Merkel Arrival in Athens to Be Met by Anti-Austerity Protesters

By Paul Tugwell and Maria Petrakis - Oct 7, 2012

Greek protesters are gearing up for German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s first visit to Athens since the financial crisis began with plans for strikes, rallies and a petition demanding reparations from the Nazi occupation.

Greece’s need for bailouts and the German-led conditions attached to the emergency loans have made Merkel the face of austerity to Greeks. She has been depicted in the media wearing jackboots and an SS uniform. While Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras called her visit tomorrow a “very positive development,” opposition leaders intend a show of anger and frustration after five years of recession.

“Mr. Samaras said we should welcome Mrs. Merkel as she deserves,” said Alexis Tsipras, the head of Syriza party, which finished second in the June elections and has urged workers, the unemployed and young people, to join the rallies. “We completely agree.”

Samaras has warned that soaring unemployment and political unrest risk the kind of upheaval that undermined the Weimar Republic in post-World War I Germany and ushered in the Nazis. His coalition is currently negotiating a new round of budget cuts to unlock the next aid payment to keep the country afloat.

GSEE and ADEDY, the umbrella organizations for private and public-sector unions, have called for a three-hour walkout tomorrow in the Athens metropolitan area and a rally in the center of the capital. From the nationalist Golden Dawn Party, which evokes Adolf Hitler’s Nazis with their stiff-armed salutes and free-food drives for “pure Greeks,” to the Greek Communist Party, Merkel is persona non grata.

Tsipras Vision

Tsipras urged Samaras to show Merkel the real Greece: “The 40 patients for each nurse, and then see if she asks for more state employees to be sacked. I propose she visit a commercial street so she can see the padlocks on stores. And then she can propose more austerity measures.”

As the biggest contributor to bailout commitments totaling 240 billion euros ($313 billion), Germany rejects responsibility for such hardship.

“We want to help Greece stabilize within the euro zone,” Steffen Seibert, Merkel’s chief spokesman, said Oct. 5. “We do this by contributing massively to the rescue programs Greece I and Greece II.” Merkel was last in Greece in July 2007.

Greece’s economy is set to contract for a sixth year in 2013. The government is struggling to reach agreement with officials from the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the so-called troika, on austerity measures to meet deficit-reduction targets that have been consistently missed.

President’s Outburst

The economic downturn has been the worst since World War II, sparking memories of Greece’s Nazi occupation and outbursts at even the highest levels in Greece as German officials pressed for more austerity measures.

As talks on a second bailout stalled in February, criticism by German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble of Greek politicians provoked an angry response by Greek President Karolos Papoulias, 83, a former resistance fighter.

“I don’t accept insults to my country by Mr. Schaeuble,” Papoulias said. “I don’t accept it as a Greek. Who is Mr. Schaeuble to ridicule Greece? Who are the Dutch? Who are the Finns? We always had the pride to defend not just our own freedom, not just our own country, but the freedom of all of Europe.”

Greek Occupation
Invaded first by Mussolini’s Italy and then by Nazi Germany, Greece was forced to finance its own occupation, paying war loans to Hitler’s Reich. Hyperinflation and a famine ensued under German occupation. At the end of 1943, prices for staples were rising at a rate of 234 percent.

More than 500,000 Greeks, or 7 percent of the population, died between October 1940 and October 1944, 260,000 of them from hunger and malnutrition. A Time magazine report in 1942 labeled Greece “the hungriest country.” Bread cost $15 a loaf.

Syriza lawmaker Manolis Glezos and the late Apostolos Santas are considered heroes for climbing the Acropolis as young men in May 1941 to tear down the Swastika, an action considered the first resistance act in Greece under the Nazi occupation.

The Independent Greeks, formed by lawmakers who broke from Samaras’s New Democracy party, made the demand Germany pay reparations part of their election campaign in May and June.

**Reparations Petition**

Now the fourth-largest parliamentary group, Independent Greeks have called for a protest outside the German Embassy in Athens during the chancellor’s visit. The German ambassador will be handed a petition outlining the party’s opposition to Merkel “transforming Greece into a German protectorate” and calling for war reparations and “the return of an occupation loan,” the party said.

The Greek Finance Ministry has set up a committee to calculate for the first time the country’s World War II claim against Germany. Estimates for the claims range. A group of 28 lawmakers who petitioned parliament on the issue in February said it was 54 billion euros; the Golden Dawn party estimates 510 billion euros.

Germany paid 115 million deutsche marks to Greek victims of Nazi crimes under a 1960 treaty, in addition to funds paid to victims of forced labor under the Third Reich, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Andreas Peschke told reporters in 2010. Germany’s Constitutional Court ruled in March 2006 it didn’t have to pay compensation to individuals seeking damages over war crimes committed during World War II.

“The German reparations are a particularly complex legal issue,” Deputy Finance Minister Christos Staikouras said Sept. 4. “The case is still outstanding, and as a country we reserve the right and the possibility to manage it to a satisfactory conclusion.”

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