

## **The Bundestag Election 2025**

### **VI: On the border: migrants can cross both ways**

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#### **An aside: the view from Portbou**

Born in Berlin, Walter Benjamin died by his own hand in the Spanish border town of Portbou in September 1940, fleeing – or as he feared, failing to flee – the Nazis.

His memorial is not the only one to refugees in the town. 18 months earlier, Portbou was also witness to Spanish Republicans trying to flee north into France following the fall of Barcelona in 1939.

A view of migration from afar, the dominant issue of the Bundestag election.

## 1,100 miles from Berlin

The short coastal walk from Cerbère to Portbou crosses a border over which refugees have flowed in both directions.

At its summit, [photographs](#) by Manuel Moros memorialise the women, children and Republican fighters gathered on the Coll dels Belitres in the hope of fleeing north into France after the fall of Barcelona to Francoist forces on 26 January 1939.

At its end, a [work](#) by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan memorialises the German Jew, Walter Benjamin, fleeing southward after the fall of France to the Nazis, who, on being denied entry into Spain, took his own life in Portbou on 26 September 1940.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin's memorial, undertaken at the initiative of the Bonn-based Arbeitskreis selbständiger Kultur-Institute ([AsKI](#)) to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, is inscribed with words of his own which, translated, read:

“Harder it is, the memory of the nameless to honour than that of the famous. It is to the memory of the nameless that historical construction is dedicated.”<sup>2</sup>

This coast is la Côte Vermeille, where the mountains meet the sea and whose brilliant light inspired Matisse, Derain and Dufy – les Fauves – and later Charles Rennie Mackintosh. But there is darkness here too, glimpsed in the names of railway stations where internment camps held Spanish refugees, at Argeles, at Agde, at Rivesaltes.

Rivesaltes continued to serve the French state, including Vichy, as a place of internment, transit and detention, until 2007.

Walter Benjamin was born in Berlin. The place where he died, on the French-Spanish border, lies nearly 1,100 miles away to the south-west. At that distance east of Berlin lies Moscow. This symmetry is a reminder: Germany – even as it is bounded today – cannot but experience Europe differently from countries who look upon it from the Atlantic's edge.

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<sup>1</sup> Although denied entry in the formal sense, the Spanish authorities had allowed him to stay in the town overnight because of his ill-health.

<sup>2</sup> „Schwerer ist es, das Gedächtnis des Namenlosen zu ehren als das der Berühmten. Dem Gedächtnis des Namenlosen ist die historische Konstruktion geweiht.“