

Policy and War in the Post-War Balkans. Germany and the Greco-Yugoslavian Issue at the beginning of the 1950s*

STRATOS N. DORDANAS,
Lecturer in History,
Department of Balkan, Slavic & Oriental Studies,
University of Macedonia. Hellas
Email: dordanas@uom.gr

In November 1950, Marshal Tito gave his first interview to a German journalist referring, among other things, to German-Yugoslav foreign relations. In the interview he emphasised Yugoslavia's willingness to strengthen the trade cooperation between the two nations, but also to restore it to prewar levels. Following the reconstitution of full diplomatic relations, Tito felt these prospects to be favourable. He assured the Germans that the Yugoslavs held no hard feelings towards them regarding the war, emphatically stating: "We do not hate any peoples, we hate only fascism". Characterizing the German people as highly competent and diligent, he re-affirmed his support for a united Germany, deeming that the formation of two Germanies held dangers analogous to those of the Korean peninsula. Clearly, Tito's views, stated above, started a new phase in bi-lateral relations. On the one hand, both sides sought a convergence in the fields of politics, economics and culture, and on the other, attempts were made to overcome the legacy of the past, of which the war was a part. The Bonn government included in this latter category the pressing issues concerning the German prisoners-of-war, the war criminals, and the ethnic-German minority in Yugoslavia.¹

Earlier in that year, March 1950, Hans Schumacher, the German representative for matters of foreign policy, had had a series of meetings in Athens with distinguished individuals of the Greek political, scientific and business worlds, which took place both before and after the elections. Tsaldaris, Plastiras and Pipinelis stressed to the German interlocutor the need for an immediate restoration of trade relations between the two countries; this being a matter of absolute priority for Greece. All three politicians recognised the importance of the German factor in fortifying Europe against Moscow and communism at large (Fleischer, 2008: 528-9). Pipinelis, having made the biggest impression on Schumacher, argued that a

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¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes [Political Archive of Foreign Office], Berlin (PA AA), 210-01/39 (1950-54): Tito für gute Beziehungen mit Deutschland [Tito on good relations with Germany], Belgrade, 13 November 1950.

common Greco-German anti-communist defence preparedness would also inevitably strengthen the economic and cultural relations between the two countries. He concluded: "To some extent, there remain in Greece unpleasant memories from the period of war [...]. Today, however, we must look forward. The common dangers that threaten the democratic peoples of Europe make the shadows of the past pale before them. Greece believes that Europe cannot be saved without Germany [...]"²

These 'shadows of the past', however, were not that easy to dispel. Partly because politics and the economy were interdependent and partly because memories of the war were still fresh. As far as German politics was concerned, the urgent issue of the German war criminals still imprisoned in Greek jails was high on the political and economic agenda between Athens and Bonn. And as far as the Greeks' vivid memories of the German occupation went, there could not have been a more appropriate witness to them than the foreign correspondent of Spiegel, who was the first German after the war to visit Crete. Walking the streets of Chania, he experienced first hand the anti-German sentiments of the residents not only from their strong words but also from their deeds. Things were no better when he tried to contact the local authorities: the mayor refused to see him, the director of the municipal archives behaved insultingly by swiping the journalist's papers off the table, and the metropolitan refused to answer most of his questions.³ All this that the Spiegel correspondent had gone through, the German diplomatic mission in Athens simply interpreted as "Cretan idiosyncrasy". In other words, it was assumed that the negative situation on Crete cannot be compared with the rest of Greece, adding that fortunately for them, Crete would not comprise a favoured destination for Germans in the foreseeable future.⁴

As can be seen from all that has been said above, the cases of Greece and Yugoslavia present a number of similarities as to the restoration of diplomatic ties with the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II. Willing to establish diplomatic relations with West Germany for almost the same reasons, both states sent ambassadors to Bonn, at the same time allowing German embassies to reopen in Athens and Belgrade, respectively. If anything with this move, the two Balkan capitals acknowledged, on the one hand, the importance of the German political factor on the Cold War in Europe, and on the other, Germany's key contribution to their respective countries' economic reconstruction.

In 1950, having been hit by a severe economic crisis, Yugoslavia found itself literally on the verge of starvation. This officially signaled the failure of the five-year plan, which the Yugoslavian side blamed on the following factors (Bombelles, 1968: 12-46): firstly, the adverse turn of events on their internal economy brought on by the Tito-Stalin split that saw their exports cut in half, this was added to by the economic embargo imposed by the Cominform,

² PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): Hans Schumacher an Konrad Adenauer, „Eindrücke von einem mehrwöchigen Besuch in Griechenland [Impressions from a visit of several weeks to Greece]", Berlin, 21 April 1950.

³ PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): Generalkonsulat der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Athen an Bundeskanzleramt, Dienststelle für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Bonn [Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Athens to Bonn], „Kreta", Athens, 29 December 1950: Dr. Horst J. Becker, „Reisebericht Kreta [Report on a Trip in Crete]", Athens, 25 December 1950.

⁴ PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): Generalkonsulat der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Grundherr to Bonn], „Kreta", Athens, 29 December 1950.

the crisis in Korea, and finally, the slow pace with which their return to the West was being accomplished. Regarding this last point, Germany's crucial role must be noted. From 1947, Yugoslavia and Germany signed a series of respective trade and economic agreements worth several million dollars, or rather several million Deutsch-marks. Apart from the obvious economic character of these agreements, there were also two other aspects of great interest. The first of these was Germany's opportunity to apply pressure for the release of her prisoners of war or "supposed" war criminals held in Yugoslav jails.⁵

According to data, in 1945, this figure amounted to 84,000 men, of which 74,000 had been released by January 1949, and about 1,300 still remained imprisoned. In May 1951, the data that Yugoslavia gave to the United Nations was that 6,200 Germans had died in captivity, approximately 400 were considered to be war criminals, and some 4,000 men were employed as free labourers. This last category had been released from jail on account of their agreeing to sign contracts to work for the Yugoslav government. The fact becomes obvious that in order for Yugoslavia to increase her industry, there was a real need for manpower and skilled workers, which led her, on the one hand, to turn to the existing reservoir of war criminals, offering them long-term contracts, and on the other, to look to Germany in the hopes of luring a labour force from there. In the early 1950s over 10,000 Germans were calculated to have been working in the implementation of Yugoslavia's five-year plan, which included the industrialization of the country.⁶

In light of this, it is perhaps easier to understand why Tito, in his 1950 interview - mentioned at the beginning of this talk- had announced that amnesty would also be granted to German war criminals; this essentially meant that Yugoslavia was ready and willing to gradually but definitively close the chapter on the war legacy relations between her and Germany.

The legacy of the war was also accepted when it could be used to support the case for yet another, this time ideological, ongoing war against Moscow. In July 1951, an article was published in the newspaper *Politika*, which was a tribute to the *Three years of Struggle against Oppression in Moscow*. In this article, 1948 was perceived to be the second stage in a decade-old battle (begun in 1941) against tyrants and conquerors, which although indirectly, very clearly paralleled Stalin with Hitler. It was regarded as a national and historical obligation to continue the struggle of building socialism in the face of all the old and new

⁵ PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): „Geschichte [Report]“, pp. 16-19. For these reasons, among others, the German Embassy in 1952 denied the following article of “Yugopress”: “The German Chargé d’ Affaires in Belgrade, Heinrich Graf von Hardenberg, who returned from an official trip to Bonn, told the Yugopress Diplomatic Representative that the official Bonn circles and the German Embassy in Belgrade had received with the great satisfaction the conclusion of the trade agreement between the Federal German Republic and the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. Graf von Hardenberg considers that this agreement will serve to strengthen an unhampered trade exchange between the two countries. The German Embassy is convinced, he stated, that, in the spirit mutual understanding, it will very soon come to an expansion of political and cultural relations. He also believed that at summer’s end the Yugoslav and German Governments will be advancing their proposals concerning the settlement of detailed technical questions bearing of the further development of German-Yugoslav Relations”, see, PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): “Yugopress” Information Bulletin, “The German and Yugoslav Relation”, Nr. 31, Belgrade, 25 June 1952.

⁶ PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): „Geschichte [Report]“, pp. 16-19.

challenges and threats to Yugoslavia's independence.⁷ What is more, being at loggerheads with Moscow and the Cominform, Yugoslavia needed to muster support from other partners, and the Federal Republic of Germany became such a one (Christidis, 2003: 117-121).

In the first place, Tito had repeatedly expressed his support for an independent Germany, strongly criticising the Allies' policies on the German question, which he believed were no different to what they had been at the end of the First World War.⁸ Tito's views on Germany were, in fact, in keeping with general European perceptions that supported the strengthening of West Germany in order for it to be used as a buffer against the Soviet threat (Young, 2006: 134).

On February 15, 1953, the new German Ambassador to Belgrade, while handing his credentials, received the assurance from Tito himself, that "Yugoslavia supported an independent Germany with full rights, which would counter the Russian threat." Despite its transient, as it turned out, nature, this German-Yugoslav political agreement against Moscow also had positive impacts on a number of other matters of importance for Germany. One such was the release of the final twelve German war criminals, at the start of 1953. Another promoting the rights of the ethnic-German minority in the Yugoslav state.⁹

Even up until May 1952, a German report entitled *The state of the German minority in Yugoslavia*, stated that there had been "systematic extermination of the ethnic German population in Yugoslavia from October 1944 until the summer of 1948". From a total of 620,000 in 1941, the remaining 55,000 ethnic-Germans in Yugoslavia were, however, gradually granted some of their rights. More particularly, the use of the German language was allowed in 1948, and there was almost a complete reversal of the Yugoslavs' negative public opinion about Germany. In fact, as hatred of the Germans subsided, blatant hostility against the Russians grew.

Greco-German relations, in the early 1950s, followed a similar trend to those between Germany and Yugoslavia, and although from the very beginning trade agreements had been the focal point, it was the new political priorities that played the catalytic role in the Bonn-Athens rapprochement. Thus, in December of 1950, Greece had made a positive impression on the first German diplomatic mission on its six-day stay in the Greek capital. More important than these feelings of friendship and warm reception, however, were the diplomats' initial meetings with the political heads which determined the future framework of the bilateral relations. Express instructions from Bonn stated that good relations with Greece were essential at this early stage. There were obviously a number of political and economic reasons for this, but the two main ones were, firstly, Greece's anti-communist orientation and secondly, that as a member of the UN and other international organisations, Greece could be useful in supporting German interests until the Federal Republic of

⁷ PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): Politische Vertretung, Ulrich an Auswärtiges Amt, „Der Ton der jugoslawischen Propaganda gegen Moskau [Yugoslavian Propaganda against Moscow]“, Belgrade, 9 July 1951.

⁸ PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): Politische Vertretung, Ulrich an Auswärtiges Amt, „Marschall Tito über Deutschland [Tito on Germany]“, Belgrade, 25 October 1951.

⁹ PA AA, 210-01/39 (1950-54): Kroll an Auswärtiges Amt, „Telegramm“, Belgrade, 12 February 1953.

Germany was itself accepted as a member in itself.¹⁰

For Greece, besides strengthening commercial exchanges with Germany, the other major advantage concerned the 'threat from the north' (Valden, 1991: 50-52, 67-69; Michailidis, 2007; Katsanos, 2013);¹¹ Europe was now responsible for dealing with the political alignment between Greece and Germany. Germany was considered to be a decisive factor in Europe's security and for this reason, Greece was willing to support its accession to Western organisations. In addition, in view of meeting the new challenges posed by the Cold War, Greece thought it best to erase the period of the German occupation from its memory, or in the words of the Athens government: "The past should be forgotten".¹²

Only that, as already mentioned, this particular memory was painful and persistent and could not be easily erased. It seems that perhaps the sole exception was for the sake of the new political interests (Fleischer, 1991: 99). The first issues that the German diplomats put to the Greek government, as they did with Yugoslavia, were those concerning the return of the German war criminals and German assets seized by the Greek government after the war. These were linked directly to matters that were vital for the Greek economy, such as opening up the German market to Greek agricultural products, tobacco, in particular (Králová, 2012: 161-264). On the basis of the Greek Foreign Minister's, Sophocles Venizelos' promise to the German ambassador, an attempt was made to legally regulate the matter in 1951, at least to some extent. Obviously, this move comprised a public policy objective of both sides: on Germany's part this entailed having every one of her prisoners released from Greek jails, whereas on Greece's part, it was thought that this policy of compromise would be an effective bargaining tool in Athens's future dealings with Bonn. A characteristic example of how Greece chose to settle the prisoner-of-war issue in order to secure Germany's politico-economic support is evident in the case of the first German commander on Crete, who although sentenced to life imprisonment in 1947, was released within three years, after Germany applied strong pressure (Dordanas, 2012: 83-109). For its part, the Greek foreign Ministry let the relevant German authorities know, in no uncertain terms, that bringing up the memory of the Occupation and stirring up the past did not serve Greek interests at the time. Nevertheless, in October 1952, to its great satisfaction, the Bonn government was able to announce that the last German, former SS officer, would soon be freed, being thus able to focus its attention on handing over more than twenty such cases to the German justice system, all of whom were either official staff of the German Embassy in Athens or had been former officers during the occupation period, of whom

¹⁰ PA AA, 210-01/199 (1950-53): „Vermerkt [Note]“, Bonn, 15 February 1951.

¹¹ It should be noted here that the Greco-Yugoslav relations in the early '50s followed a different path from that of the other countries of the Soviet bloc. Thus, in 1950-51 diplomatic and economic contact between the two countries was restored, which did not happen with other eastern bloc countries at that same period. For Yugoslavia this shift towards Greece was of vital importance following the rupture with the Cominform in 1948. The case for Greece, however, was that the US had applied strong pressure in order for the government to overcome its reluctance due on the one hand to the assistance that Belgrade had given to the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) during the Civil War and on the other Belgrade's stance on the Macedonian Question.

¹² PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): Telegramm [Grundherr] von Athen an Auswärtiges Amt (Bonn), „Zusammenfasse Eindrücke ersten 6 Tagen nach Ankunft Athen [A summary of the impressions of the first six days after the arrival in Athens]“, Athens, 13 December 1950.

many had since become part of the administrative mechanism of the Federal Republic of Germany.¹³ One month later, Papagos assured the German side of his decision to resolve past differences in a way that would be satisfactory to both countries.¹⁴

In the ensuing period, following consultations at senior government level, the German side put on the negotiating table the issue of the return of German owned property in Athens and Thessaloniki, at the same time, outrightly rejecting all requests for financial compensation towards the reconstruction of Greek cities that had been destroyed by the German army in the war (Fleischer, 1991: 101-102).¹⁵ Interestingly, however, the German foreign ministry decided that it would cover a significant part of the cost for the publication of Papagos's book *The War in Greece, 1941-1944*, in German, having recognised, of course, the political benefits that this could bring. This happened only after certain passages on issues that allegedly "did injustice to" Germany had been revised. The preferred date for the book's release was before March 1954 when Adenauer would make an official visit to Athens (Fleischer, 1991: 103).¹⁶

The incessant process of forgetting the past was not actually dealt with in this history book, as it did not seem to concern the author, who omitted outright to discuss the distressing period of the occupation. Instead, Papagos chose to present a virtually painless narration of military events, and in deed, ended with the statement that the German people were in a worse situation, having themselves been the victims of their leadership or the comment about Wehrmacht being "the best army in the World" (Fleischer, 2008: 528-9).

In a similar vein, postwar German sensitivities were never broached in the official correspondence between the German ambassador in Athens and the infamous Laskaris Papanaoum, one of the biggest Nazi collaborators and most ardent persecutors of the large Jewish community in Thessaloniki, then living in Germany. In their letters reference was only ever made to the good collaboration that had been established between them a few years prior in occupied Thessaloniki (Dordanas, 2005: 349-369, 410-428, 445-6). Any likely reaction on the part of the Greeks that would have arisen in the event that this official correspondence had been made public, was sacrificed on the altar of politico-economic interests and for the sake of cordial Greco-German post-war relations.¹⁷

¹³ PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): Abteilung II an Abteilung III, „Gesprächsmaterial für den Empfang des neuen griechischen Botschafters durch den Herrn Bundespräsidenten [Material for discussion for the reception of the new Greek Ambassador from the Chancellor]“, Nr. 210-01/23 II, 13513/52, Bonn, 13 October 1952.

¹⁴ PA AA, 210-01/23-24 (1949-54): The German Embassy in Athens [Knoke] to the German Foreign Office in Bonn, „Besuche bei Ministerpräsident Feldmarschall Papagos und Außenminister Stephanopoulos [Visit to Prime Minister Marshal Papagos and the Minister of the Foreign Office Stephanopoulos]“, Athens, 22 November 1952.

¹⁵ For the cases of Klisoura, Kalavrita and Distomo and the German denial to financially support these cities in the Post War period see also: PA AA, B 11/230 (1951-55).

¹⁶ PA AA, B 11/230 (1951-55): Bonn to Embassy of Athens, „Marschall Papagos, Der Krieg in Griechenland, 1941-1944 [Marschall Papagos, The War in Greece, 1941-1944]“, Bonn, 10 Dezember 1952 and other material.

¹⁷ Details on the relations between the German politicians and the section of the Greeks who during the German occupation in Greece cooperated with the military authorities see: PA AA, B 11/230 (1951-55).

In conclusion, both Greece and Yugoslavia, two countries that had played a leading role in the resistance movement against the German occupation forces in WWII, found themselves, at the beginning of the 1950s, in the position of having to acquiesce to the new state of affairs. In order to receive the political and economic benefits of their respective national objectives and policies, as these were dictated by the Cold War situation, they had to turn a blind eye to the events of the very recent past. Whether referring to Yugoslav socialism or post-civil war Greece, the attempts made to restore the economy were based on Western capital, part of which came from Bonn. The political directives of the Cold War imposed on Belgrade and Athens the requirement to build their relations with West Germany from scratch. This, in turn, entailed obliterating the past, which was considered to perhaps be of educational value, but which was worth very little in the bipolar world. In sum, the Federal Republic of Germany developed into a critical safety valve for the West against the Eastern Bloc. At first as a trading partner, Germany returned to South-Eastern Europe: to Tito's socialist Yugoslavia and to Greece, which in the then largely communist Balkans, was an islet of "the West".

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