

GLOBAL INSIGHT

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Greeks direct cries of pain at Germany

By Tony Barber in Athens

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Pensioners demonstrate against the Greek government's new austerity measures

Rioters burn the German flag in street protests. A demonstrator defaces the façade of the Bank of Greece, the central bank, so that it reads “Bank of Berlin”.

Most shockingly, a rightwing Greek newspaper depicts Angela Merkel, Germany’s chancellor, in a Nazi uniform above the headline “Memorandum macht frei” – an allusion to the memorandum in which Greece’s foreign creditors demand more austerity measures and to the Auschwitz slogan.

In these anxious times anti-German sentiments are not unusual in Greece. Locked in a struggle to avoid economic ruin and exit from the eurozone, Greece is confronting the potential collapse of its self-image as a country with a secure place in Europe’s family of nations.

To blame Germany draws on deep wells of national suffering endured during the 1941-1944 Nazi occupation of Greece. It is not the only response: Greek economic mismanagement, public sector corruption and dysfunctional politics inspire much self-criticism. Animosity towards Germany is not sweeping through all levels of Greek society.

However, a steady drumbeat of resentful attacks on Germany’s policies in the eurozone debt crisis, and on German popular views of Greece, rumbles week after week through television talk

shows and the press. As the economic emergency intensifies, it resonates in stormy debates among Greece's political classes.

The left wing of the socialist Pasok party, and the right wing of the conservative New Democracy party, each contain a self-styled "patriotic" element for which national sovereignty is a badge of pride. In both of Greece's largest parties a block of pro-European modernisers, mindful of the need for sustained external financial support, is doing battle with malcontents that dabble with anti-German and anti-European Union rhetoric.

Anti-German populism finds its mirror in the impression among the German public that Greeks are lazy, unreliable and responsible for their own woes. German business people are losing patience: Franz Fehrenbach, head of Bosch, the world's leading car parts supplier, called this week for Greece to leave the eurozone.

In all these ways the economic costs and political strains of the debt crisis are producing a certain "renationalisation" of public opinion across Europe. An unmistakable discomfort accompanies the realisation that Germany's economic pre-eminence entitles it to the leading role in tackling the emergency.

It is visible, for example, in France's presidential election campaign. Ms Merkel threw her support behind Nicolas Sarkozy, the centre-right incumbent, after France lost the top-notch credit rating still enjoyed by Germany. But the French left yearns to maximise its autonomy in economic policymaking, should it win the election. This sidesteps the reality that Franco-German equality, so central to post-1945 European integration, is, at least in economic terms, a fiction.

Greece's post-second world war relationship with Germany is rather different. Neither country invested anything like as much effort in reconciliation as Germany and France did.

Economic recovery and social peace in Greece, after its 1946-1949 civil war, depended to no small degree on good relations with the old West Germany and its booming economy. Hundreds of thousands of Greek emigrants found work in German cities. German tourists flocked to Greek beaches.

A high point was reached in 2004, when Otto Rehhagel, a German football coach, led Greece to victory in the European Championship. The Greek media crowned him "King Otto", a reference to the Bavarian prince who was installed by Europe's powers as Greece's first post-independence monarch in 1832.

Not everything was plain sailing. In 1957 Greek authorities arrested Maximilian Merten, the former wartime military administrator of the northern city of Thessaloniki. He was tried for war crimes, sentenced to 25 years in prison and then quietly released. Only when the relevant archives were opened in 1990 did it emerge that the Greek government had freed him in return for securing an economic co-operation agreement with West Germany.

As this episode indicates, a small country such as Greece must often accept trade-offs in relations with a bigger country such as Germany. Today's Greek outbursts against Germany are a cry of anger from a country that knows it committed so many mistakes that its fate lies to a great extent in the hands of outsiders.

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