

Distomo, Greece: The World War II Nazi German Massacre and Beyond

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Image: German troops in front of buildings set ablaze in Distomo, during the massacre.

Voice from Hellas. Distomo is a small town of about 5,000 souls, nestled in the rolling hills of central Greece. Its access road is hardly visible from the main road to Delphi, the historic place, in the heart of the country and the heart of Greek philosophy, where in the temple of Apollo, it is said the concept of democracy was born some 2,500 years ago.

Entering Distomo, less than 20 km away from Delphi, one can feel an air of deep sorrow. At the outskirts of the village, to the left of the main road on top of a small hill a memorial had been erected for the victims of the horrifying massacre perpetrated by Nazi German SS troops. The bushes and small trees around the hill leading up to the monument were freshly burned. The sooty smell was still in the air.

In the village people appeared depressed, resigned. Nobody wanted to talk, let alone to foreigners. When asked who set the hill ablaze, one elderly man consulted with his friends in Greek, and then said, 'we know but we don't want to talk about it.' – On reflection, the deliberate and horrific hill fire must have brought back vivid memories of the bloody horrors that were committed to their village 71 years ago by Nazi Germany. No wonder, they don't want to revive that memory.

In nearby Delphi a similar air of resignation permeated the small town. Delphi, today a renowned tourist town, was almost empty. A restaurant owner sadly said – there is no more democracy in Greece – there is no more democracy in Europe – and he added – in the world, period. With all the extra taxes the government is levying on real estate property, he lamented, I may lose this restaurant which has been owned by my family for hundreds of years. He has no good word for Germany in particular and Europe as a whole and concluded, with this turn-about by Tsipras against the overwhelming will of the Greek people, the left is promoting the right – and that will lead to even more disaster. "What can we do? We are in shock. Nobody dares to move."

On 10 June 1944, German Waffen SS-troops of the 4th SS Polizei Panzergrenadier Division went door to door and butchered Greek civilians, 218 in all – babies, children, elderly, women and men – no discrimination. Then they burned the village down to the ground. According to survivors, they were "bayonetting babies in the cribs, stabbing pregnant women, and beheading the village priest." – Their 'justification' (sic) was an act of revenge for the villagers participation in a partisan attack on the German unit – which later was proven to be a lie.

The most illustrative account of the mass murder is documented in the book, "My Odyssey" by the then Head of the International Red Cross in Greece, the Swede Sture Linner (*Min Odysse* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1982). He writes:

We were married on June 14 [Sture Linner and his wife Cleo]. Emil Santrom, chair of the Greek Committee, organized a wedding banquet for the occasion. Late in the evening he approached me and pulled me aside to a corner, away from the laughs and voices, to talk privately.

He showed me a telegram he had just received: The Germans had been slaughtering for three days the people of Distomo, near Delphi, and then they burned the village down. If there were any survivors, they would be in need of immediate assistance.

Distomo was within the region of my responsibility for the supply of food and medicines. I passed on the telegram to Cleo to read. She winked and we immediately departed discretely from the festivity.

About an hour later we were on our way in the darkness of the night. It took several agonizing hours to travel the ravaged roads and pass several roadblocks. It was dawn by the time we finally reached the main road that led to Distomo.

Vultures were rising slowly and hesitantly at a low height from the sides of the road when they heard us coming. For hundreds of yards along the road, human bodies were hanging from every tree, pierced with bayonets – some were still alive.

They were the villagers, who were punished this way – they were suspected of providing help to the guerillas of the region, who had ambushed an SS unit.

The odor was unbearable.

In the village the last remnants of the houses were still burning. Hundreds of dead bodies of people of all ages, from elderly to newborns, were strewn around on the dirt. Several women were slaughtered with bayonets, their wombs torn apart and their breasts severed; others were lying strangled with their own intestines wrapped around their necks. It seemed as if no-one had survived...

There! An old man at the end of the village! He had miraculously survived the slaughter. He was shocked by the horror around him, with an empty gaze, his utterances incomprehensible. We descended in the midst of the disaster and yelled in Greek: "Red Cross! Red Cross! We came to help!"

From the distance a woman approached with hesitation. She told us that only a handful of villagers managed to escape before the attack begun. Together with her we started searching for them. It was after we had set off in this search that we realized she was shot in the hand. We operated on her immediately with Cleo performing the surgery.

It was our honeymoon!

Not long after this horrific massacre, our connection with Distomo would conclude with this remarkable epilogue.

When the German occupation forces were forced to leave Greece [after the defeat of Nazi Germany], things did not go as planned for them. A German unit was surrounded by guerillas exactly in the same area, at Distomo. I thought

that this might be taken by the Greeks as an opportunity for a bloody revenge, especially when considering that for quite a while the region had been cut off from any food supplies. I loaded with food necessities a few lorries, I wired to Distomo word of our planned arrival, and we found ourselves on the same road, once again, Cleo and I.

When we reached the outskirts of the village, we were met by a committee led by the elderly priest. He was an old fashioned patriarch, with a long, wavy, white beard. Next to him the guerilla captain, fully armed. The priest spoke first and thanked us on behalf of everybody for the food supplies. Then he added: "We are all starving here, both us and the German prisoners. Now, though we are famished, we are at least in our land. The Germans have not just lost the war; they are also far from their country. Give them the food you have with you, they have a long way ahead."

At this phrase Cleo turned her eyes to me. I suspected what she wanted to tell me with that look, but I could not see clearly any more. I was just standing there weeping....

This story tells more about Greece, the Greek people, than thousands of words could say.

Relatives of the victims initiated legal proceedings against the German government for reparation payments. In October 1997 a Greek court awarded them damages of 28 million euros, a judgment confirmed by the Greek High court in 2000. However, the ruling was not enforced because under Greek law a judgment against a sovereign state requires prior consent of the Ministry of Justice – which was not given.

The victims' families took the case to court in Germany. The case was rejected at all levels of German courts, referring to a *1961 bilateral agreement concerning enforcement and recognition of judgments* between Germany and Greece, and *Section 328 of the German Code of Civil Procedure*. These legislations require Greece to have jurisdiction – which it does not have. The horrific mass-murders carried out by the Nazi troops are considered 'sovereign acts' by a state. Following "*fundamental principles of international law, each country is immune from another state's jurisdiction.*"

Similar principles were applied to other reparation payments Germany should have made to brutally assailed countries by the Nazi troops, including the overall reparation payments Germany owed Greece of about 170 billion dollars (in today's terms at least 350 billion euros).

Germany got literally away with murder. Why is that? Why are such international laws not adjusted to realities on the ground? Why do they allow the strong to butcher the weak without consequences?

Could not, under such international ruling, Greece claim that her entire debt is a sovereign debt (which the troika claims it is) and that nobody, least Germany, has a right to legally pursue Greece for reimbursement? – It is even better; international law also proclaims that any contract concluded under duress, coercion, corruption or blackmail is illegal. All of Greece's debt, including the latest € 86 billion of which details are being negotiated in secret as I write these lines, were acquired under duress, coercion, blackmail and corruption. Thus, it is illegal.

Why does Greece not seize this international legal protection and claim its debt illegal and

null? – And start afresh, with a clean slate? – Outside of the Eurozone, gaining respect from her southern fellow-countries and the rest of the world for having the backbone to stand up against the globalized looters and the banksters?

Greece has lost 8% of its population during the WWII by Nazi Germany, proportionally the most of any country fighting the Nazis.

Greece is still vulnerable; their people's friendliness, their attitude of non-confrontation, has put them again in the fangs of the same predators – a Germany that slaughters with banks instead of tanks, a Germany of no scruples, a Germany with heartless leaders – a Germany that again strives for dominance for hegemony for their place in the sun alongside the Washington led neoliberal empire. Have they, the Germans, not noticed that they may be used again by the master hegemon as forerunner to absorb Europe? It would 'only' be the third time in 100 years. Weapons change. The modes of wars change – but the objective stays the same.

We are doomed to fall into the US trap yet again, lest we wake up and sidestep the German wannabe European hegemon. Greece could be the eye-opener. Greece could create a precedent for others to follow.

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