

Anti-refugee xenophobia and the danger of war

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In his novel *The Death Ship*, a scathing critique of capitalist society, B. Traven describes how Belgian and Dutch border officials secretly deport stateless individuals across the border into the neighbouring country at night. “I was not born, had no seaman’s card, could never get a passport in life, and everyone could do with me what he wanted because I was no one, was not officially in the world, and could consequently not be missed,” says Gerard Gales, the protagonist of the book.

Ninety years after the publication of the novel, Europe is again witnessing similar scenes, on a far more massive scale. Tens of thousands of refugees who have escaped the hell of war in the Middle East are being deprived of all rights and any shred of human dignity. They are being used as pawns in conflicts between the European states.

Barbed wire and guns hinder their onward journey. They are mistreated, detained under barbaric conditions and deported. They are not considered human, and certainly not as being in need of protection. They are treated as “invaders”, “illegal immigrants” or “criminal foreigners.”

The Western Balkans summit held on Wednesday was the high point to date of the systematic persecution of refugees seeking asylum in Europe. The Austrian government invited representatives from nine Balkan states to Vienna for the purpose of closing down the Balkan route along which most of the refugees travel from Greece to Central Europe. Greece, where 100,000 refugees have arrived just since the beginning of the year, was not invited to the summit. Its foreign minister described Greece’s exclusion as an “unfriendly act”, and the Greek government recalled its ambassador from Vienna in protest, something without precedent in the history of the European Union.

Vienna’s unilateral action, which also met with criticism in Brussels and Berlin, is only the latest development in a surge of nationalism and xenophobia fuelled by the ruling elites of all the European countries, beginning with Germany.

Berlin rejects a blockade of the Balkan route, favouring a “European solution”. In practical terms, this means, instead of sealing the Greek-Macedonian border, policing the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey to block asylum seekers seeking to reach Greece on their way to northern Europe. Berlin fears that heavily indebted Greece could implode financially and politically under the burden of the refugee crisis, with incalculable consequences for the finances and cohesion of the European Union.

As the Balkan ministers met in Vienna, representatives of the 28 NATO member-states gathered in Brussels to work out the final details of the deployment of NATO assets in the Aegean. From Saturday, naval forces under German leadership will monitor refugee routes around the clock, with “people smugglers”, (i.e., refugee boats) to be “punished just as harshly as terrorists” and “refugees in distress” to be brought back to Turkey.

The aim of the military operation is to “drastically and sustainably” reduce the number of refugees at the Turkish-Greek border, as German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière explained on the sidelines of a meeting with his EU counterparts in Brussels. This is to be achieved in not more than 10 days.

Then, a special summit of the European Union and the Turkish government is scheduled to take place, where Ankara, in return for money, diplomatic concessions and—something that is not openly discussed—support for its war against the Kurds, the Syrian government and Russia, will be obliged to act as

the prison-keeper and border guard for the European Union.

This summit is crucial for the German government. A week later, on March 13, three important state elections that could undermine Angela Merkel's chancellorship are being held. For this reason, de Maizière threatened that Germany would seal its borders if there was no agreement at the summit.

A competition is underway across Europe to determine who can most brutally deter refugees. It is not difficult to imagine what this means for the desperate people struggling for their very survival somewhere between Kabul, Baghdad, Damascus, Athens and Berlin. Like Gerard Gales in *The Death Ship*, they are “no one” and “not officially in the world”. The much-vaunted “European values” to which, in the view of some politicians, every asylum seeker must commit in writing boil down to the reality that a migrant without a passport or visa from an EU country is an object that does not merit the protection afforded to animals.

The attacks on refugees demonstrate what the European ruling elites plan for their own people. They mesh seamlessly with the austerity measures that have plunged millions into abject poverty in Greece, Portugal, Spain and other countries. Given the unstable economic situation, the growing social and national tensions, and the billions flowing into military spending, further and harsher attacks will follow, and not only in so-called “debtor” states.

The conception that Europe could be united as a progressive and democratic entity on a capitalist basis has always been an illusion. Capitalist private interests, which are closely linked to the nation-state system, cannot be reconciled with the peaceful elimination of borders and harmonious development of the economy and society.

The dispute over refugees is only a symptom of the growing national conflicts in Europe. Differences between Europe's capitals are now being aired in an aggressive tone, reminiscent of the eve of the two world wars. The recalling of the Greek ambassador from Vienna is just one example.

In the German media, the demand of political scientist Herfried Münkler for Germany to become the “disciplinarian” of Europe evokes great enthusiasm. In its Thursday edition, *Die Welt* denounced Vienna's

Western Balkans summit as the reincarnation of the Danube monarchy—this time not as an ally, but as an opponent of Germany. “The Balkans used to be Vienna's sphere of influence, and have become so again since the collapse of Yugoslavia,” the newspaper declared. Berlin and Brussels, in contrast, look to Greece and Turkey, “Vienna's imperial opponents”. Those who think in such categories are already planning the next war.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán accuses the German government of expressing itself “gruffly, rudely and aggressively”, and of making “Europe's future and security dependent on the good will of Turkey”. In Warsaw, plans for a new version of the “Intermarium”, a power bloc against Germany and Russia, are being discussed. There are dozens of similar examples.

Politics in Europe once again follow the mottos: “the national interest first” and “everyone for himself”. While almost all of the European powers are rushing to get involved in the wars in Syria, Libya and Africa, a military conflict on the continent itself is moving into the realm of possibility.

The sealing of borders and the mistreatment of stateless individuals, described so vividly in Traven's novel, were unmistakable signs of the coming Second World War. The book was published eight years after the guns of the Great War fell silent and a mere 13 years before the German invasion of Poland.

Today, the dangers are no less acute. Everything depends on the independent intervention of the working class. The defence of refugees, the struggle against capitalism and the fight for a socialist Europe are inseparable parts of the struggle against war.



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