



Lemkin Institute Statement on the Crisis at the Belarusian Border with Poland

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As the refugee crisis on the Belarusian border with Poland heats up, the Lemkin Institute condemns the EU response to the ongoing suffering faced by refugees seeking safe haven in Europe. We remind state leaders that refugees can only be “weaponized” – a term being used by government officials and Western media outlets alike – if the receiving countries view the refugees as dangerous, unwanted, and subhuman.

Refugees are ordinary human beings with dignity and rights. The language we use to talk about them matters. “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought,” George Orwell reminded us long ago.

Over ten refugees have reportedly died on the Belarusian side of the border in the past few weeks. In the cold night of November 10, a 15-year-old Kurdish boy died from hypothermia. These deaths can be added to the terrible toll taken by Europe’s closed border policies. According to the International Office of Migration, at least 22,748 people have died in the Mediterranean alone since 2014.

Besides legal obligations, European nations have a particular responsibility to accept refugees and treat them with respect, given Europe’s experience with the horrors of racism and religious bigotry in the first half of the twentieth century as well as its advocacy for human rights and the rights of stateless persons since the end of World War II.

One should not have to remind Europe of the darkness of the 1930s, when unwanted Others within European borders were scuttled from one state to another, finding safety nowhere. Germany’s “Polish Action” in 1938, when Germany forced an estimated 17,000 stateless Jews of Polish origin over the Polish border, where they ended up stuck in a no-man’s-land between the two countries over the cold winter months, is only one example of the horrors that result from rampant xenophobia and a disregard for the humanity of refugees and stateless persons.

The crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border is emblematic of the failure of Western foreign policy and the brutality of post-Cold War Western imperialism, especially when faced with blowback from its own efforts. Most of the people on the Polish border appear to be from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, three countries destabilized by the US-led ‘war on terror,’ which European nations supported in various ways, including, in Poland’s case, by allowing the CIA to operate a ‘black site’ on its territory. The United States, for its part, is behaving in a similar fashion on its

border with Mexico, where it is still preventing refugees from entering and subjecting them to brutal treatment and unsafe conditions in the borderlands.

Powerful nations in Europe and North America are largely responsible for the flow of refugees and therefore must open their borders to them.

The refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border should be granted entry to European states and afforded the rights that are outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol, and the particular agreements signed in the development of a Common European Asylum System. If Europe were to live up to its own values, neither Belarus nor any other country could dream of “weaponizing” human beings in order to punish EU countries.