

Book Review: Fortress Europe: Dispatches From A Gated Continent

by Blog Admin

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*For nearly thirty years the Berlin Wall symbolised a divided Europe. In the euphoric aftermath of the Cold War, the advent of a new borderless world was hailed, one in which such barriers would become obsolete. Today these utopian predictions have yet to be realised. An inspiring and thoroughly researched book, not afraid of communicating a clear political message and expressing severe criticism, **Fortress Europe** provides much room for discussion not only on EU immigration policies, but also on the norms, values and principles on which Europe builds itself and against which it is measured, writes **Inez von Weitershausen**.*

Fortress Europe. Matthew Carr. Hurst. October 2012.

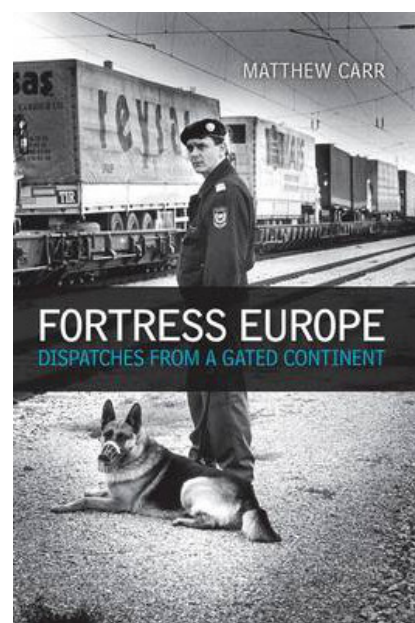
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In *Fortress Europe* journalist Matthew Carr describes and criticizes the impact of the EU's border enforcement programmes towards its neighbourhood and illustrates how diverse practices of coping with immigrants and refugees are in stark contrast with the principles underlying the creation and development of the Union itself.

Carr underlines what he considers the violent and inhumane dimension of European immigration policy by referring to it as a "military confrontation". Referring to clashes between immigrants and authorities as "battles" with "lethal" consequences (p.3-5) and going to great length to take account of the various forms of the extent of suffering, Carr carves out the violent dimension of immigration. Applying the war metaphor throughout his book, he identifies the belligerent parties as "some of the richest countries on earth" and "a stateless population from some of the world's poorest" (p.3), the latter relying on hunger strikes, demonstrations or riots as limited and unequal instruments to defend themselves. Even though airports, immigration detention centres and urban housing estates might constitute a new kind of battlefield, the underlying causes for the fight, such as the strive for security, freedom and well-being, have remained the same.

Like any good "war correspondent" Carr humanizes the consequences of political decisions and appeals to the reader's rational as well as emotional side. The book starts off by pointing out how borders have historically been a guarantor of stability as much as a cause of violence closely connected to notions of identity, and yet not necessarily linked to documentation. It traces how the introduction of "paper walls" has made "rights and protection (...) contingent on the possession of a passport and visa" and thus created "illegal trespassers" and "stateless non-people to whom governments owed no obligations" (p.19). After describing the emergence of "Fortress Europe" since the 1970s, Carr then lays out how the current immigration discourse is shaped by xenophobic attitudes, nativism and hostility. Quotes from European politicians who announce a "human avalanche", "over-foreignisation" and a necessity to "reclaim our border" (p.20-24) convincingly reinforce this point.



While the author repeatedly underlines that xenophobia is not limited to Europe and that “Fortress Europe is only one component in a (...) series of walls that have been erected across the industrialized West in the last twenty years (...) in order to lock out the world’s poor” (p.247), he sees a particular challenge arising from the fact that in Europe the abolition of internal borders and the successive widening of EU membership have coincided with a “persistent hardening of Europe’s ‘external frontiers’”(p.25).

In 12 chapters the author analyses the “dual and contradictory character” of the Schengen aquis, by looking at different countries and experiences, such as how in Poland the Terespol Border Guard approaches his work while Chechen children play in the nearby detention centre for asylum seekers. In the autonomous city and Spain’s African exclave of Melilla he finds that the deadly razor wire has been replaced by an automated wire hinge and a pepper-infused water pipe, before he goes on to investigate how in Morocco thousands of Sub-Saharan African migrants are right-less before they are forcefully expelled at night-time. Carr continues his travels to Malta, Libya and Italy and discusses the impact of the “Arab Spring” in the context of the island of Lampedusa which became the destination of some 5000 Tunisians seeking refuge in the context of the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in February 2011 rather than of a “Biblical exodus” of 200,000-300,000 as suggested by Italian foreign minister Frattini at that time. In Greece the author experiences the “insecurity and paranoia” prevalent at the Turkish-Greek border (p.89) when he attempts to investigate the existence of minefields; and in the UK he observes a “mutually reinforcing consensus between governments, the media and the public that invariably depicts immigration as an endless crisis” where undocumented migrants are reduced “to the status of dangerous and dehumanized invaders massing outside the nation’s borders” (p.120).

While the book thus contains moving stories starring authorities and migrants alike, and makes the reader aware of the inhumane dimension of immigration policies in Europe, it does not fall short of also including hopeful tales of “samaritans” (p.210), who welcome strangers, provide immigrants with clothes, food, medical assistance, shelter and “kindness”. Some of them do so because they feel empathy with and a moral obligation towards fellow human beings while others see Europe itself at the origins of the problem. Sister Paola Domingo from the Carmelito Verdone order, for instance, asserts critically that people also choose to flee their countries “because we have taken away their freedom, their wealth, everything, because the policies’ of their governments are controlled by Europe and America” (p.213). These individuals are not afraid of risking conflict with society or the law in their “crimes of solidarity”.

Though an attentive observer and talented narrator, Carr does not limit himself to describing what he sees but also critically reflects on today’s technology-transformed world. He suggests that we now live in a “cultural borderland” which makes “the whole idea of an overarching and exclusive ‘national identity’ rooted in a particular territory (...) questionable” (p.235). The aim of the book is however not to declare an end to the nation-state in the sense of Guéhenno or Ohmae; rather it argues that “if borders can be hardened they can also be softened” (p.267) and that the European Union’s successful dismantling of its national border controls (...) offers a potential model that could be widened outwards” (p.269).

An inspiring and thoroughly researched book, not afraid of communicating a clear political message and expressing severe criticism, *Fortress Europe* provides much room for discussion not only on EU immigration policies, but also on the norms, values and principles on which Europe builds itself and against which it is measured.

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