

German anger over Greek demand for war reparations

Berlin incredulous at justice minister's threat to seize German property and repatriate antiquities unless €341bn compensation is paid

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Germany has reacted with anger and defiance to Greek government demands for multibillion-euro reparation payments over first and second world war atrocities.

Greece's justice minister, Nikos Paraskevopoulos, said Athens was prepared to approve a court ruling to seize German property in the country - including the Goethe Institute, the German Archaeological Institute, German schools and holiday homes if Berlin refused to pay €341bn (£240bn) in compensation.

The demands, which also included the return of 8,500 archaeological treasures and artefacts in Germany, were met with incredulity in Berlin.

Seizures of property that could extend to holiday homes of private German citizens would be used to compensate victims of a second world war Nazi massacre of 218 Greek civilians in the village of Distomo, the government said.

Bela Anda, who was a spokesman for Gerhard Schröder when he was German chancellor, now an editor at tabloid Bild, branded the threats "bizarre, presumptuous and impertinent".

"The government of [Alexis] Tsipras positions the lever where Germany is most vulnerable - the crimes committed by Germany in the first and second world wars. It's moral blackmail," he said.

The demands stem from a Greek finance ministry report published in December 2014 which calculated on the basis of expert assessment that Germany "owed" Greece €9.2bn for the first world war, €322bn for the second world war and €10bn for money Greece was forced to lend the Nazi regime in 1942.

Resentment in Greece over Nazi atrocities remains high, and has been greatly exacerbated by frustrations over its bailout and the widespread feeling that Germany is largely to blame for Greece's woes.

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and her finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, have been repeatedly depicted in the Greek media in Nazi uniform.

Upping the ante

The German television channel ZDFneo has responded with a music video which has gone viral, which makes fun of both sides of the dispute and mocks both the Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, and Schäuble.

Greek politicians have been upping the ante in their dispute with Germany ever since last month's renegotiation of the country's €240bn international bailout, in which both sides claimed victory for a deal that gave Athens a four-month reprieve and more leeway over economic reform.

Relations appeared to hit a new low when the defence minister, Panos Kammenos, of the rightwing populist party Independent Greeks, this week threatened to send Islamist fundamentalists to Germany from among tens of thousands of migrants currently in Greece, in revenge for the austerity measures that Berlin is widely seen to have imposed on Athens.

"If you deliver a blow to Greece, then you should know that migrants will be given papers and sent to Berlin," Kammenos told a meeting of his party, in remarks passed to the media. "If members of the terror militia Islamic State are among them then Europe only has itself to blame because of its attitude towards Greece with regards to the debt question."

The reparations demands have increased the tension still further. The issue dominated the news agenda in Germany on Thursday, with some commentators saying that the government should review at least certain aspects of Greece's claims.

The respectable daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (faz.net) accused Tsipras of "living in cloud cuckoo land", saying that the issue had been resolved years ago. "Germany has always lived up to its responsibility for what is

anyway an injustice that can never be repaired - and paid for it. To pull this card now ... is dangerous mischief in the time of the euro rescue.”

Die Welt called on German politicians to remain resolute in their handling of Greece, accusing Athens of using the reparations issue to deflect attention from its failure to tackle economic reform. “The Athens government is refusing to carry out existential reforms. It prefers instead to befuddle its people with the fiery booze of anti-German rhetoric,” the paper wrote in its main editorial. “If they continue to rage, to toy with the idea of sending Islamists to Germany, to close the Goethe Institute, the only answer can be to remain steadfast.”

While polls indicate most Germans are against further compensation payments, the issue remains divisive. Members of the Left party have insisted Berlin should compensate Greeks with €11bn for a so-called “occupation loan” that the Bank of Greece was forced to make to Nazi Germany in 1942.

“It is Germany’s moral duty to pay the money, even if there are different opinions on international law,” Annette Groth of the Left party told Reuters.

The Cottbus-based Lausitzer Rundschau backed the idea, writing in its editorial this morning that Germany should be prepared to consider compensation payments linked to the “occupation loan”.

“Ten billion euros for education projects, infrastructure measures, or as start-up money for companies ... maybe concentrated on the very villages and regions in which the Germans staged their worst massacres ... would be a forward-looking signal of active recompense 70 years on,” it wrote.

The German government has so far refused to comment on the specific threats to seize property, appearing determined not to rise to the bait. On Wednesday, it rejected the reparation claims in general, saying that it had paid Greece 115m Deutschmarks in 1960, as part of a global agreement covering war reparations with 12 countries, to which Athens signed up.

“The question of reparations and compensation payments has been both legally and politically resolved,” a government spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said. His statement was backed up by similar reactions from the foreign and finance ministries.

German reunification

Berlin also points to the 1990 Two-plus-Four Treaty, which was signed by the then East Germany and West Germany as well as second world war allies before German reunification, which was meant to end to any claims.

Silja Vöneky, an expert in international law at the University of Freiburg said that sovereign assets belonging to the German state - including the Goethe Institute and German schools - may not be confiscated.

She pointed to the 2012 ruling by the international court of justice under which states cannot be forced to pay compensation for war crimes by rulings from foreign courts. The ruling followed a claim brought by the relatives of victims of the 1944 Distomo massacre in Greece, who sought the confiscation of German property as compensation. The court ruled that individuals could not take a state to court and that the Greek government itself would have to take a case before the international court.

Ulf Brunnbauer, a German historian at Regensburg University, said he found Greece’s demands “thoroughly understandable” but counterproductive. Speaking on German public radio, DLF, he called for a closer dialogue between the government and Greek historians over German crimes committed during its three-and-a-half-year Nazi occupation of the country. “I think that’s very necessary,” he said.

Former Greek government spokesman Evangelos Antonaros told the same radio station that the Tsipras government would turn the row with Germany into one of the defining elements of its time in office, largely because it would help keep it in power.

“Germany has been turned into the scapegoat and the bogeyman,” Antonaros said. “Unfortunately, it clicks with the majority of the people ... though the more sensible voices are warning of the dangers of a very severe crisis in relations between Greece and Germany.”

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