Greece is seen as barely having enough funds to make it to the end of this month.

However, it has insisted that it will make a €457 million payment to one of its creditors, the International Monetary Fund, due on April 9 and work towards a sustainable deal with its European partners.

Mr. Brunnbauer, the historian, questions the timing of the Greek reparations demands and the attempt to link them to the country's current debt crisis.

“It is not a clever political move to bring this up now. It won't exactly increase the German government's willingness to find a compromise on the debt issue.”

Siobhán Dowling has covered German and international politics from Berlin and Dublin for more than a decade and previously studied 20th century European history. To contact the author:

dowling@handelsblatt.com

READ THIS ARTICLE ONLINE:

<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/150/ressort/politics/article/athens-and-the-nazi-atrocities>