

## DIE WELT

### Regular Guest Column by Erwin Grandinger

January 21st 2012



Volume 20, EPM Issue 145

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## Mortgaged Property Is *No Salvation* In A German Currency Crash

**If** you think mortgaged property ownership will protect your assets in Germany, you are wrong. The German state has plenty of experience of fleecing homeowners. Ever thought of escaping the euro crisis through buying property financed with a very low-interest loan?

**Germans like to hold real estate to safeguard their assets. History shows that this strategy does not always work out; notably not in the context of a currency reform.**

From today's perspective, a 90-year-old German, thus far, has experienced at least six currency reforms in his lifetime; if he had lived in West Germany, mercifully, it would have "only" been five. On average, that has meant a new currency every 15 years. Even if the younger generation has a different perception, currencies come and go in this country far too often. So you should say goodbye right now to the linear thinking that the national currency is a static factor in the lives of Germans.

Less than 100 years ago, during the early days of the Great War in August 1914, the first monetary Enabling Act ("Ermächtigungsgesetz") was passed: the German Reich received direct access to central bank credit and the backing of bank notes with gold was prohibited by law. The associated money creation led from 1921, seven full years later and long after the end of the war, to hyperinflation.

In November 1923, just days after Adolf Hitler's "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich, the Reichsmark was converted into Rentenmark. The public debt of the German Reich was thus slashed from 164 billion marks to no less than 16 pfennigs (the "debt brake" of the Weimar Republic).

The second monetary Enabling Act was pushed through in 1933 when the German Reichsbank was put under the "direction and supervision of the Führer and Reichskanzler". The financing of the Second World War occurred so quietly that even in 1948, three years after the war, the majority of Germans believed in the continuity of the Reichsmark.

However, a not insignificant proportion of Germans, then as now, anticipated monetary and fiscal policy disaster and no longer trusted the system. What had been the options to safeguard assets against currency loss or inflation during the First and Second World Wars?

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Then as now, many citizens began to take on debt and leveraged their wealth to invest in real estate. Throughout all this though, the German state knew how to use the “apparent property safeguard” to its own benefit – it consistently exploited the collapse of the old system to finance the new.

### **Reich Emergency Levy expropriated 65 per cent of assets**

Through the financial reforms of Matthias Erzberger in 1919-20, the top rate of income tax of four percent (pre-war Prussia) was increased drastically to 60 percent and a "Reich Emergency Levy" (*“Reichsnotopfer”*) was introduced, providing for the expropriation of German assets by 65 percent. In addition, from 1924 to 1942 an “interest tax on property” (*“Hauszinssteuer”*) was introduced at Länder level; this was used to siphon off asset price gains that had occurred through currency reform and hyperinflation. It applied to all real estate purchases made before July 1918.

The currency reform of June 1948 finally produced a similar success, again destroying the German Mittelstand for a second time within 30 years. The old Reichsmark could be exchanged into the Deutsche Mark at a ratio of 10:1. The new currency had already been printed in 1947 in the United States (Greek readers may feel particularly uneasy at this point). The debts of the empire, postal system and railway were completely cancelled; banks received equalization claims.

### **Tax office cashed in on the introduction of the Deutsche Mark**

The West German currency reform of 1948 also provided for a 50 percent property tax as part of the Equalisation of Burdens Act (*“Lastenausgleichsgesetz”*). Crucially, however, mortgages were forcibly converted at 1:1, of which ten percent was to be paid to old creditors, but 90 percent to West Germany’s new tax office. Thus anyone who had tried to use property ownership to escape the predictable financial collapse associated with the Second World War was presented with the real bill in 1948 – he suffered a 90 percent loss in value and, in doing so, financed West Germany.

And thus it fits to this picture that Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble recruited to his ministry Levin Holle as head of "Financial Market Policy" in December 2011. In September the then senior partner of the "Boston Consulting Group" in Berlin, Holle commissioned a report which proposed levying a one-off tax on German savings (*“Back to Mesopotamia”*), which would generate six trillion euro for the federal government, equivalent to one third of all German savings.

Thus in keeping with the two episodes in the previous century, the present-day EFSF and the future ESM can count as a third attempt by a German state to monetize government debt (*“Drittes Ermächtigungsgesetz”*). So, if you think, against the backdrop of almost one trillion euro of German sureties, guarantees and capital injections, to safeguard your assets by buying mortgaged property, please, think again: the German state has a long memory and has considerably more experience of systematically siphoning off asset price gains that result from currency reform during the introduction of the successor currency system.

***Dr. Erwin Grandinger, January 21st 2012, Guest Column, DIE WELT, Germany***

