

# Trump's election as seen from Europe

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In 1928, a year before the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression, and 11 years before the outbreak of World War II, the great Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote:

“In the period of crisis, the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.”

These words are worth bearing in mind when considering the political significance of the election of Donald Trump and the nervous reaction from within ruling circles in Europe as it becomes clear that the president-elect intends to pursue a radical nationalist agenda at the expense of Europe.

Outgoing US President Barack Obama has been touring Europe over the past week to praise the state of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic, and to assure European officials that the damage to trans-Atlantic relations caused by Trump's election could be managed. Events, however, have a logic of their own.

In Athens and Berlin, Obama met with representatives of the European ruling class, who have largely reacted to Trump's election with dread. The rise of Trump—who has threatened to undermine the NATO alliance signed between America and Western Europe in 1949, discussed the use of nuclear weapons in Europe, and vocally endorsed torture—has shaken European politics to the core.

French daily *Le Monde* wrote that Trump's election meant “the end of an era, that of the ‘benevolently hegemonic’ role of the US, that it inherited from World War II. First in the Cold War, against the USSR, then after the collapse of communism and the fracturing of the Soviet Union in 1991, Washington led the free

world, at the head of the ‘West.’”

The British *Economist* magazine wrote in a worried editorial that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, “history was said to have ended,” bringing with it the final triumph of “liberal democracy.” With Trump's victory, however, “that illusion was shattered. History is back—with a vengeance.” The election is a “hammer blow both to the norms that underpin politics in the United States and also to America's role as the world's pre-eminent power.”

In his visits, Obama tried to reassure the European ruling elites that, however great the conflicts within NATO, the political framework provided in the post-Soviet period by US global hegemony and the US alliance with the European Union (EU) would endure.

In Athens, whose downtown was under lock-down as 5,000 riot police attacked protests opposing austerity, Obama hailed the EU as a historic achievement. He applauded EU-backed social cuts imposed by the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government and Syriza's logistical support for Washington's Middle East wars. Having spoken to Trump, Obama said, “[O]ne of the messages I will be able to deliver is his commitment to NATO and the trans-Atlantic alliance.”

In Berlin, much of which was also placed on lock-down, Obama issued a statement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel praising US-German ties as the “core” of the US-European alliance. They pledged that cooperation would continue between Washington and Berlin “based on our shared commitment to personal freedom and dignity, which only a vibrant democracy under the rule of law can guarantee.”

Obama's predictions that Trump will maintain cordial relations with Europe, while he simultaneously advances a program of “America first” nationalism, are so much wishful thinking.

As the world reels under the economic crisis triggered

by the 2008 crash, attempts to drastically redesign world politics to benefit the US financial aristocracy will again come, as Trotsky noted, primarily at the expense of its imperialist “allies” in Europe.

While the election of Trump marks a significant turning point, it is also the product of deeply-rooted tendencies. Since the end of World War II, US imperialism served in the final analysis as Europe’s hegemonic power, stabilizing inter-European antagonisms that twice in the 20th century exploded into world war. It financed and backed European integration policies during the Cold War, to project a “democratic” image for European capitalism as part of its rivalry with the Soviet Union. Trump’s election marks a new stage in the breakdown of this political set-up.

The dissolution of the USSR, far from marking an “end of history,” in fact was only an initial expression of a crisis of the capitalist nation-state system. This crisis is centered in the long-term decline of American capitalism, which has sought, with ever greater violence, to maintain its position as the global hegemon through military force.

For Europe, the turn of the US to “America first” nationalism means the breakup of all the post-war institutions, which were underwritten by American power. Even before the election of Trump, however, the European powers, and particularly Germany, have begun to respond to these tendencies by aggressively asserting their own interests on the world stage.

The specter of conflict with Washington enormously exacerbates divisions within the EU and various international institutions through which European imperialist powers assert themselves. In 2010, as the euro crisis first broke out, then-European Central Bank Chairman Jean-Claude Trichet warned that Europe was as tense as before World War I or II. Then, this summer, Britain voted to leave the EU, two years after Berlin ominously announced its re-militarization drive, insisting that it must be able to launch major military operations independently of Washington.

At the same time, the crisis of American democracy that has found expression in the election of Trump has its parallel in Europe. The installation of Trump’s far-right regime in Washington will strengthen right-wing, nationalist and fascistic tendencies within Europe, from the National Front in France to the Alternative for

Germany. The likelihood of extreme right governments coming to power in Europe is immensely increased.

For the working class in the United States, Europe and internationally, the election of Trump is a warning. Looking back to the heritage of 20th century fascism, the ruling classes are preparing an escalation of militarism, world war and police repression against workers and youth.

The dangerous tendencies toward nationalism and war are rooted in the protracted crisis of the world capitalist system. But as in the 20th century, these same tendencies also create the conditions for socialist revolution. In the coming struggles, the task of the working class is to politically mobilize and arm itself with an independent, revolutionary and socialist perspective.



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