

Racism and arrogance: Anti-Greek agitation in the German media

By Johannes Stern
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Not since the defeat of the Third Reich 70 years ago has the German ruling elite vilified another country and its people as it has maligned Greece in recent weeks. Its choice of words alone brings to mind the darkest times in Germany history, when the media pumped out propaganda in an effort to line up the population behind the crimes of German imperialism.

The following are just a few of the phrases that have entered the “normal” vocabulary of bourgeois politicians and journalists. Greek government officials have been called “gamblers and thugs” (Alois Theisen, editor-in-chief of the Hessian Broadcasting Corporation), the Greek government has been reviled as “perverse” (Hans-Ulrich Jörges, editor of *Der Stern* magazine) and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has been called a “carpet merchant” (*Handelsblatt*).

Since the final capitulation of Tsipras and the Syriza government to the austerity diktat of German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, it is increasingly clear that the insults are directed above all against the Greek people, who enraged the German ruling class by daring to reject its austerity demands in the July 5 referendum.

At the beginning of this week, Thomas Strobl, the deputy chairman of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and son-in-law of Schäuble, stepped in front of the cameras to declare, “The Greeks have exasperated us long enough.” That Strobl should give vent to such chauvinism is not surprising. In 2005, in his capacity as general secretary of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, he was responsible for the production of the CDU’s songbook *Lied.Gut*, which included the infamous Nazi anthem “Panzerlied.” Following protests, the songbook was discontinued. Ten years later, Strobl’s views are now mainstream.

Some commentaries in the media make openly racist arguments. As early as June, Berthold Seewald, lead

editor for cultural history in an article entitled “History before Tsipras: Greece destroyed the European order once before,” advanced the absurd and reactionary argument that Greece upset the European “order of peace” established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, after the defeat of Napoleon, and left the continent in shambles. According to Seewald, this process is now repeating itself. One reason for this, he says, is that the Greeks are not really Europeans.

At the end of the article, Seewald writes: “The idea that the Greeks of modern times would behave as descendants of Pericles or Socrates and not as a mix of Slavs, Byzantines and Albanians became a dogma of educated Europe.” He complains that “even the architects of the EU could not escape this. They dragged Greece, already strapped for cash in 1980, into the European boat.” One can only “marvel at the consequences on a daily basis,” he concludes.

There is a distinct whiff of Nazi ideology in these racist assertions. They harken back, in the first instance, to Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, an Orientalist and journalist of the 19th century. In his 1830 work *History of the Morean Peninsula During the Middle Ages*, already controversial in its own day, Fallmerayer argued that a uniformly Hellenic ethnicity prevailed in ancient Greece. But, he asserted, basing himself on Slavic and Albanian place names among other things, that the “Hellenic race was wiped out in Europe” and “not even a drop of noble and pure Hellenic blood flowed in the veins of the Christian population of modern Greece.”

Spiros Moskovou, who heads the Greek office of the German news agency Deutsche Welle, explained the historical continuity of such ideas in a speech last autumn. He noted that Fallmerayer’s theories were “taken up by the Nazis” to “justify their gruesome

occupation of Greece.” Hitler had been “extremely disappointed” because he “had originally thought the descendants of the ancient Greeks would welcome the invasion of the German Wehrmacht.” When that proved not to be the case, “the Nazi propagandists revived the theory of the degenerate Greek nation.”

The racist innuendos in *Die Welt* are not mere aberrations. On the cover of the latest edition of the largest German-language weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, is an illustration showing a nervous German tourist with a fat wallet dancing arm in arm with an Ouzu-drinking Greek. Above, in big letters, are the words: “Our Greeks—Rapprochement with a strange people.”

The message and the historical reference are so blatant that even sections of the German media have felt obliged to protest. The *Handelsblatt* wrote that the cover suggested “in a demagogic way that the foolish German pays the tab for the dancing, drunken Greeks.”

Handelsblatt then posed the question: “Why does *Der Spiegel* call them ‘our Greeks?’ Do we have ownership claims on the Southern European country? Greece most recently belonged to ‘us’ in the Second World War, when a flag bearing the Swastika flew over the Acropolis.”

How is it to be explained that such filth, long thought to belong to the dim and distant past, has reemerged so violently?

The factors driving the emergence of such racist propaganda today are essentially the same as those that led to the catastrophe of the 1930s. The German elites are reacting to the deep crisis of European and international capitalism by returning to aggressive great-power politics. To do so, they must impose their will on Europe as they did in 1914 and 1939.

There is hardly a prominent figure who more clearly embodies the return of German arrogance than Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler. In a recent interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* under the title “Europe has completely different problems,” the professor, who repeatedly calls for Germany to play the role of “taskmaster” of Europe, employs chauvinistic arguments to promote the idea of German leadership.

Münkler first declares, “We must recognize that in the Balkans there exist largely vertical structures of obligation.” It would certainly have been a “mistake”

to “include these states in the European Union.”

Later, he says of the political parties in Greece, that “there is no place for them in the European arena” because they employ a “national vocabulary.”

Germany, he continues, is “currently the strongest power in the EU,” and this brings “obligations with it.” Germany must “engage more.” Until “France lands on its feet again, Germany has a central function as, let us say, guardian of the treaties.”

Münkler has only contempt for the fate of the Greek people. If the latest attempt of the country to “transform” itself does not succeed, he writes, “one must say: Greece is a Third World country and has no business in Europe and certainly not with the euro.”

At the very end of the interview, Münkler, who networks with the most influential layers in ruling circles and the military, offers a glimpse into the various scenarios for which the ruling elites in Berlin are preparing themselves.

Should Greece collapse, he writes, “we would have to contend with massive unrest there.” An intervention “of the Russians” is “not to be excluded.”

Münkler indicated his views on the German response to such a development at a recent panel discussion at the Catholic Academy in Berlin, where he exchanged views on rearmament and preparations for war with a leading German general.

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