

Reparations Unpaid

Alexis Tsipras

The new Prime Minister of Greece spoke to the Inter-party Parliamentary Committee for Claiming German Reparations at its meeting at the Hellenic Parliament in Athens on 10 March 2015.

I take the floor today in this historic meeting not only for symbolic, but also for substantive reasons; first and foremost, to pay tribute to the victims of World War Two. But also to honour the male and female fighters from all over the world who gave their lives for the freedom of their homelands – who gave their lives in order to defeat Nazism, which threw its poisonous fog over the people of the world. I also take the floor to honour the fighters of the Greek national resistance, who gave their lives in order to rid the country of Nazi atrocities and occupation, in order for us to have a free, sovereign homeland today.

Some people say, ‘Why tackle the past? Look to the future!’ But how can a country, a people, have a future if it does not honour its history and its struggles? How can a people move forward, erasing collective memory and leaving its struggles and sacrifices historically unjustified?

Not much time has passed since then. The generation of the Occupation and of the National Resistance lives still. Echoes of torture and executions at Distomo and Kaisariani, at Kalavrita and at Vianno, are still fresh in the collective memory of our people. The crimes and destruction caused by the troops of the Third Reich across Greece, but also across the entirety of Europe, remain fresh in the memory of our people. And these memories must be preserved in the younger generations. We have a duty – historical, political, and ethical – to preserve them. Not because we want to retain the suspicion and hatred between peoples, but in order to remember forever what Nazism means, what fascism means. In order to remember that when

solidarity, friendship, co-operation and dialogue between different people are replaced by a sense of superiority and historical destiny – when respect is supplanted by intolerance, both ethnic and social – then war and darkness prevail.

This darkness Europe has known well. It lived it, and hated it. This was one of the reasons why, in 1957, the European people decided to begin procedures so that the sirens of war would never sound again. We should not forget that the German people suffered, too, from Nazi atrocities; and that, in Germany, Nazism prevailed because the German people were humiliated at an earlier stage.

This, of course, is not an excuse but an explanation. It is the lesson of the short 20th century – if we remember Eric Hobsbawm well. After World War One, hatred and revanchism prevailed; there was short-sighted humiliation of the loser as punishment, the humiliation of an entire people, and misery visited upon them because of their defeat. And this choice was later paid in the blood of the youth of the entire world – including Germany's.

The people of Europe and their leaders must remember and draw conclusions from modern European history, because Europe must not be permitted to make the same mistakes again. After World War Two, the lesson was learned. Despite the crimes of the Third Reich and Hitler's hordes, who burned the world to the ground, despite the totalitarian evil of the Holocaust, Germany benefited, and rightfully so, from a series of interventions. The most important of these were the write-offs of Germany's debts, under the Agreement on German External Debts made in London in 1953 and, of course, the huge sums disbursed by the Allies in order to rebuild Germany.

The London Treaty recognises, however, that Germany's final reparations for World War Two remain. They should have been resolved at the time of the final peace agreement, which wasn't signed until 1990, due to the division of Germany. The reunification of the two Germanys created the necessary legal and political conditions to resolve this issue, but the German governments since then have opted for silence, legal tricks, deferment, and dilatory tactics. And I wonder, is this stance ethical?

I mentioned legal tricks, and since these are very important issues I would like to explain clearly what I mean, so that no shadow of a doubt remains. When Germany agrees to discuss its debts to Greece since World War Two, it invokes the Bilateral Agreement of 1960. This was when, by Germany's own initiative, it paid 115 million marks as reparations, and the then Kingdom of Greece acknowledged that there were no further claims

to be had. This agreement, however, did not have to do with the reparations that involved the damages suffered by the country, but with the reparations to the victims of Nazism in Greece. And, of course, in no case whatsoever did it concern the Occupation Loan, or even the claims for reparations given the atrocities of war, the almost complete destruction of the infrastructure of the country, and the destruction of the economy during the war and the Occupation.

All these, I know well, are highly technical and highly sensitive issues, and perhaps this is not the place or the time to say more about them. The necessary clarifications and the technical work will not be done by me, but by experts – legal scholars and historians. I want to reassure both the Greek people and the German people that we will approach this issue with the necessary sensitivity, with a sense of responsibility and honesty, through communication and dialogue. But we expect the same thing from the German government, for reasons of a political, historical and symbolic nature.

In contrast to the moralising tone that has prevailed in the past few years within the public debate in Europe, we neither choose the position of the student who bends his head and closes his eyes against moral teaching from on high, nor do we choose the position of the moralising teacher, who wags his finger reproachfully at a supposed sinner, asking him to pay for his sins. On the contrary, we choose the path of negotiation and dialogue, of mutual understanding and justice. We will perform no theodicy here, but at the same time we will not give up our inalienable claims. We are not delivering lessons on morality; nor will we accept any morality lessons. Because, lately, when listening to provocative statements from abroad, I am often reminded of the famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says: ‘They see the mote in their brother’s eye, but not the beam in their own’.

The Greek government will work tirelessly, on an equal footing and through dialogue in the framework of an honest negotiation, to find a solution to the most complex problems faced by Europe. The government will work to honour fully its obligations. But, at the same time, it will work to meet all the unfulfilled obligations owed to Greece and the Greek people. And in the same way that we commit to fulfil our own obligations, so the other sides ought to fulfil theirs, too. Morality cannot be invoked *à la carte*. It cannot happen by chance.

The new Greek government will support, with all its powers, the initiative to rebuild, reconstruct, and upgrade the Commission for Claiming the German Reparations to Greece. We will support it truly and substantively – not simply for show. We are ready to offer any political and

legal assistance, so that the efforts of the Commission bear fruit; and in the framework of its tenure, to bring a meaningful result, to bring a solution, to vindicate the unfulfilled ethical, but also historical, debts, not only to the Greek people, but also to all of the peoples of Europe who fought and bled to defeat Nazism. We owe it to our history. We owe it to the fighters of the National Resistance in Greece. We owe it to the victims of World War Two. We owe it to Europe and its peoples, who have the right to a future unfettered by any kind of totalitarianism.

