The Return of No-Man's Land

Below is a the link to an excellent recent piece by Tara Zahra, a Professor of East European History at the University of Chicago.

She views the current Central Europeam standoff over receiving incoming refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Africa and the wider Middle East against the historical backdrop of these countries' own — and in some instances, fairly recent — experiences of population upheaval born of war. In particular stories about of how, in the runup to World War II, Jews from neighbouring cpountries — Poland, say, or Austria — who were attempting to flee Nazi depredations ended up caught up in games of cross-border pass-the-parcel.

A salutory example, cited by Zahra, being of the group of Austrian Jewish residents of the borderlands with Hungary — the very border, as she notes chillingly, on which the Austrian government is now deploying thousands fo troops — who after being driven out in April 1938 were deposited on an island in the Danube that belonged to Czechoslovakia. End of story? Far from it. The Czechoslovak authorities deported them the same day, and many ended up living for months on a tugboat — provided by the Jewish community in nearby Bratislava — while local Jewish organizations desperately tried to find somewhere or someone who would let them.

Change the details and this all sounds wearily familiar. And that, of course, is a key part of Zahra's message. In Central Europe, at least, we have most definitely been in a place of population upheavals, mass exodus and attendant national existential uncertainty before. She posits the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 as Eastern Europe's first major refugee crisis: soon to be followed by the collapse of the three great European land empires — Austrian, Russian and Ottoman — in the final stages of World War I, bringing with a refugee explosion

totalling over 3 million people.

The story becomes more intricate thereafter. I take Zahra's central point, however, to be that the new states carved out of the ruins of the three imploding empires were all built on the supposedly modernizing notion that as she puts it, 'national homogeneity was the essential precondition for a modern, democratic state'.

The situation was further exacerbated by the post-war advent of widespread new immigration restrictions in Western Europe and in particular North America. As Zahra observes 'The United States, which had absorbed several million migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe in the decades before the First World War, effectively shut its gates to immigration from those areas afte World War I.'

Zahra concludes with a rousing coda devoted to the relationship between freedom of movement and freedom as such that rings as true for the refugee 'no-man's lands' of today's Central Eastern European states as ever:

"Europeans", she states, "should be mindful of a past that has demonstrated that walls only create an illusion of security. Decades of experience show that the creation of a No-Man's Land erodes the freedoms of those on all sides of the fences that surround it."

https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2015-09-22/return-no-man-s-land

The Return of No-Man's Land

Europe's Asylum Crisis and

Historical Memory

By [Tara Zahra](#)

In mid September, around 1,000 refugees were reportedly stranded on the border between Hungary and Serbia, with neither state willing to grant them asylum. The return of a "No-Man's Land" on Eastern European soil is yet another disturbing reminder of how history can repeat itself. No-Man's Land was last seen in Eastern Europe in 1938, when governments played a sick game of ping-pong with unwanted Jewish refugees, shunting them back and forth across state borders.

In one infamous incident in 1938, the Polish government passed legislation that stripped most Polish Jews living outside Poland of their Polish citizenship. Three days before the measure took effect, on October 28, 1938, Nazis rounded up 17,000 Polish Jews living in Nazi Germany and attempted to deport them to Poland. Poland promptly closed its borders. Throughout November, thousands of people were thus caught in limbo between the Polish and German border near Zbąszyń. They were housed in miserable tents, barracks, and condemned military stables—or else were left to freeze outdoors, exposed to the elements.

Hannah Arendt, the century's most famous theorist of refugeedom (and a refugee herself), explained such scenes as a symptom of the interwar obsession with national sovereignty. The state, "insisting on its sovereign right of expulsion… smuggled its expelled stateless into the neighboring countries, with the result that the latter retaliated in kind." The consequences, she wrote in her book *[The Origins of Totalitarianism](#)*, "were petty wars between the police at the frontiers, which did not exactly contribute to good international relations, and an accumulation of jail sentences for the stateless, who, with the help of the police of one country, had passed 'illegally' into the territory of another."

A Jewish family prior to being deported from Slovakia, 1942.

Such "petty wars" broke out along frontiers across Eastern Europe in 1938. On April 16, for example, Jewish residents of the Burgenland in Austria, on the border with Hungary (the very border to which the Austrian government is currently deploying 2,200 troops) were driven from their apartments, robbed of their possessions and identity papers, and dumped on a Danube island that belonged to Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak government deported them on the same day, to the purgatory between the borders of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The refugees spent three days trapped in a triangle of bayonets from three states. Finally the Jewish community of Bratislava, Slovakia devised an impromptu solution. They rented a tugboat that was stationed on the Hungarian coast of the Danube, and took aboard 68 refugees with a plan to travel down the river until they found somewhere to dock. No country would allow the tugboat to land, however. The refugees remained on the [boat for three months](#) while Jewish organizations attempted to find a sanctuary.

LOW MOBILITY

Today, No-Man's Lands, border checks, and internment camps are reappearing, and many of those countries that produced a lion's share of Europe's refugees in the twentieth century seem unable to avoid repeating their mistakes. The jubilant celebrations of a borderless Europe that accompanied the dismantling of the Iron Curtain and the expansion of the European Union have reverted to old demands for barbed wire fences.

Migrants walk towards the Hungarian border after arriving at the train station in Botovo, Croatia, September 23, 2015.

Today's scenes of desperate refugees (and human indifference)

in Eastern Europe certainly seem eerily familiar to anyone with a superficial knowledge of Europe's twentieth century history. In 1937, the stateless (previously Austrian) Jewish writer Joseph Roth aptly described what he called the "[metaphysical affliction](#)" of refugeedom. "You're a transient and you're stuck, a refugee and a detainee; condemnded to rootlessness and unable to budge." Or, in the words of one refugee stranded in Hungary today, "[Why is Hungary doing this anyway](#)? We don't want to stay there. I want to go to the Netherlands, maybe Germany. Now I'm stuck here."Perhaps less familiar is the long and deep history of Eastern European ambivalence toward refugees and toward mobility in general. This hostility has often been linked to an Eastern European preference for national homogeneity and national self-determination, and to Eastern Europe's own perceived status on the margins of Europe.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western Europeans and have assumed an inherent link between mobility and freedom. In 1989, nothing symbolized the failed promise of socialism so profoundly as the barbed wire and watchtowers that imprisoned citizens in their own states. When the Berlin Wall came tumbling down on November 9, 1989, commentators insisted that East Berliners were not simply crossing from East to West, they were also moving from captivity to freedom. As crowds of dazed East Germans wandered the streets of West Berlin for the first time in 28 years, Tom Brokaw declared, "Tonight in Berlin, it is 'Freedom night'…Thousands of East Berliners have been crossing into freedom all day long."

The unification of Germany and the expansion of the European Union to include former Eastern bloc countries in 2004 and 2007 were supposed to represent the realization of the basic principle of mobility as freedom, and that upheld freedom of movement as a "human right."

In reality, however, the past 25 years have been exceptional in European history. The much-vaunted freedom of mobility

within Europe's Schengen Zone has always been dependent on the defensive barriers circling Europe's edges. Even during the Cold War, Western countries (including the United States) were typically only happy to uphold a right to asylum as long as only a few people could actually apply for it. As soon as refugees actually began to arrive, Western governments and popular opinion often turned against newcomers, questioning whether they were "bona fide" refugees or merely opportunistic "economic migrants."

Eastern Europe's history of ambivalence toward refugees was born at the very moment the region first began to produce refugees in massive numbers. The first major refugee crisis in Eastern Europe began with the Balkan wars of 1912–13, but reached astronomic proportions with the collapse of the Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires in 1917–18, which together produced upward of three million refugees. The dissolution of Europe's great land empires set the stage for the subsequent refugee crises of the twentieth century, since Eastern Europe's new nation-states were founded on the fiction that national homogeneity was the essential precondition for a modern, democratic state. New restrictions on mobility in Western Europe (with the exception of France) and North America after World War I exacerbated the situation. The United States, which had absorbed several million migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe in the decades before the First World War, effectively shut its gates to immigration from those areas after World War I. In Arendt's words, what was "unprecedented" for refugees after 1918 was "[not the loss of a home but the inability to find a new one](#)."

Although the Austrian government did not actively deport Hungarians, Austrian diplomats and government officials made it clear from the outset that their hospitality had an expiration date Such difficulties persisted in the coming decades. In 1956, for example, 180,000 Hungarian refugees descended on Austria in the aftermath of the failed Hungarian

uprising against the Soviet Hungarian People's Republic. At first, Austrians tended to welcome the refugees with open arms. As time wore on, however, and greater numbers remained in camps and settled into life in Austrian towns and cities, Hungarian refugees from Communism were saddled with negative stereotypes. They were specifically accused of being [work-shy freeloaders](#) and economic opportunists, who had overstayed their welcome and abused the generosity of their hosts.

Although the Austrian government did not actively deport Hungarians, Austrian diplomats and government officials made it clear from the outset that their hospitality had an expiration date. Hungarian exiles were strongly encouraged to move on to other countries for permanent resettlement. In a 1957 speech, Interior Minister Oskar Helmer proclaimed, "It is no longer acceptable that by virtue of its geographic position, Austria is condemned to bear the major burden of the refugee problem."

In the aftermath of the Hungarian crisis, the number of individuals who fled across the border from Yugoslavia into Austria also multiplied, as did the number of refugees whose asylum claims were rejected. In 1957, around one-fourth of Yugoslav applicants for asylum were issued deportation orders. The reasons for rejection were often arbitrary and inconsistent. One Yugoslav refugee was turned back on the grounds that "if all of the anti-Communists flee, who will remain behind in the country to fight the Communists?"

Marko Djurica / Reuters
A migrant family waits to board buses on a field near the village of Babska, Croatia, September 23, 2015.
Most asylum-seekers were simply turned away because Austrian authorities insisted that they were "economic" and not "political" migrants. The criteria for distinguishing between the two remained unclear, however. A refugee who "made a good impression and has worked hard," and another who had "worker's

hands" were granted asylum. A less fortunate candidate was rejected on the grounds that he was a "[heavy smoker who has not worked much](#)." In reality, since the very moment that the "refugee" was defined in international law, the distinction between "refugees" and "economic migrants" has been malleable in practice, and often used to willfully exclude individuals considered "undesirable" from a political, cultural, or economic perspective.Contrary to popular belief, it was not only Western restrictions on immigration that ended mobility from and within Eastern Europe; it was also the efforts of East European governments themselves to immobilize their own populations. In particular, the more Eastern Europe's governments sought to keep out or to deport national, religious, or linguistic minorities (culminating in the expulsion of millions of German-speakers after World War II), the more they restricted the movement of their "own" citizens, who were needed to replace the labor of expelled or murdered minorities. Ethnic cleansing and border control were flip sides of the same coin. The more homogenous Eastern Europe's populations became, the more the movement of "valuable" national citizens was restricted. Czechoslovakia, for example, actually banned all foreign travel, including trips to visit friends and family in 1947—before the Communists seized power. Communists merely radicalized restrictions on mobility that were often first introduced by democratic governments.

Having won freedom of movement, Eastern Europeans today appear to be most invested in erecting and maintaining an Iron Curtain around the continent's edges. In yet another parallel to today's refugee crisis, Eastern European governments also justified restrictions on mobility in the name of "protecting" their citizens from exploitation abroad, fearing that East Europeans might become the "slaves" or "coolies" of the twentieth century. They often blamed mass migration itself on emigration agents—denounced as "traffickers" and "smugglers"—who supposedly fooled naïve migrants into leaving home and robbed and cheated them en route. There was little

acknowledgement of the fact that escalating border controls and policing only increased the demand for the services of smugglers and agents.

IRON CURTAIN

Today, Eastern Europeans enjoy unprecedented freedom to move within Europe's borders, at the expense of those outside them. They have finally achieved a longstanding (but precarious) dream: that of being, more or less, accepted as "white" Europeans, officially guaranteed the same rights and privileges as Western European migrants. In contemporary debates, East Europeans are often [praised as the "good" immigrants](), in rhetorical opposition to those from outside Europe (especially non-white or non-Christian migrants), whose capacity to assimilate is continuously questioned. Former British Conservative Party Chairman and Member of Parliament Norman Tebbit declared in September 2013 that British citizens should not fear migrants from Eastern Europe. "[We don't have much of a problem with people like the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks…they're not the problem]()," he insisted. "The bigger problem that is caused in our cities is caused by immigrants from the Third World who have got no intention of integrating here…They are people who left their country, came here and are trying to recreate their country in our country."

Having won freedom of movement, Eastern Europeans today appear to be most invested in erecting and maintaining an Iron Curtain around the continent's edges. Freedom of mobility, in the view of anti-refugee activists, should remain the exclusive privilege of Christian "Europeans." This may seem like a great historical irony, but it is consistent with a long history of linking popular sovereignty to national homogeneity; ambivalence toward migration itself; and Eastern Europeans' own precarious position within the European community. The fundamental tensions between a proclaimed "human right" to exit and the principle of national sovereignty may never be resolved, since states will continue

to insist on the right to control their borders. And yet Europeans should be mindful of a past that has demonstrated that walls only create an illusion of security. Decades of experience show that the creation of a No-Man's Land erodes the freedoms of those on all sides of the fences that surround it.