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Welcome to Fortified Europe: the Militarization of Europe's Borders

By David L. Glotzer
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It's late in the afternoon and we are stuck behind a school bus in Northern Croatia as we drive through the what the GPS says is the miserable little town of Apatija, which my Croatian friend Juraj says literally translates to "apathy" in Croatian.

We are following Balkan Route in the footsteps of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Africa who are fleeing the Syrian Civil War, ISIS, Al-Shabbab, the Taliban, African despots and America's drone war.

I'm impressed with how the school bus can navigate the dirt and gravel roads that crisscross this Croatian nowhere. Before the Croatian government set up transit camps to provide people with food, shelter, medical care bus and train rides to Western Europe, refugees without the money to pay for their own transportation had to walk these roads.

We split with the bus at fork between two fields and make our way through another little nowhere called Gola which makes us both laugh because its slang for a naked woman. Which makes sense, Gola looks almost entirely abandoned; other than some half painted houses along the main road and a relatively well kept church it looks like no one has lived here since the end of the Yugoslav wars. The vibe is certainly bare, at the edge of the town we pass by ill clad children riding their bikes through water filled potholes, Juraj says it's a Gypsy village, and then we make it to a field recently bisected by the new Hungarian border fence.

Hungary quarantined itself off from Croatia and Serbia with a 13 foot fence topped with razor wire in response to refugees crossing on their way to Western Europe. Between September and October of 2015 of over 200,000 had made the journey. It is now January 2016, and the combined number of refugees crossing into Hungary since the fence went up has totaled less than 1,000.

We come up to a small gap policed by Hungarian soldiers and a squad car from the adjacent Hungarian town. The soldiers are young, bored and don't speak very much English but they tell us they haven't seen any refugees trying to cross in weeks.

On the Croatian side of the border there are only empty toll booths and an abandoned police station which has been stripped of everything valuable. The only thing left is an old air-conditioning unit dangling from a broken window. Six months ago, before the refugee crisis picked up, you couldn't tell which country you were in until you heard someone speak. Croatia is in the process of joining the Schengen region, which Hungary is already part of, which is supposed to guarantee freedom of movement for all people between the 26 member nations. The Hungarian fence is in clear violation of this agreement.

Earlier in the day we had been to the Slovene border near Samobor. The Slovenes had laid barbed wire along the Bregana River which separates them from Croatia. About a mile from the official border crossing we tried entering Slovenia by taking an old stone bridge when we were held up by a guard sitting in what looked like a telephone booth. As he told us we needed to go through the official border an old man walked passed, into Slovenia, as calmly as he must have done when these two countries were both part of Yugoslavia. The guard gave him no trouble.

Before turning the car around, the guard told us the barrier was built to make sure Refugees go through the established transit camps and don't freeze to death crossing the river or in the forest.

In March, both Slovenia and Croatia closed their borders to refugees trying to enter Western Europe. It must have been nice to have already laid out 400 miles of razor wire.

But it's not just the Balkans who are preparing to defend themselves from hordes of desperate people. Earlier in April Austrian Defense minister Hans Peter Doskozil told Die Welt, "as the EU's external borders are not yet effectively protected, Austria will soon ramp up strict border controls. That means massive border controls at the Brenner (Pass), and with soldiers," its border with Italy. Both are signatories of Schengen.

Since the flow of refugees picked up Germany has restricted rail travel from Austria, Sweden on travel from Denmark, Denmark from Germany, Belgium from France and Norway from the entire European Union. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has barricaded itself from refugees crossing from Greece causing a humanitarian crisis and Hungary will hold a referendum on whether or not to accept the EU's refugee quotas as it tries to build its own European hermit kingdom.

In March the EU signed a deal with Turkey to stop refugees from smuggling themselves into Europe, which includes a plan to "swap" refugees who pay their life savings to smugglers to cross the Aegean on a raft. Through neglect, the EU is literally forcing asylum seekers into the hands of the criminals they are afraid they will become once they enter Europe, while any tourist can pay €20 to do the same on a ferry and get trashed for a weekend on any number of Greek islands.

According to Eurostat the EU received approximately 2.3 million applications for asylum between 2013 and 2015. With more than 500 million people and the world largest economy, there should be no problem absorbing what is, in fact, less than 0.5% of the EU's current population.

While the immediate cause of the refugee crisis is undoubtedly the global war on terror and specifically the war in Iraq, this does not explain why Europe is failing to handle what, with the threat of climate change, may be nothing more than the runt of 21st century migrant crises.

Greece alone took in nearly 1 million people, mostly Albanians, after the USSR fell and the Yugoslav Wars began, yet these people were integrated into Greek society and there was never a threat that Europe would collapse even though the majority of Albanians are Muslim.

But that was before the Maastricht treaty formerly created the European Union and the Euro which bound disparate economies together with a common currency under the conditions that they gave up fiscal and monetary sovereignty.

In its creation, Germany, recalling the vivid history of Post-Wiemar Hyperinflation, made sure that the new European Currency would be a "hard" currency designed after the pre-WWII Gold

Standard, a common currency that spread the Great Depression in the United States to the rest of the developed world after 1929.

So when the 2008 financial crisis raced across the Atlantic like a tsunami and crushed Europe's banking system under the banner of "Sound fiscal policies" deficits and national debts were restricted to 3% and 60% of GDP respectively and the European Central Bank was restricted from purchasing national debts, which is the reason why central banks were invented in the first place.

Now individual countries can't generate the deficits necessary to pull the European economy out of recession without entering a debt crisis. Unlike the United States, interest rates on national debts for Eurozone countries are set by markets and countries are restricted from pursuing expansionary fiscal policies during times of crisis. Eurozone nations gave up their individual economic sovereignty in order to come together without creating European economic sovereignty and it's tearing them apart.

In the US, but also in any country with its own currency like, austerity is a political choice and real resources are the main constraint, this is not the case for Eurozone nations for whom finance is a scarce resource. Now Southern Europe is in permanent debt deflation and Northern Europe is decaying from lack of investment even though their real interest rates are negative, workers are at each other's throats because the empowered parties refuse to acknowledge austerity was a mistake and change course, and the only groups winning belong to the xenophobic right wing.

Certainly by historical standards this is not the largest refugee crisis Europe has faced; after World War II more than 50 million people were displaced and Europe was in ashes, yet they recovered. Today the trauma of war does not haunt them; freedom of movement for EU citizens has culturally linked more disparate people than at any other time in their recent history; they have common intuitions; they have the productive capacity to provide all of their citizens with meaningful lives and a historically unprecedented level comfort. And yet, with all the physical and human means to solve their problems, the European project is falling apart, they are "divided by a common currency" according to former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis.

In the ultimate vindication of Camus' *La Peste* Europeans forgot that it was not the hyperinflation of the 1920's, but the deflation of the 1930's which brought Hitler and the Nazi's to power. And once again, following economic catastrophe, fascism is crawling back onto the surface of European politics because a dissolving common currency has made the politicians trying to save it economically impotent.

Add to the economic fire an influx of refugees and let the scapegoating begin.

The AfD, which didn't even exist until 2013, is now the third largest party in Germany and has a leader, Frauke Petry, who boosted her poll numbers after suggesting that German Police should shoot refugees at the border if they tried enter the country. After taking a nearly quarter of the vote in Saxony-Anhalt she said, "yesterday we made an important first step in the right direction to break the cartels of consensus parties." And she is right. Nationally the Social Democratic Party has fallen to 21% while Angela Merkel's coalition government fell to just 34%.

Get on a train and travel east for a few hours and you can hear Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban talk about refusing Asylum seekers “to keep Europe Christian,” which is apparently not enough for much of the Hungarian public as he faces a serious challenge from Jobbik, a radical nationalist party whose party leader thinks that “the Land Law has to be amended so that the Solomons cannot buy land in Hungary,” and that the major problem facing the Hungarian people, other than some dangerous Jews, is “Gypsy crime.” Jobbik holds more than 20% of Hungarian parliamentary seats.

Or head west to France where the “Socialist” party is criminalizing the hijab and evicting asylum seekers from refugee camps in order to out-right the proto-fascist National Front. The French Government is also being subsidized by the British Government to militarize the border crossing in Calais to keep refugees from crossing over into Dover.

Hollande’s “Socialist” Government is showing the people of Europe that you don’t have to elect proto-fascists in order to get right wing policy because without a credible left the center will gladly be the handmaiden of bigots and racists.

Across the Channel the Brits will be holding referendum on staying in the European Union on June 23rd. Why? Because even though the UK has its own currency and is entirely unimpeded from achieving full employment and boosting badly needed investment, the conservative government doesn’t feel like it. That would show that government could somehow be useful, and obviously the British malaise should be the fault of foreigners and poor people, not austerity and neglect.

In the Netherlands Geert Wilders’ ironically named Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) is leading in the polls for the upcoming 2017 parliamentary elections. The PVV’s platform includes, among other things, “the abolition of the senate, shutting down of all Islamic Schools, withdrawal from the EU, the abolition of the European Parliament and no cooperation in any EU activities, repeal of the carbon tax, taxes on the Islamic headscarves and prohibition of the Koran,” and “no more windmills” or funding for durability or CO2 reduction.”

If that’s not ridiculous enough the Dutch version of PVV’s platform also rails specifically against “integration courses,” valiantly declaring “not in theaters, not at libraries, not in swimming pools or anywhere!” Because why not? Apparently integrated swinging pools a greater national threat than climate change in a country that is 26% below sea level.

Oh, and actual Nazis make up the third largest party in Greece.

Welcome to fortified Europe, where the walls might not be as big and beautiful as a Trump fantasy but they do have German efficiency and other than the creeping sense that we’re reliving the 1930’s everything is just fine.