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The resurrection of borders in Europe

Peter Schwarz

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On 27 June, 1989, an image from Hungary went around the world. A staged media stunt, it showed Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn and his Austrian counterpart, Alois Mock, cutting a hole in the barbed wire fence that separated Eastern and Western Europe. The opening of the Hungarian border contributed greatly to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe.

Twenty-six years later, the front pages of the world press once again carry pictures from Hungary. They show a razor-sharp barbed wire fence guarded by heavily armed police who are attacking desperate refugees with tear gas to prevent them from crossing the border.

While the European Union's external borders are hermetically sealed in Hungary, its internal borders are being resurrected. The border controls abolished by the 1995 Schengen Agreement are back. Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and other countries have mobilised thousands of border police and soldiers to this end.

Officially, it is a temporary measure. The border controls are meant to fend off refugees and be lifted when the influx subsides. But hardly anyone believes that the barriers, once raised, will quickly be lowered. In business circles there is "growing concern that it could become the rule, if

the EU countries do not quickly agree on a common response to the refugee crisis,” writes the financial daily *Handelsblatt*.

The Hungarian border fence, in any event, has been built to last. After the Serbian border has been sealed off, other fences are planned on the borders with Romania and Croatia, which, unlike Serbia, are EU members.

The images of the opening of the Hungarian border and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 were exploited to the hilt for propaganda purposes. They stood as symbols of the “freedom” the reintroduction of capitalism supposedly signified.

Already at the time, this was a lie. Capitalism “freed” the ruling elites, who enriched themselves by stealing state-owned property, from any social responsibility. It “freed” the working class from their jobs and eviscerated the social safety net. For many, the freedom to travel has remained largely hypothetical, given the starvation wages and miserable pensions that prevail right up to the present day.

Nevertheless, the current resurrection of frontiers right across the continent is a political watershed. The national and social tensions in Europe have intensified to such a point that they can be suppressed only by means more brutal than those applied by the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe. The immediate target of the border closures is the refugees, but in the long term they represent a declaration of war on the entire European working class.

The flood of refugees is itself the result of imperialist wars in the Middle East and Africa as well as a social counterrevolution waged over many years against European workers. Hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya because the European and American military interventions there have made their very survival impossible. But additional tens of thousands are coming from the Balkans and Eastern Europe because the austerity diktats of Brussels and the corruption of the EU-funded elites have destroyed any possibility of maintaining a livelihood.

The deeper cause of this disaster is the crisis of world capitalism. The globalization of finance and production is incompatible with the nation state, on which capitalist rule is based. Imperialism seeks to resolve this contradiction by conquering other countries by force.

“Imperialism,” Trotsky wrote in 1915, “represents the capitalist predatory expression of a progressive tendency in economic development—to construct human economy on a world scale, freed from the cramping fetters of nation and state.”

The attempt to resolve the contradiction between world economy and the nation state by capitalist means has catastrophic consequences. Internationally, nearly 60 million people are refugees, having been deprived of the elementary right to live. The European powers react to this disaster of their own making by transforming Europe into a fortress and resurrecting the old borders within the continent.

The conflicts within Europe grow more acute. As early as 2010, we warned in a *World Socialist Web Site Perspective* column: “The break-up of the euro does not mean merely the end of a currency. It threatens a devastating and potentially bloody breakdown of political relations between European states.”

This is confirmed today by the refugee crisis. The influx of tens of thousand refugees has provoked sharp conflicts between the European governments and the trading of verbal insults.

Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann deploys soldiers to the border with Hungary and compares his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orban, to the Nazis. Germany, which had rejected any redistribution of refugees while they were stranded in Greece and Italy, now threatens other EU countries with fines if they refuse to accept migrants. Many Eastern European governments reject taking in Muslim refugees out of a mixture of racism and Catholic bigotry.

Many press commentaries speak of the refugee issue as a test for the EU. Tackling it is “not just a matter of humanity,” writes *Handelsblatt*. “Rather, it is shaking the very foundations of Europe.” It warns that if there is not an agreement soon, “Schengen is dead as a doornail—with unpredictable political and economic consequences for all of Europe.”

It is then only a matter of time before the soldiers of different countries, who are presently warding off refugees at the various borders as if they were a foreign invading force, start shooting at each other. This may seem inconceivable to many, but it arises inevitably from the logic of political developments.

In the last century, the European great powers twice waged war against each other due to uncontrollable political and economic conflicts. After the Second World War, under the protection of the United States, they tried to create economic and political institutions that would make renewed conflict impossible. The European Union and the introduction of a common currency were the culmination of these efforts.

They have produced the opposite. The unification of Europe on a capitalist basis is impossible. Instead of dampening political, national and social contradictions, it has exacerbated them.

If the working class does not intervene independently in political events another disaster is inevitable. It must unite across Europe, conduct an irreconcilable struggle against the ruling elites and the EU, and reorganize Europe on a socialist basis as the United Socialist States of Europe.