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Published online: 18 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Anna Maria Droumpouki (2013) Trivialization of World War Two and Shoah in Greece: Uses, Misuses and Analogies in Light of the Current Debt Crisis, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 21:2, 190-201, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2013.815463

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2013.815463

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Trivialization of World War Two and Shoah in Greece: Uses, Misuses and Analogies in Light of the Current Debt Crisis

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ABSTRACT The economic crises since 2008 have, in Greece, given rise to a variety of blame-narratives which have instrumentalized both anti-Semitic and anti-Nazi stereotypes to justify popular resistance to the imposition of crippling austerity measures on the Greek people. This article explores the often confusing and contradictory narratives of parties and civil society groups across the political spectrum, which conflate images of German occupation, supposedly Jewish dominance of finance capital and Zionist brutality against Palestinians as the basis of Greek victimhood. The article underscores the power of myths and distortions in the process of identity-formation in a period of desperate crisis which ultimately renders democratic discourse and European solidarity even more fragile.

KEY WORDS: trivialization of WWII, politics of memory, Holocaust, economic crisis, antisemitism, stereotypes

According to Richard Ned Lebow (Ned Lebrow et al. 2006, 36), the ‘politics of memory in postwar Europe has an obvious starting point (1945), some critical turning points (among them 1968, 1979, 1991) … but no endpoint’ (emphasis in original). Similarly, Christian Karner and Bram Mertens note that the Second World War is firmly embedded in many Europeans’ historical consciousness and life-worlds, to the extent that it can be readily employed as an interpretative ‘anchor’ and point of reference for many contemporary political issues. It is true that the continuing presence of the Second World War in the minds and rhetoric of Europeans (and others) constructs in certain cases the present ‘misuse of memory’ through historical analogies. The political instrumentalization of the Holocaust is more intense than ever, and the decontextualized comparisons, especially in the media, are a common phenomenon. Indeed, the economic crisis in Greece has made the trivialization of the Shoah and generally of the Second World War, even more intense and frequent.

The interpretation of the past in the light of current political goals always involves a certain instrumentalization of memory. No other catastrophe has been so voluminously recorded and publicized as the Shoah. But, likewise, no other catastrophe has been

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instrumentalized and trivialized to that extent, as a way of supporting the Palestinians against Israel or as a vehicle that connects the economic crises to the Jews. The obvious uniqueness of the Holocaust has transformed the historical event into a new civic religion. This mystification of the Holocaust has triggered many reactions that tend to compare it with contemporary brutalities and wars. Günter Grass’ example is recent: in his poem entitled ‘What Must Be Said’, the famous German writer, Nobel laureate and Germany’s self-appointed moral conscience [praeeceptor Germaniae] labelled Israel a threat to world peace because of its nuclear arsenal and ambitions. Such views are not new. For example the controversial German historian Ernst Nolte claimed in a 2004 speech that ‘the only difference between Israel and the Third Reich is Auschwitz’, and the Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago once compared the situation in besieged Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian administration, to Auschwitz. Grass also uses in his poem a German verb, auslöschen, to describe the efforts of Israel to annihilate Iran, which comes dangerously close to evoking the Holocaust, as the word was also used to describe the annihilation of Jews during Second World War. Of course Grass’ comparison of Israel and Iran is unfair, because unlike Iran, Israel has never threatened to wipe another country off the map. However, our aim here is not to analyse the problematic arguments of Grass, but to indicate how anti-Israeli sentiments equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism in the context of the economic crisis. This phenomenon of the ‘new anti-Jewishness’ (Taguieff 2011) articulates a political position, mainly of the left, that invokes the past through official declarations in order to make sense of current historical contexts. There are innumerable instances of it—some of them highly controversial and much-discussed—which are part of everyday discourse.

The ‘Second World War Narrative Desire’

This text goes through an inexhaustible landscape of Greek media dominated by uses, misuses and analogies of the past and tries to locate the causes of this new ‘Second World War narrative desire’, as I call this obsession with war memories. How are memories of the Holocaust invoked in contemporary discussions surrounding the debt crisis in Greece? What are the uses and misuses of the past through historical analogies? Our focus will be on print media of all political leanings. We will also devote attention to cartooning as an art that provokes controversy. Newspaper caricatures depicting the European Union’s ‘Troika’ as German soldiers who want to re-conquer Greece after seventy years, the Greek Finance Minister Evangelos Venizelos giving the Nazi salute ‘Sieg Heil’ (Hail Victory) to a soldier, or Angela Merkel as a Nazi, invoke memories of the Second World War and are so common in daily newspapers that they tend to be banal. Greeks are depicted as Jews heading to the crematoria, especially through the work of the famous Greek cartoonist Stathis Stavropoulos. The relativization of the Shoah through implicit (or even explicit) equation of Israel with Nazi Germany is strong, and this argument will lie at the core of our analysis. A consensus has developed through the resurgence of the old myth of blaming the Jews for Greece’s economic crisis, while the stereotype images of Germans as Nazis are flourishing. This rhetoric is becoming more mainstream when it is expressed by outstanding figures of Greek public life, such as the composer Mikis Theodorakis, or the resistance icon, the 90-year-old Manolis Glezos. We will focus on the intertwining of Greek and European politics and the current debt crisis in order to explain these invocations of—and interpretative struggles over—the past in relation to the Shoah. Of course all anti-Jewish stereotypes that derive from the Middle East conflict will be also portrayed.
The New ‘Anti-Jewishness’ and the Middle East Conflict

Pierre-André Taguieff (2011), a French philosopher and leading expert on anti-Semitism, analyses in his last book the mutations of contemporary anti-Semitism. He prefers the alternative terms ‘anti-Jewishness’ or ‘Judeophobia’, as new versions of the old term, related to the opposition of some social actors to the supposed nationalism of Israel. The new ‘Judeophobia’ attributes to Israel all the world’s evil. The criminalization of Israel has many layers, all pointing towards a deterministic idea that has new and powerful potential. The new ‘anti-Jewishness’ consists of various elements, pointing out different types of anti-Semitism:

- The political anti-Semitism that is connected to political anti-Zionism. The Arab world becomes the hero against ‘a Hitlerist regime’.
- The ideological anti-Semitism that Nazifies Israel, whilst this involves the anti-Zionism of the left and the pro-Palestinian support of European left-wing parties during recent decades.
- The theological anti-Semitism. Israel has been characterized as the enemy of Islam. This is reflected, for example, in the recent poem of Günter Grass, where Iran is the victim and the target of the nuclear power of Israel.
- The cultural anti-Semitism. A mix of evil qualities is attributed to Israel by intellectuals of the left and western elites.
- The economic anti-Semitism. The call for restrictions against those trading with Israel, which is supported by many voices of the left in Greece.

We will try to link the above stated forms of anti-Semitism with the current political situation in Greece, especially with the ‘trend’ of the last twenty years in Greece to equate Israeli politics with Nazi crimes. The historian Hagen Fleischer (2008, 177) writes:

There is less sympathy for the suffering of the Jews in countries such as Russia, Poland, and Greece, where the majority population also suffered heavily under German occupation, or in the Baltic countries, where dark memories of Communist rule endure. In these countries there is a form of a competition in claiming victimization, in which groups contend that commemorating primarily Jewish victims diminishes non-Jewish suffering.

This discourse constructs a new narrative: downplaying the Holocaust and its instrumentalization, in favour of a distorted rhetoric. An enlightening example is Israel’s invasion of Lebanon during the summer of 1982 and the political reactions, especially from the Socialist Party (PASOK) of Andreas Papandreou that ruled Greece from 1981 to 1989. The anti-Americanism and the anti-Israeli sentiments resulting from the pro-Arab leanings of the PASOK-government, affected the political scene in general. According to the Socialists, Israel was an ‘American satellite nation’. The political and ideological anti-Semitism found expression in the words of the Resistance hero and revered national symbol, Manolis Glezos, in front of the Israeli Embassy:

It is unsupportable that these people, whom we protected against Nazi persecution (referring to Jews hidden in Christian families), should be making a Holocaust. The Greek people are pained and outraged when they see the descendants of Holocaust

This reminds us of the statement of the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdo\u015fıan during a CNN interview: ‘Israel is inexplicably cruel against innocent Palestinians, hiding behind the Nazi Holocaust and seeking victimhood… Everybody knows what Israel is about’ (20 March 2002, Centre Simon Wiesenthal – Europe, 25 months of anti-Semitic invective in Greece: Timeline: March 2002–April 2004).

On the other hand, the world-renowned composer Mikis Theodorakis reaffirmed the recent scapegoating of Jews: ‘Everything that happens today in the world has to do with the Zionists… American Jews are behind the world economic crisis that has hit Greece as well.’ He also stated that he is ‘anti-Israel and anti-Semitic’, because ‘this small nation (Israel) is the root of evil’ (news conference, 4 November 2003). In the audience were the Socialist government ministers, Evangelos Venizelos, Minister of Culture, and Petros Efthymiou, Minister of Education, who did not react. Theodorakis’ claim that Jews control banks, the mass media and the United States is an indicator of the economic anti-Semitism gaining ground during the last four years and constructs a disorienting narrative of Jews as holders of international capital. In various articles in ‘progressive’ mainstream newspapers (such as Vima and Eleftherotypia), he escalates the anti-Semitic leftist rhetoric, by saying that the Jews are conducting their final solution against the Palestinians.

Conversely, nationalistic rhetoric, based on decontextualized comparisons, attempts to draw attention to the suffering of the Greek people. History is reduced to mere rhetoric, and the supposed continuities between Nazism and contemporary phenomena lie at the core of the symbolic repertoire of the left ‘anti-Zionists’ in Greece. One can see here the notion of the ‘poetics of history’ identified by Fogu and Kansteiner (2006, 302): ‘The culturally shared—yet contested—historical narratives that utilize their own poetic arsenal in relation to the present … a rhetorical enframing of the memory of recent events by tropes derived from an already institutionalized historical culture.’ From this perspective, the institutionalized historical culture of the Holocaust is used in order to trivialize the political situation in the Middle East today. According to this rhetoric, Israel is a state fundamentally negatively distinct from any other, which therefore has no right to exist.

The stereotype of the ‘Nazi’ Sharon and so on, reproduced in Greece by moderate leftist newspapers such as Eleftherotypia, has rapidly led to unhelpful dichotomies and under-conceptualized cultural and political dimensions of Second World War memories. Jews have been described as Nazis, and in many manifestations the Israeli flag has been paraded with the swastika replacing the Star of David, while Palestinians are routinely compared to Holocaust victims.

We must note that Greece was the only European country that voted against the United Nations plan for the partition of Palestine in 1947, and this echoed anti-Israel feelings among the public who sided with the Arab countries in the Middle East dispute. After 1981 and the election of the Socialist Party PASOK, these feelings of solidarity towards the Arab countries and opposition to Israel became more apparent, as part of official Greek politics.

The vandalization of Jewish monuments and graveyards, apart from the usual expression of traditional anti-Semitism, can also be a manifestation of anti-Zionist or anti-Israel outbursts from the far Left. For example, the Jewish monument at Salonika, the
once-renowned ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans’, has been defaced not only by neo-Nazi thugs but also by members of the Communist-backed PAME trade union. The latter attached slogans and photos of young Palestinians killed by the Israeli Army in order to protest against the 2006 Lebanon War. The anti-Semitism of the Left in Greece could be the subject of a separate paper. ‘However, even the official memorial plaque at Chaidari, the main former Nazi concentration camp in Greece, states: “Site of sacrifice and torture of resistance fighters. Starting point and trench of the struggle for freedom of the Greek nation.” There is no reference to the approximately 4,500 Jewish inmates who had suffered there before being deported to Auschwitz or killed on the spot’ (Droumpouki 2010, 81).

Theodorakis, expressing such views, maintains, for example, that he does not hate Jewish people, but rather the policies implemented by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon towards the Palestinians, which he describes as Nazi-like. According to Theodorakis, Sharon—as well as other Jews in influential positions—persuaded George W. Bush to go to war against Iraq. As the composer of the Palestinian national anthem, he also maintained that there is no anti-Semitism in Europe, despite a recent wave of anti-Jewish attacks (20 March 2002, Centre Simon Wiesenthal – Europe, 25 months of anti-Semitic invective in Greece: Timeline: March 2002–April 2004). In July 2004 Giorgos Katsanevakis, prefect of the Chania region of Crete and member of the left-wing Synaspismos Party, told the Israeli Ambassador Ram Aviram that Sharon was the Anti-Christ.

Senior members of the Greek Socialist Party (PASOK) often use Holocaust rhetoric to describe Israeli military actions. Thus, in March 2002, the parliamentary speaker Apostolos Kaklamanis referred to the ‘genocide’ of Palestinians. He was backed by the government spokesman, Christos Protopapas, who said that Kaklamanis spoke ‘with sensitivity and responsibility … expressing the sentiments of the Parliament and the Greek people’ (Samuels 2004).

The Greek Orthodox Church also has some representatives that express anti-Jewish opinions publicly. In 2001, the former bishop Christodoulos blamed Jews for being behind the Greek government’s decision to abide by EU rules that oppose listing an individual’s religion on state identity cards (Interview, Vima, 15 March 2001). He also called for a referendum; and even though three million Greeks opposed the new identity cards, the Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, enforced the new European law for identity cards. Indeed, Simitis was accused by far right-wing newspapers (e.g. Stochos) of being a Jew himself, mainly because of his name and with no other evidence. ‘Greek-orthodox’ identity in Greece is still very strong today, mainly because the church used to interfere in politics until very recently. This was very common during the time when Christodoulos, as archbishop, led the church. It is also remarkable, that Christodoulos, during his visit to Majdanek Extermination Camp in Poland, made no reference in his speech to the Holocaust and the Jewish victims, though he spoke of ‘the thousands of people, who were not to blame for anything, who met a tragic death in this place’ (Simon Wiesenthal, 25 months of anti-Semitic invective in Greece, Eletherotypia, Ios, 18 June 2000). Even before the election of President Obama, an ordinary centre right tabloid, Ayrian, carried the heading: ‘The anticipated victory of Obama in US elections signals the end of Jewish domination—everything changes in the USA and we hope that it will be more democratic and humane’ (6 September 2008).
After 2008, in the wake of the escalating socio-economic crisis, many print media and blogs have exploited the Shoah as the basis for abusive analogies. Among the starkest examples is the populist right-wing tabloid, *Demokratia* which does not shrink from using front-page headlines such as ‘Merkel sending us to Auschwitz’—illustrated with a photomontage of the German chancellor in a Nazi uniform—or from paraphrasing the infamous Nazi slogan ‘Arbeit macht frei’ [Work liberates] at the gates of concentration camps, into ‘Memorandum macht frei’—in order to depict the struggle of Greeks against new austerity policies. The ‘memorandum’ details the austerity measures that the ‘troika’ aims to impose on Greece. Numerous other articles and newspaper headings tend to equate the Nazi occupation (1941–1944) with the current crisis. According to the Israeli ambassador in Berlin, ‘pictures like that, trivializing the Nazi period, the Holocaust and National Socialism, were unique’. Numerous other articles and headings suggest analogies between the current crisis and the Nazi occupation of Greece (1941–1944).

The anti-Semitic cartoons with the crucifixion motif and Christ as a metaphor for Palestine were, in fact, numerous during the crisis in Lebanon. What we would like to examine here, is the fact that Greek cartooning uses the Holocaust and Second World War as metaphors to construct contemporary interpretations and to propagate them to the Greek public. As Richard Ned Lebow notes, this reading of recent history can serve as a means of tracking larger conflicts in society, in this case the financial crisis.

A 2002 cartoon of the Greek daily *Ethnos*, close to the then-ruling PASOK Socialist Party, showed two Jewish soldiers dressed as Nazis with Stars of David on their helmets, stabbing Arabs to death. The text read: ‘Do not feel guilty, my brother. We were in Auschwitz and Dachau not to suffer, but to learn.’ The same paper ran another cartoon, titled ‘Holocaust II’. It showed an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at an emaciated Arab with his hands raised, and below the famous picture of the Warsaw Ghetto boy raising his hands. The caption read: ‘Sharon’s war machine is attempting to carry out a new Holocaust, a new genocide.’ Another example among plenty was the one published by the pro-Pasok daily newspaper, *Eleftherotypia*, in which a woman asks a man after the killing of Sheikh Yassin, ‘Why did the Jewish government kill a religious leader?’ The man answers: ‘They are practising for Easter.’

In the context of examining the use of the Holocaust and the Second World War as metaphors for contemporary propaganda, we would like to focus on the work of the well-known Greek cartoonist Stathis (Stavropoulos), whose cartoons are frequently reprinted by international papers. Stavropoulos expresses the anti-German feelings that many Greeks hold as a reaction to the austerity measures, as he uses Nazi stereotypes on a frequent basis. The burning of a German flag during an anti-austerity protest outside parliament reflects anti-German feelings which are encouraged by sections of the media. According to Stathis, ‘Germany has already tried twice to make Europe a German colony. This time it is through economic means. We have no bad feelings towards the German people—only towards their government and European banks.’ At the same time, Stathis expresses the ‘anti-Zionist’ feelings of the left, himself being an active member of the left party Syriza. In an interview with the German political magazine *Der Spiegel*, he admitted being aware of the danger that his use of Second World War symbols could enflame new resentments among the Greek people. However, the debate, he insists, is worth the breaking of a few taboos. His anti-Semitic and trivializing cartoon campaign is
reproducing a problematic rhetoric that is becoming more and more mainstream in Greece. Here are some examples from Stathis, but also from other Greek cartoonists that follow Stathis’ ‘school’ of political caricatures:

- Cartoon equating the Nazi destruction of Warsaw Ghetto with Israeli attack on Ramallah. A Nazi ghost soldier is musing: ‘Finally things are complete! Just as we killed the Jews then, so now the Jews are killing the memory of those who were killed’ (Eleftherotypia, 30 March 2002).
- Nazi-like Israel soldier with Star of David on his helmet says to Nazi officer next to him: ‘Arafat is not a person the Reich can talk to any more.’ Nazi officer responds: ‘Why? is he a Jew?’ (Eleftherotypia, 24 September 2002).
- ‘I'm not sorry that what we are doing to you is what the Nazis did to us. I am sorry for those that you will do to what we did to you’ (Ethnos, a reportedly pro-government centre left daily, 7 April 2002 [Dimitris Hantzopoulos]).
- Israel’s ex-Prime Minister and US ex-president G. Bush dressed as Nazi officers with swastikas and shooting pistols. Bush: ‘Assassinations brought us nowhere Ariel, but the assassination of politics may lead somewhere’ (Eleftherotypia, 23 March 2004).
- Dogs with swastikas depicting NATO. ‘Why, do we need United Nations permission to attack with bombs?’, ‘I don’t know, you should ask him before we eat him’ (Eleftherotypia, 25 February 1999).
- Angela Merkel and a Nazi skeleton saying ‘Sieg Heil’ (16 November 2010). http://blog.cartoonists.gr/?p=913
- Greeks wearing the striped uniforms of concentration camp prisoners, a Nazi officer of the Troika and a collaborator of the Nazis, namely the ex-Prime Minister, Loukas Papadimos (Real News, 29 January 2012).
- Greeks again wearing the striped uniforms, with the yellow Star of David. As they work, the two Nazi officers say: ‘Unemployed, parents of many children, handicapped. Let them be burned by the barbed-wire, let’s finish with susceptible groups’ (15 November 2011). http://blog.cartoonists.gr/?p=913
- In a torture chamber, a Greek man says to Merkel: ‘What else do you want me to sign, Frau Führer Merkel?’, getting the reply: ‘That the bleeders wear yellow stars, the corrupted pink and the anti-productive red’ (6 February 2011). http://politiki-geliografia.blogspot.gr/2011/02/blog-post_07.html
- Greek prisoners in a concentration camp. The Nazi guards say: ‘What are the chances for the prisoners after negotiation with the Troika?’, ‘If they avoid Auschwitz, they will go to Dachau’ (Epikaira, February 2012, vol. 121).
- A reference to Kristallnacht, the ‘Night of Broken Glass’ in 1938. A shop in a Berlin Street with the name ‘Mitsos’, suggesting a Greek owner. On the shop the following words are written: ‘Achtung, Achtung, Greek scammer’. Two passengers say: ‘What happened: Have we started the pogroms here in Germany again?’ (Eleftherotypia, 24 February 2010).

The intense and frequent reminders of a painful past indicate the need for the construction of a new narrative, one that misuses the past and wants to form an interpretative frame in which to set the current debt crisis and the martyrdom of Greeks. As Stathis told Reuters: ‘I used the German uniforms symbolically ... They show what
Germany did not manage with weapons during World War Two, it is now trying to do through economic means. His caricatures, especially during the last two years, depict Greeks as the new Jews, wearing the shabby uniforms of camp inmates and the yellow star. The Greeks of these caricatures are martyrs and scapegoats, just as Jews had been under Nazi rule. The distorting comparison is obvious; the constant misuse of historical analogies in the media does not provide the chance for a solid critique of such misuses. As Karner and Mertens note:

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\text{In historiographical terms, such linking of utterly incomparable institutions and contexts is at best ridiculous and, at worst, highly irresponsible. However, what is at stake in such claims is clearly not historical accuracy but the articulation of a political position, with ‘history’ being reduced to rhetoric.}
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It remains to be discussed whether these agents of trivialization make the historical analogies in order to legitimize their arguments or because war and occupation are embedded in Greek consciousness as the most traumatic experience of the last century.

In the first version of Stathis’ cartooning examined here, Jews and Judaism are made responsible for all the ills in Greece, with the frequent use of Nazi and Holocaust imagery. During the last three years, however, today’s Germans are seen as those who impose on Greece a ‘new Nazi occupation’, as Stathis equates EU and/or German financial control with the Nazi occupation. Why do these ‘agents of trivialization’ use historical examples so easily? One explanation could be a lack of knowledge of historical anti-Semitism and the period between 1941 and 1944, but also a lack of understanding among Greeks today that anti-Semitism is not a problem of others but our own. There is no doubt that, in proportion to its total population, more Jews were killed as a result of the ‘Final Solution’ in Greece than in most other countries in Europe. Many Gentiles collaborated with the Nazis and also helped with the deportation of their fellow citizens. Even though Greece paid an enormous human toll in the form of Greek-Jewish blood during the war, no Holocaust Studies have been established there, in contrast to other European countries. Extreme right-wing elements, including members of Xrisi Aygi (Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi party that entered parliament through the recent elections with 7% of the vote, the highest percentage in its history), have desecrated the ‘belated’ Holocaust monuments in many Greek cities with anti-Semitic graffiti. The violent escalation in these acts of vandalism directed at the Holocaust monuments is only one of the serious aspects of the present problems in Greece.

According to the historian K. E. Fleming (2008, 205), anti-Semitism in Greece is now stronger than ever. Bishops, artists, writers and politicians have increased social tensions with statements that derive from their anti-Zionist resentment. In televised remarks, the Greek Orthodox bishop Seraphim in 2011 blamed the country’s financial problems on a conspiracy of Jewish bankers and claimed that the Holocaust was orchestrated by Zionists, and that even Hitler himself was a Zionist. These incidents have intensified over the past year, in a trend connected to the severe economic crisis faced by the country. Even though anti-Semitism in Greece may not be as violent as in other countries such as Russia, it is indisputable that it is a phenomenon that deserves academic discussion. Greek anti-Semitism often masquerades as a principled political stance in which Zionism and Judaism are equated. Shoah monuments are often targets of this resentment, and the trivialization of the Shoah and manipulative analogies between past crimes and current problematic
developments take place even at the top level of world politics. Anti-Semitic prejudice remains virulent today, as Stathis’ cartooning shows. Since the Second World War, Greek history books have been mainly quiet about the Nazi occupation and the persecution of Jewish fellow citizens.

Stathis is only one voice, though the most famous, who is responsible for this ‘wave of trivialization’. Of course, for many, this comparison is valid, as Germany, according to many Greeks, wants to impose a fourth Reich, this time an economic one. The comparisons reveal the public’s understanding of their historical past. In this case, the present defines our understanding and use and/or misuse of the past. Understanding the past provides a point of reference for the present and for formulating responses to the past (Lebow et al. 2006, 3). The recent visit of chancellor Merkel to Greece (October 2012) for just six hours was the cause of large demonstrations and protests, although the police banned public protests along Merkel’s route. Merkel has been vilified in some Greek media as dictating devastating austerity on Greece. Once again, one newspaper and political cartoon dressed her in a Nazi uniform. The far-right and anti-bailout party, the Independent Greeks, demonstrated at the German embassy ‘to express in front of Chancellor Angela Merkel our opposition to Greece becoming a German protectorate’, together with many people that held pictures of the chancellor wearing the Nazi uniform.

Anti-Semitism, as we have seen, is used as a political tool to criticize Israel. Political parties of the left, movements and other social agents are involved in constructing a symbolic repertoire that aims to delegitimize the current political situation in Israel. Comparing the Holocaust to the politics of a state today is self-interested, indicating the decisive role of the public media in the construction of an anti-Israel and historical narrative. On the other hand, the representation of the Nazi occupation in the media, comparing the current financial crisis ‘imposed’ by an ‘authoritarian German regime’ to the past Nazi rule in Greece, has become mainstream and common in the daily Greek press. According to many newspapers, ‘the Germans are back’, echoing the title of a famous Greek movie of 1948. Anti-German feelings are rising in Greece, as the German chancellor has been demonized and citizens’ movements organize theatrical performances, for example outside the German Embassy in Athens, where the brutal German soldier and a swastika-bearing Merkel dressed in Nazi uniform appear as favourite characters. Also, the media suggest that the Greek people are angry because German papers represent Greeks as lazy tax evaders, which is understandably resented. According to Manolis Glezos, Greeks live in ‘a status-quo of (economic) violence’. Glezos demands that war reparations should be raised as a national issue, since Greece is the country which has never received reparations from Germany. The amount of reparations that Germany should pay is disputed, and Glezos calls for civil disobedience, blaming Germany for ‘feelings of revenge against Greece, because during World War Two, Greeks defeated the Germans and resisted strongly against Nazi troops’.10

Conclusion

At the two recent elections in Greece, in May and June, the ultranationalist neo-Nazi Chrysi Avgi—Golden Dawn—rose from a ridiculed fringe group to a widely reported political factor, winning twenty-one and eighteen parliamentary seats respectively (out of 300). The leader of ‘Golden Dawn’, Nikos Mihaloliakos, is a notorious admirer of Nazism and a Holocaust denier. In a report that he wrote twenty years ago, he expressed his
appreciation of Rudolf Hess. He also wrote an extensive report in his magazine on ‘Heroes of the Luftwaffe SS Corps’. Golden Dawn shares the popular anti-euro and anti-immigration stance of other European far-right leaders, as well as the eradication of debt. With the alarming electoral success of Golden Dawn and its politically rowdy behaviour, memories of the Nazi occupation are recalled, even though the main target now is immigrants.

The occupation period left deep scars on Greece, which have never healed, while the economic crisis once more has stoked hostility towards Germany. Of the approximately 72,000 Jews who had lived in Greece before the Nazi occupation, about 60,000 Jews—more than 80%—were savagely murdered in the most calculated manner. Today fewer than 6,000 Jews live in the country and very few Jewish communities have remained. Accelerated assimilation has weakened the distinct Greek Jewish memory and absorbed it into a general Greek national memory.

The recent Greek-Israeli co-operation in defence, culture and diplomacy sheds a new light on the relations between the two countries. However, irritating anti-Semitic stereotypes and serious misconceptions are in part the result of a very decisive factor, namely, as Hanna Arendt maintains, the fact that Jews today possess a territory after so many catastrophes and persecutions. They had always depended for their physical existence on the protection of non-Jewish authorities and, thus, were always vulnerable (Arendt 1976, xiii). But with the creation of Israel as a state, and the wars of conquest for more territory, they are the target of criticism which does not stop, especially as this criticism comes from the left, not only in Greece but in Europe generally.

In spite of the enormous toll of lives, Holocaust Studies have not been established in Greece, in contrast to other European countries. In this context, a more general reluctance in coming to terms with the many elements of the traumatic past during the Second World War should be mentioned. Greece is the only country in Europe that still officially celebrates its involvement in the war, her ‘epic’ counter-attack against the Italian invaders, while she virtually ignores V-E Day, the anti-fascist victory in Europe. The reason lies in the bitter and bloody civil war that broke out in Greece after the liberation from the foreign enemies. In this inner-Greek war, the left guerrillas, who had been by far the strongest resistance group under the occupation, were finally defeated. At the same time, the triumphant centre-right coalition integrated the former Nazi collaborators into the national consensus. Thus, for decades, the official and ‘public’ history of the 1940s harped on about ‘Communist crimes’, while independent scholarly research and education was almost made impossible by political taboos and regulations. German occupation terror (and in particular the genocide of the Jews) were glossed over or conveniently ‘forgotten’ to avoid annoying the German Federal Republic, the new powerful partner in economic and strategic alliances. For decades, the same ‘political correctness’ was applied in history textbooks and the mainstream media.

Even though anti-Semitism in Greece is not as violent as in some other countries such as Russia, it is a phenomenon that needs to be discussed in academia. Greek anti-Semitism often masquerades as a principled political stance in which ‘Zionism’ and Judaism are equated. Shoah monuments are often targets of this resentment, and the trivialization of the Shoah takes place even at the top level of world politics, where the offenders usually insist on their manipulative analogies (Fleischer 2009).

Memories of the Second World War in Greece are vivid and painful up to the present day, and today’s political demagogy uses images of the suffering, persecution and famine
of the occupation to highlight the severity of the present situation. The pressures on Greece to impose strict economic measures which have serious impacts especially on young and retired people, lead to attacking Chancellor Merkel and her country, as one fears a new German attempt to gain hegemony in Europe. A good example is the frequent depiction of the prime ministers George Papandreou and Lucas Papademos as collaborators with the ‘enemy’, the Germans of the ‘Fourth Reich’.

Paradoxically, many Greeks who refer to a diachronic German role of (even genocidal) perpetrators, at the same time attack the descendants of the victims of that millennium genocide. Some of them, such as Stathis, seem already to have second thoughts about this strange overlap and revise their priorities in relation to their main target. As David Lowenthal (1985, 214) put it, ‘memories continually change to conform with present needs’.

Notes

1 The book was translated into Greek, after the publication of this author’s earlier book The New Judeophobia in 2002, also in Greek. As ‘anti-Semitism in Greece’ is rarely a topic of extensive research in Greece, the translation and immediate publication of L’anti-Semitism is a publishing event. See Taguieff (2011).


3 Of course, Lebow refers to the national case studies that his volume uses in order to analyse the argument that institutional memory constructs different meanings of the past. See Lebow et al. (2006, 15).


5 It should be noted here that after the recent elections in Greece, Syriza received the highest percentage in its history and was elected as second party to the parliament. One of the organizations that congratulated Syriza, was also the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.


8 It took seventy years for Athens, ‘the last European capital without a Jewish monument’ (according to newspaper headlines) to commemorate those who perished at the hands of Nazis and create a Holocaust monument. The monument was unveiled in May 2010 after long discussions between the Jewish community, the municipality and the Third Ephorate (authority) of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, which had hesitated to authorize the construction of the monument in the area of Keramikos, near the ancient cemetery of the same name and other antiquities.


