

***History in the Making #4*****The Defense of Fortress Europe: Resurgent Nationalism and the Irony of Exclusion**

by Steven Jobbitt

August 17, 2016

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Just over a quarter of a century ago, walls were coming down in Europe, and borders were opening up. Inspired by principles of unity and cooperation, a brave new world was being forged by optimistic European Union visionaries, while advocates of free market globalization peddled hopes for a better future, promising as they did so to bridge cultural, political, and economic divides as part of their now largely failed attempt to create a diverse but unified global village.

The political scientist Francis Fukuyama even tried to convince us that we had reached "the end of history." With the conclusion of the Cold War, he argued, the ideological struggles that had defined the twentieth century and that had produced untold misery and suffering for millions of people had come to an end.

Freedom and democracy had won. Liberalism and capitalism would now work hand in hand to create a better, more prosperous, and equitable world.

Or so we were told.

It is hard to imagine that anyone could seriously believe this today. Since the economic collapse of 2008-2009, people in "the West" have come to realize what people in "the rest" of the world already knew from experience: history—at least as Fukuyama would have us think of it—never went away. If anything, it had returned with a vengeance.

Europe is an important and unmistakable case in point. With capitalism in crisis and political extremism on the rise, the Europe of today looks ominously like the Europe of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the Europe of a century ago, the gap between the rich and poor is growing (both domestically and internationally), leaving an ever-growing number of marginalized and angry citizens to seek radical political solutions to their increasingly hopeless situations.

And like the Europe of a century ago, populist leaders on the right have been very successful at manipulating people's fears and frustrations, and steering them into right-wing radicalism and exclusionary forms of nationalism.

Though the roots of this right-wing nationalist resurgence run deep, the shift has taken many observers by surprise. Until very recently, the rigid frontiers of the nation-state appeared to be fading (at least within Europe itself), while many middle class Europeans could comfort themselves with the idea (or more accurately the illusion) that societal divisions were waning. Today, however, the walls are going back up, and societies are once again becoming re-segregated and divided along familiar lines of race, gender, class, and increasingly also age.

A siege mentality not unlike that which has propelled Donald Trump to the Republican Party nomination in the United States is currently gripping the

people of Europe. Crippled by an economy that serves the interests of the few over the needs of the many, and struggling to come to terms with a rapidly mutating capitalist system defined both by austere neoliberalist policies and the revolutionary consequences of full automation, many Europeans are opting to circle their wagons, and to retreat into imagined national and “civilizational” spaces where they feel safe and protected from the upheaval and insecurity that defines their lives.

Hopes of creating a global village have been replaced by efforts to build a fortress. But even this project is on the verge of fragmenting. Given the recent outcome of the Brexit vote in the UK and a groundswell of support for Eurosceptic parties and anti-immigrant movements elsewhere, it seems that even Fortress Europe might shatter into so many tiny castles built upon rather exclusive notions of sovereignty, and propped up by a dangerously narrow and short-sighted obsession with national survival.

In the current climate, immigration has again become a hot button issue for many Europeans, with the on-going refugee crisis only pouring gasoline onto an already incendiary political and economic situation. Heightening the interconnected fears of terrorism and the non-Western “other” that already existed in Europe, the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa since the spring of 2015 has become a pretext for the exclusionary policies of many states, especially those that are situated on the geographical margins of Fortress Europe.

### ***Of Fences and Militarized Borders***

Hungary is a particularly instructive case in point. Faced with an inflow of migrants that many on the right have since likened to an “invasion,” Hungary announced early in 2015 its intentions to build a fence along its border with Serbia, a project which was completed with the help of the army by the middle of September of the same year. A new law was also passed at the same time that targeted undocumented migrants and refugees, and by September 21, 2015, Hungarian parliament had passed further legislation that granted the army and police sweeping new powers to prevent refugees from crossing the border, including giving troops the right to use rubber bullets, tear gas grenades, and crowd-dissolving weapons.

Hungary’s move to seal its borders to migrants and to effectively re-militarize its southern frontier was widely criticized in Europe at the time, but by the end of the year this Central European nation was looking less like a pariah, and more like a trend setter. Throughout the Balkans, increasingly repressive measures had been implemented to stem the flow of refugees that had reached a crescendo over the course of 2015. Only days after Hungary completed its fence along the Serbian frontier, for example, Croatia closed 7 of its 8 border crossings with Serbia and began building a fence of its own. Slovenia in turn blocked off its borders with Croatia and used pepper spray against refugees. Bulgaria began deploying troops on the border with Turkey, and Macedonia also erected a fence, and increased the military presence on its southern borders.

The implementation of these increasingly repressive measures was by no means an isolated Balkan or East Central European phenomenon. Some EU leaders had advocated the use of naval force as a deterrent for migration across the Mediterranean as early as spring 2015 (at about the same time that Hungary announced its intentions to build a fence), while throughout the EU, most member countries had imposed new checks and security measures at their borders by the beginning of 2016.

Austria was one of the leading states on this front. Bolstered by a groundswell of popular support for restrictive measures to stem the migrant tide, the Austrian government adopted a series of hardline measures that effectively criminalized migration into the country. Working in cooperation with Hungary and a handful of other states, Austria played a central role in closing the Balkan route into Central and Western Europe, one which had been the hope of a large number of refugees (primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan) since spring 2015.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Irony of Exclusion***

It is certainly not the intent of this short article to single out Austria and Hungary as Europe's worst anti-immigrationist or anti-refugee offenders. In my opinion, all of Europe, along with the rest of the so-called developed world, has failed—and continues to fail—the roughly 60 million people who currently find themselves displaced in the world today.<sup>2</sup>

But there is a certain irony in the way that these two countries have dealt with the crisis, an irony that is particularly acute as Hungary prepares to commemorate

the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and the refugee crisis that the Soviet suppression of this uprising created. Though today both countries scramble to seal their borders to refugees, the memory of Hungarian victims of Soviet oppression fleeing their country is still vivid for many, especially in Hungary and the Hungarian diaspora where the revolution and its aftermath has provided useful political fodder for both the left and the right.

Letters and petitions from Hungarian refugees that I recently came across in the Portuguese archives speak volumes to the irony, and perhaps even hypocrisy, of a nation now anxious to close its borders to people in need. Having fled the tyranny of Hungary's communist regime and the counter-revolutionary violence of the Soviet crackdown, Hungarian refugees were desperate to find countries willing to host them, countries where they would be able to rebuild their lives. For some, like a doctor who had found temporary refuge in Sweden, this meant finding a place where he could once again practice medicine, and contribute to society. For others, like a former boxing champion, this simply meant finding a new home where he could practice his sport in peace, and pursue a modest life as a manual laborer.<sup>3</sup>

Neither of these men found refuge in Portugal, a state which deemed itself incapable of taking more than a few thousand temporary refugees (mostly orphans), and which feared the ideological and political turmoil that even a handful of refugees might inspire in their citizens.

The irony of Austria's current response is also illuminating, and highlights just how far we have strayed from the values that inspired post-World War II reconstruction in many nations throughout Europe.

An appeal made by the Austrian prime minister in January 1957 to the United Nations is particularly revealing. Arguing that his country had done more than any other to assist the Hungarians who had been displaced by the conflict in their own country, the Austrian prime minister chastised his contemporaries for not doing more.

Appealing to their sense of moral duty as Europeans, and reiterating Austria's own plans to "stay the course," he wrote: "We certainly do not envisage closing the Austro-Hungarian border. By granting the right of asylum, Austria takes into account not only its obligation as a democratic country and the clauses of the Convention

on Refugees, but also its humanitarian and moral responsibilities.[...] In addition, Austria, which has a common border with Hungary, has never once said 'we have reached our quota of refugees.' A statement of this kind, so contrary to the spirit of freedom and human pity—feelings on which the existence of the free world is based—would completely destroy the ideal to which we are all so deeply attached."<sup>4</sup>

In these otherwise dark times, we have to remember that there is another way. We have been here before, and we found the political will to do the right thing (or, at least, to say the right thing). Let's remind ourselves that compassion can indeed be the basis of politics, and that the cultivation of a nation's moral imagination can and should be guided by universal humanitarian principles rather than the politics of fear, hate, and exclusion. It is a noble goal for our societies to strive for. The stakes, for many, are simply too high not to.

---

<sup>1</sup> On the rise of rightwing extremism in Austria, see Anna England, "Some Wrongs that Made the Right: Austria's 2016 Election and the Global Intensification of the Political Right" <http://www.resrg.ca/?p=305>

<sup>2</sup> See Rafaela Jobbitt, "Africa and the Migrant Crisis: The Case of Eritrean Refugees" <http://www.resrg.ca/?p=288> and Steven Jobbitt, "Broadening the Discussion on the Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Need for Global and Historical Perspective" <http://www.resrg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/HITM-1-refugee-crisis-Europe-global-historical-perspective1.pdf>

---

<sup>3</sup> See my forthcoming article "Hungarian Refugees and the Politics of Martyrdom in Salazar's Portugal, 1956-1957," *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9 (2016) <http://ahea.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ahea>

<sup>4</sup> "Declaration faite par Son Excellence M. Oskar Helmer, Ministre de l'Interieur de la Republique Federale Autrichienne devant le Comité Executif de l'UNREF, le 29 janvier 1957" (quotation translated by author from the French)