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The end of liberal Europe

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The historian Heinrich August Winkler has described the history of Germany as a “long road to the West.” By “West,” the Social Democrat means parliamentary democracy, human and civil rights—as they were defined by the American and French revolutions— class compromise and social balance.

After a long *Sonderweg* (special path), according to Winkler’s interpretation, Germany had finally arrived in the “West” through the Constitution of 1949, the nonviolent reunification of 1991 and the integration into the European Union, which finally led the European continent to peace.

Winkler’s conception of the “West” was always ideologically driven and involved a significant glossing over of reality. However, if recent events are assessed on the basis of his criterion, then Germany and Europe have rapidly travelled the “road to the West” in reverse over recent months. Almost overnight, the political culture has been violently transformed. The social democratic and liberal Europe has collapsed.

Everywhere, the ruling elites are moving sharply to the right. Chauvinism, xenophobia, militarism and the call for a strong state are on the rise. This applies not only to the emerging ultra-right-wing parties such as the French National Front, the Alternative for Germany, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish PiS, but also for every establishment party, including those supposedly on the left.

Pseudo-left publications such as the Pabloite United Secretariat's *International Viewpoint* are among the leading voices in the chorus calling for state intervention and imperialist war in the name of allegedly defending women's rights.

In Germany, political parties and the media have sparked a campaign of racist incitement against refugees following the wildly hyped events in Cologne on New Year's Eve, reminiscent of the anti-Semitic campaigns of the Nazis. Government and opposition parties try to outdo each other in the call for more police and tougher laws, with the Left Party excelling in this regard.

In France, the Socialist Party government has imposed a permanent state of emergency and threatened to deprive convicted criminals of foreign origin of their citizenship, in the tradition of the Vichy regime.

Everywhere in Europe the borders are being imposed, and the Schengen system is as good as dead. Conflicts between EU members are escalating. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls warned at the World Economic Forum in Davos that the EU "could very well break up in a very short time." His Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte spoke of "six to eight weeks" remaining for the EU to resolve the refugee crisis. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote, "Never before was the end of the EU as realistic as it is today."

Europe's ruling elites are agreed when it comes to increasing military capacity, waging war in the Middle East and Africa and deploying the military at home. But even here, the unity of Europe should not be taken for granted. With the growth of national antagonisms, it is only a matter of time before tanks are deployed to the borders between EU member states. Seventy years after the end of World War II, the threat of war in the heart of Europe has reemerged.

The approximately 1 million refugees who have entered Europe in the past year, about 0.2 percent of the total EU population of 508 million, are the pretext and not the cause of the political shift to the right. This shift is not the result of widespread sentiments in the general population, as the media seeks to present it, but the expression of a rebellion of the ruling elites. They are systematically fanning reactionary moods, using the media and the official parties.

The real reason for this rebellion from above is the explosive social, economic and political contradictions that have been building up since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wider Soviet bloc 25 years ago, and especially since the international financial crisis of 2008. German imperialism has played a crucial role in these developments.

Germany has ruthlessly exploited its economic predominance to force its rivals to the wall and to gain hegemony over Europe. It has used the euro in order to impose merciless austerity measures on weaker southern and eastern European countries--measures that have ruined their economies, plunged millions into misery and robbed the youth of any future.

A cursory glance at European economic statistics is sufficient to show the illusory character of the idea that Europe could be united harmoniously and peacefully on a capitalist basis.

For example, Germany's gross domestic product, just short of €3 trillion in 2014, was more than seven times as high as that of neighboring Poland, which has nearly half as many inhabitants. Germany's exports were seven times larger than those of Poland; the German export surplus of €220 billion alone was higher than total Polish exports of €163 billion.

Even France, which exported less than half as much as Germany in 2014 and had a trade deficit of €71 billion, and the United Kingdom, with a trade deficit of €134 billion, were cast in the shadow of Germany.

The contrast in the social statistics is even more blatant. The average monthly gross earnings of full-time workers within the EU varies between €306 in Bulgaria, €902 in Poland, €3,106 in Germany and €4,217 in Denmark.

These averages mask the huge social gulf that has opened up within the individual countries. For example, Germany owes its economic supremacy not least to its extensive low-wage sector, which resulted from the Agenda 2010 "reforms" introduced by the Social Democratic Party-Green Party government of Gerhard Schröder. Millions of workers are living on the edge of subsistence and often need two or three jobs to make ends meet.

These sharp social contradictions are the real reason for the shift to the right by the European elites. They know that below the surface, a massive social explosion is brewing and that they have little time to prepare for it. As in the 1930s, they are stirring up chauvinism and xenophobia to divert social tensions into right-wing channels, build up the police apparatus, and establish a right-wing movement to use against social protests in the same manner as they did in the 1930s with the Nazi stormtroopers (SA).

The growth of militarism serves the same purpose. There has hardly been a war in recent history that has not in part served to direct internal tensions outwards. At the same time, the conflicts between the great powers are very real. In Germany's ruling class, the belief has long prevailed that its global economic interests can be secured only by military means. For two years, it has agitated intensively for an aggressive foreign policy under the slogan, "New power, new responsibilities."

Currently, these missions take place in the framework of international alliances, primarily NATO. But this will not last. The conflicts of interest between the great powers are so deep that due to the crisis of the world capitalist economy they are being driven inevitably toward a Third World War.

Only the political intervention of the working class can prevent such a catastrophe. In contrast to the ruling elites, the mood among the masses is predominantly left-wing. But this sentiment finds no expression in official politics. The experiences of the past year—from Syriza's betrayal in Greece to Germany's Left Party supporting the call for increased state powers—have powerfully demonstrated that no opposition can be expected from the ranks of the official parties.

The fight against war, racism and social cuts, as well as the defense of refugees and democratic rights, is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism and the building of an international

socialist workers' party. This requires the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe.

The Fourth International is the only political tendency that has warned that Europe cannot be unified on a capitalist basis, and that new wars are inevitable if capitalism is not overthrown.

Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International, explained at the end of the First World War, "a halfway complete and consistent economic union of Europe coming *from the top* by means of an agreement of the capitalist governments is sheer utopia." That analysis is being confirmed today. The only possibility of uniting Europe in the interests of its peoples is in the United Socialist States of Europe.

Twenty-five years ago, David North, now the chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, warned in a speech on the eve of the launching of the first Gulf War by the US against Iraq, "just as World War I and World War II were preceded by bitter inter-imperialist rivalries, the ground is being prepared for World War III. The weapons which are now being used against the Iraqi people will in the future be used in even more bloody and horrific conflicts." (1)

Since then, US imperialism and its European allies have destroyed a great part of the Middle East, which now threatens to become the source of a new world conflagration.

1) "One of the great crimes of the twentieth century," speech by David North, January 20, 1991 in New York City, in: "Desert Slaughter. The Imperialist War Against Iraq," Detroit 1991, p. 246