

Abolish all camps in times of corona: the struggle against shared accommodation for refugees* in Berlin

Marco Perolini (1st July 2020)

On 8 May 2020, a group of activists who mobilize with Women in Exile and Friends¹, a self-organized group of refugee* women, visited a refugee* camp in Hennigsdorf, in the outskirts of Berlin.² The activists did not travel to Hennigsdorf to deliver an empowering workshop for refugee* women living in the camp, which is the type of mobilization in which the activists of Women in Exile often engage. Instead, the activists distributed food and personal care products to some of the over 400 refugees* who lived in the camp.

At the time of the visit, the refugees* in Hennigsdorf were subject to a forced quarantine. The authorities imposed the measure at the beginning of April, when 68 refugees* tested positive to COVID-19. Deprived of liberty and surrounded by police who enforced the quarantine, refugees* had to order groceries by ticking a pre-printed list of items that the management of the camp made available to them. That list did not include diapers, sanitary towels or soap.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare some of the most endemic flaws of the shared accommodation system for refugees* in Germany. Lack of privacy, overcrowded spaces and more generally the exercise of biopower (Foucault, 1976) on racialized non-citizens are some among the most egregious shortcomings. Self-organized groups of refugees* and other social movement organizations (SMOs) have contested shared accommodation for refugees* in Germany, which they refer to as camps or Lager (in German), since the 1990s. They have been promoting the awareness of refugees* of their right to have rights (Arendt, 1951) and organizing protests, marches, occupations and many other types of collective actions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the mobilization of self-organized groups of refugees* against border regimes. On 9 May 2020, Women

¹ Women in Exile and Friends is a self-organized group of refugees* founded in 2002. Their offices are in Potsdam (Brandenburg, the federated State surrounding Berlin). Self-organized groups of refugees* are social movement organizations founded by refugees*, characterized by a horizontal decision-making structure and with the primary objective of empowering refugees*.

² I refer to all non-citizens who have applied for asylum in Germany as refugees* irrespective of their legal status. In the context of the ethnography that I conducted between January and November 2018 in Berlin, I talked to dozens of activists and participated in the mobilization of several social movement organizations. Non-citizen activists define themselves as refugees irrespective of whether they had obtained the legal status of refugees. They contest the hierarchies among different legal status categories embedded in the German asylum law. Refugee* and refugees* are notions that I use in this article as they embed the non-legal understanding of the idea of refugee shared among activists in Berlin. In view of protecting the privacy of activists, all the names that I use in this article are pseudonyms.

in Exile and friends staged for the first time an online protest on Youtube. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the activists of Women in Exile settled for a virtual gathering to raise awareness of the daily ordeal that women and children face in camps, including in Hennigsdorf. The activists reiterated their slogan, which they encapsulated into a social media hashtag: “Social distance is a privilege”. The slogan decries the impossibility for refugees* to follow guidance on social distance in camps.

The online protest was not infused with the same powerful energy as the protests that the activists of Women in Exile usually stage on the street. However, the easing of lockdown measures at the end of May has enabled Women in Exile and other social movement organizations that contest border regimes to take it to the street again. For example, on 1 June Women in Exile and other SMOS protested in Potsdam to demand the abolishment of camps. On 6 June, many SMOs that oppose border regimes participated in the Black Lives Matter protest in Berlin in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in the United States.

Self-organized groups of refugees* in Germany have mobilized for the abolition of camps since the 1990s. In this short piece, I examine the multiple modalities through which self-organized groups of refugees* resist camps. Apart from organizing protests, activists engage in submerged forms of mobilization that have the potential of transforming the isolation in which refugees* live. Moreover, I explain why the COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for the struggle against camps to acquire more resonance and visibility.

Hennigsdorf: a refugee* camp under forced quarantine for over 5 weeks

The shared accommodation for refugees* in Hennigsdorf is composed of several buildings that used to be military barracks during the time of the German Democratic Republic. Similarly to many other camps that I visited, the complex is fenced-off and managed by a private company. Security guards patrol the entrance of the complex, scrutinize the movements of refugees* and monitor the presence of external visitors.

German asylum law requires non-citizens who apply for asylum to live in a designated reception centre for up to 18 months. During this period, they do not have the right to work and they cannot leave the district (Landkreis) where the reception centre is located (this restriction is commonly known as *Residenzpflicht*). After 18 months, non-citizens who are still waiting for their asylum claim to be processed are sheltered in shared accommodation.³

On 16 April 2020, a cleaner working in the shared accommodation in Hennigsdorf tested positive to COVID-19. Following further tests, 68 out of the more than 400 refugees* who lived in the accommodation tested positive. The

³ Articles 47, 53 and 59a of the Asylum Act.

authorities swiftly quarantined the whole complex. While some refugees* could leave the complex after two weeks, provided that they wore a green wristband which many considered to be stigmatizing,⁴ the authorities quarantined some of the buildings within the complex for over 5 weeks.

In a video that a refugee* who lives in the complex shot from his window, several police cars appeared to patrol the entrance of the shared accommodation.⁵ In an open letter that Women in Exile published on Twitter on 1 May, the refugees* who lived in the camp emphasized the inadequate measures that authorities had taken to counter COVID-19. While a forced quarantine was in place, refugees* raised the lack of face masks and sanitizers and the failure to promptly separate refugees* who had tested positive from those who tested negative.⁶ Authorities scored better on the enforcement of coercive measures to control refugees*: CCTV cameras in the hallways, private security and police patrolling the entrance of the accommodation.

On 8 May, a few activists of Women in Exile decided to travel to Hennigsdorf. During the online protest that the Women in Exile organized on 9 May, one activist explained the purpose of the visit. She emphasized:

“The reason why we went there is because the women reached out to us and said that in the shopping list [pre-printed by the managing company] there was not like... I call it like...women basic needs like sanitary pads,

baby diapers...the women said: ‘we need this please can you come and bring us these things as they are not in the shopping list’. They can't go out for shopping and it was very sad and so we decided to go... and when we went there we met the security, they said of course you cannot get in and they said they would deliver the shopping themselves...we said no we want to see the women whom we brought this for [...]. The security went and say the women can come down but they can't get out and we said yeah of course we know and we don't want them to come out...the women came but they didn't have masks only one who had a mask... I was really shocked like they don't have masks and this is where they report everyday cases of people testing positive [for COVID-19]”.⁷

After delivering the shopping bags to the women on the other side of the fences, the activists displayed a few small banners that read “social distance is a privilege” and “abolish all lager” and took some photos for social media. The police who were patrolling the entrance of the shared accommodation stopped

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https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2020/coronavirus/beitraege_neu/2020/05/brandenburg-fluechlingsheime-ketten-quarantaenen.html

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/953605994710745/videos/1387659564757967>

⁶ https://twitter.com/women_in_exile/status/1256108211394031616

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvlt2_O7iM4

the activists and argued that they were staging a demonstration. An activist explained during the online protest:

“We had to talk to them for over two hours, meanwhile refugees inside became more and more upset and started demonstrating [to oppose the police intervention]. They told us that we should know the law of this country, when police came they ask if anybody among us was under quarantine and infected, we said no... some of them had masks but others they didn't, they did not keep the distance with us [...]. They accused us of breaching the law on public assemblies and said that this was an unregistered demo and we were forbidden to go to other Lager for 24 hours. We were shocked as we didn't do anything, it was not a demo, we just took some photos with messages of solidarity. If the authorities gave women what they needed, we wouldn't have had to go there in the first place”.⁸

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Women in Exile joined many other social movement organizations in calling for the abolishment of shared accommodation for refugees*. They frame shared accommodation as camps or Lager, a term that refers to the bare lives, the disposable lives, of non-citizens who live in there (Agamben, 1998). They decry the flaws on camps as they put the health of refugees* at risk.

Self-organized groups of refugees* have indeed documented the situation of refugees* in camps during the COVID-19. Apart from Hennigsdorf, in several other camps across Germany, the number of COVID-19 infections among refugees* was very high. Self-organized groups of refugees* collected and made public information that pointed to the ineffectiveness of the forced quarantine that the authorities put in place. For example, more than 400 out of the 600 refugees* who lived in a camp in Ellwangen (Baden-Württemberg) tested positive to COVID-19. Despite the forced quarantine that the authorities had imposed at the beginning of April, refugees* continued to shared toilets and communal areas. One month after, the 200 people who had tested negative were still under forced quarantine. The self-organized group refugees4refugees who mobilize in Baden-Württemberg emphasized:

“All inhabitants of the reception centre in Ellwangen were put into quarantine on 5 April. This protected the people outside the camp, but not the people inside the camp. Inside the camp, a huge group of several hundred people were quarantined together. In this large group, as was to be expected, the virus spread rapidly. After the first mass test at the beginning of April, 250 people were infected, the next test was 313 and finally 406 people in the camp tested positive. This means that there are still almost 200 people in the quarantine group. If even one of them tests positive again, the quarantine for all 200 must be extended again by two

⁸ *Ibid.* 7

weeks according to the rules of the German government. And this can go on for a long time.”⁹

International Women Space, an organization of refugee* women who emerged during the protest camp in Oranienplatz between 2012 and 2014 (Azozomox and IWS refugee women, 2013), collected and published audio testimonies of refugees* about their lives in the camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we met in 2018, Jennifer, one of the activists who founded International Women Space, told me that documenting the struggle of self-organized groups of refugees* was crucial for mobilizing against border regimes. She explained that the activists who mobilized in the protest camp on Oranienplatz and the refugee* women who lunched IWS did not have access to any information regarding the resistance of refugees* who had contested camps and other aspects of border regimes before as there was little written documentation.¹⁰

The “Corona Lager reports” of International Women Space include, for example, a case of arbitrary use of force by the police against a refugee* woman in a camp in Brandenburg. According to the information collected by IWS, another refugee* called the police to complain about the noise coming from a neighbour’s room who was having a small party with a few other refugees*. Seven police came to the camp with two dogs, they knocked on the door from where the noise was coming from. They asked the woman who opened the door to produce an ID and, when she refused, they tackled her to the floor and pinned her down. Someone started recording the scene and when someone else shouted: “Look what they are doing to us here. They want to kill us like the other man that was killed in America [George Floyd]”, the police released the woman.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the control, oppression and biopower that refugees* experience in camps in Germany. In particular, police and private security enforced quarantines of hundreds of refugees*. However, the pandemic also galvanized the struggle against camps as many organizations, including large NGOs such as Pro-Asyl, which is the biggest refugee rights organization in Germany, demanded the closure of shared accommodation for refugees*. On 11 May, Pro-Asyl, refugee councils and the Seebrücke movement called for the closure of all camps in Germany and in Greece emphasizing that no one could be left behind and that shared accommodation made non-citizens more vulnerable to COVID-19.¹² Moreover, several courts across Germany

⁹ <https://refugees4refugees.wordpress.com/2020/05/04/corona-chaos-in-ellwangen-04-05-2020/>

¹⁰ Interview with Jennifer, 20 September 2018.

¹¹ <https://iwspace.de/2020/06/in-the-shadow-of-corona-police-violence-lager-brandenburg/>

¹² <https://fluechtlingsrat-berlin.de/presseerklaerung/11-05-2020-niemand-darf-zurueckgelassen-werden/>

requested the transfer of refugees* who lived in camps to apartments as their health could not be protected in shared accommodation.¹³

Meanwhile, self-organized groups of refugees* continued to organize protests with other organizations to call for the closure of camps in Germany as well as at the European borders. For example, On 1 June, Women in Exile and other organizations staged a protest in Potsdam to ask for the closure of camps in Brandenburg as well as in Greece.¹⁴

Self-organized groups of refugees* have framed camps as grievances against border regimes since the 1990s. They have engaged in multiple and diverse forms of collective actions to call for the abolishment of all camps and for adequate housing for all refugees*. COVID-19 has made the long-term demands of self-organized groups of refugees* and other grassroots groups against camps acquire wider resonance.

The long-term opposition to camps

In the 1990s, groups of non-citizens organized themselves in shared accommodation, in particular in Eastern Germany. For example, the Voice Refugee Forum was founded in 1994 in a camp in Thuringia (Odugbesan & Schwiertz, 2018). In the 2000s, the occupation of Oranienplatz (O-platz), a square in Berlin, which non-citizens activists transformed into a protest camp, provided visibility for their struggles against border regimes (Landry, 2015; Langa, 2015; Bhimji, 2016).

One of the main grievances that self-organized groups of refugees* have formulated since the 1990s is the opposition to the isolation in which they live in shared accommodation. For example, Brice, an activist from Benin who had mobilized with the Voice Refugee Forum and with the protest camp on Oranienplatz, told me about his experiences of isolation and fear when he lived in camps in Mecklenburg-Pomerania (Eastern Germany). Brice arrived in Germany in 1997, only 5 years after the racist riots that had shattered Rostock, the main city in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, in 1992.¹⁵ Brice told me:

“We could not even leave the camp because police stopped and searched us all the time. If you went from the camp to the train station, you were

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-netherlands-asylum/asylum-seeker-wins-right-to-leave-german-centre-over-coronavirus-rules-idUSKCN2252VO>;
<https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-covid-19-protection-inadequate-at-refugee-home/a-53395710>

¹⁴ <https://www.fluechtlingsrat-brandenburg.de/pressemitteilung-demonstrationen-am-1-juni-in-potsdam/?cn-reloaded=1>

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/revisiting-germany-xenophobic-rostock-riots-1992-170517123148797.html>

stopped. One of the camps in which I lived was very isolated and in the middle of the forest. If you were sick you had to walk 8 km to the nearby town and then 8 km back”.¹⁶

Brice explained that the demand to abolish all camps was grounded in the experiences of non-citizens, whose segregation in camps contributed to their racialization (Omi & Winart, 2015). Many of the refugee* activists whom I met in 2018 framed camps as prisons, in which their freedom of movement and their private life were scrutinized and restricted. In 2018 refugee* activists were particularly concerned with the establishment of new types of shared accommodation, the Anker centres, in which non-citizens who claimed asylum could spend up to 24 months.¹⁷ Paul, an activist from Cameroon who mobilized with Corasol, a self-organized group of refugees*, framed his opposition to camps by referring to isolation and lack of privacy. He told me:

“We have to put the emphasis on humanitarian law. A human is a human. Policy makers have to take that into account. In the shelters, you are like in a prison. Today, those who claim asylum will have to stay in Eisenhüttenstadt [a reception centre in Brandenburg that functioned as an Anker centre] until the end of the procedure. At least when I was there people were still transferred to other shelters. In the shelters, there is no privacy, you have to leave a copy of your ID to go in and out, there is security and you share a room with many people. It’s absurd not to be able to leave your home and to come back when you want”.¹⁸

Women in Exile and friends have repeatedly emphasized that camps are not adequate for women and children. In the context of their bus tour across Germany “Women Breaking Borders” in 2018, refugee* women spoke out against the lack of privacy for women in camps. In the aftermath of the activists’ visit to an Anker centre in Bamberg (Bavaria), Jule, a woman from Nigeria who lived in the Anker centre, joined the bus tour. She made a public speech in the context of a protest in front of Federal Office for Migration and Refugees* (BAMF) in Nuremberg in which she decried the living conditions for women in the camp. She emphasized:

¹⁶ Interview with Brice, 29 August 2018.

¹⁷ For more information about the Anker-centre, see “Was ist ein Anker/what is an Anker” published by Lager Mobilization Network Berlin on 15 May 2018 and available here: <https://oplatz.net/was-ist-ein-anker-what-is-an-anker/>

¹⁸ Interview with Paul, 9 September 2018.

“We are living as prisoners or we are prisoners already... we are suffering in that camp, honestly we are suffering, look at our kids, our families...the women have no privacy...16 people...one toilet one bedroom...we are going nowhere...we’re here to stay!”¹⁹

Self-organized groups of refugees* and other grassroots organizations framed camps as a system that racialized and control non-citizens.²⁰ Many of the non-citizen activists whom I met felt unsafe in camps as the authorities could identify them and target them with deportation. For example, Bastian, a young Cameroonian man whom I met during my fieldwork, left the shared accommodation where he lived in Brandenburg for fear of deportation. Some of the activists whom he met in the context of his mobilization against border regimes sheltered him to avoid his transfer to Spain, the first country from where he had entered the European Union²¹. In the context of a public workshop in September 2010, Bastian told the participants:

“One night the police came to the heim [shared accommodation] to look for me. I was at a birthday party and a refugee called me and informed me that police were looking for me. So, I left the heim. In the jungle, the strongest and the most intelligent survives. When you are about to be deported, you really need to do whatever you can to survive. It’s like when you are a child and you fall in the water, in order to save yourself from drowning, you need to find any available hold. The network of activists and friends in Berlin has been really important as they provided me with a shelter and supported me.”²²

Self-organized groups of refugees* and other grassroots groups often call for the abolishment of camps in the context of their visible repertoires of contention. They document the lives of refugees* in camps and ground their demands in the racialization processes through which non-citizens who live in camps are excluded, isolated and othered. Activists also engage in more submerged, invisible initiatives, for example to counter deportation. Despite the difficulties to put in place these collective mechanisms of resistance, activists often collectively identify and make use of cracks and opportunities to resist the alienating reality of camps.

¹⁹ Ethnographic notes taken on 27 July 2018.

²⁰ See “Was ist ein Anker/what is an Anker” published by Lager Mobilization Network Berlin on 15 May 2018 and available here: <https://oplatz.net/was-ist-ein-anker-what-is-an-anker/>

²¹ Bastian’s transfer to Spain was based on the Dublin III Regulation (Regulation 604/2013) which establishes the responsibility for assessing asylum applications among EU countries.

²² Ethnographic notes taken on 8 September 2018.

Submerged resistance against camps

Activists often engage in submerged and less visible forms of mobilizations than protests to resist and transform the isolation that refugees* experience in camps. For example, self-organized groups of refugees* often organize outreach initiatives in camps in view of raising the awareness of refugees* of their rights and promoting their political mobilization.

Refugee* activists who participate in collective actions often emphasize that their activism is grounded in a process of political activation that other activists have facilitated. For example, when I spoke to Julia, a woman from Kenya who mobilized with Women in Exile and friends, about the outreach activities in camps, she stressed the impact that the first workshop that she attended had on her determination to collectively resist border regimes. Julia told me:

“Women in Exile visited us in the camp and told us more about the politics here [in Germany] and that we had rights, I didn’t know that refugees* had rights. Women in Exile ran an empowerment workshop and taught us that we could fight for our rights, that’s how I became an activist in Deutschland [Germany]. I felt there is a need to fight, especially because of the conditions we are living in”.²³

Julia explained that many refugee* women came from national contexts in which they were discriminated against, they were invisible in the political space and were not used to claim their rights. Moreover, she stressed that refugees* in Germany were often afraid of the negative consequences that their mobilization may have on their asylum claims. Julia reiterated that it was crucial for refugees* living in camps to realize the opportunities that they had to collectively mobilize.²⁴

Guillaume, an activist who mobilized with Corasol, spoke with me about the importance of reaching out to refugees* in camps and stressed that these initiatives alleviated the distress and isolation in which refugees* lived. In the context of a workshop about the new Anker-centre that Guillaume delivered and which I attended, he emphasized:

“I got to know my rights because of my involvement in activism and all the people whom I’ve met in this context. Despite that, I am still very stressed, I have been seeing a counsellor for 6 months. Imagine what would have happened if I lived even more isolated [i.e. in an Anker

²³ Interview with Julia, 19 September 2018.

²⁴ Interview with Julia, 19 September 2018.

centre], if I couldn't even get in touch with activists and the outside world...".²⁵

Guillaume indeed often appeared sullen and absent-minded. When we got to know each other better, he often shared with me the anxiety that his precarious legal status prompted. In June 2018, I agreed to support Guillaume in reaching out to refugees* living in a few camps in Brandenburg. The activists of Corasol planned to reach out to refugees* to involve them to a workshop and a protest scheduled on 20 June to contest the new asylum policies that the government had recently proposed. The activists were adamant on informing refugees* living in camps about the new policies, explaining their consequences and stimulating their mobilization against them.

In the early afternoon of a sunny Sunday afternoon I met Guillaume in the shared accommodation where he lived in Brandenburg. Guillaume was very energetic on that day. He was very keen on reaching out to refugees*. After lunch we started knocking on the doors of the rooms where other refugees* lived. When they peered out at us, Guillaume hastily explained to join us downstairs in a meeting room where we would provide them with more information about a protest against the new asylum policies. Most of the refugees* whom we talked to did not show much interest and I felt that they would not attend the protest.

In contrast, a dozen of refugees* who lived in another camp that we visited afterwards were keen on participating in both the workshop and the protest. While we were knocking on the doors a bit randomly, we realized that several refugees* came from Chechnya and did not speak any other language than Russian or Chechen. I showed to a couple of them the Russian version of the flyer that we had designed to advertise the protest. After 20 minutes in which we talked to as many refugees* as possible, Guillaume suggested moving to the meeting room where many of the refugees* whom we had talked to were waiting for us.

The meeting room was indeed very full as more than 30 people from countries including Pakistan, Iran, Kenya joined us. One Chechen woman, a young blue-eyed woman wearing a small head-cover, came too. Guillaume made a short presentation in German and I translated it into English. A refugee from Iran who spoke good English translated simultaneously into Farsi. Guillaume asked me a couple of times the German translation for "government" and "law", which surprised me because his German was better than mine. I thought he must have felt under pressure to speak German in public and to a large group.

²⁵ Ethnographic notes of the summer camp organized by Welcome United between 5 and 7 July in Falkenberg (Brandenburg).

Guillaume repeatedly reiterated in his speech: “We have to fight all together against these new laws”.

Several of the refugees* whom we met in the second camp that we had visited attended the protest. One man also started to regularly participate in the meetings and the collective actions of Corasol. Other self-organized groups of refugees* regularly organize outreach visits and workshops for refugees* living in camps. The political mobilization that these activities promote is also conducive to weave new social ties which break the isolation that refugees* experience in camps.

Apart from outreach initiatives in camps, activists also engage in campaigns and acts of political disobedience. Some of them aim to provide alternative shelters to refugees* who do not feel safe in camps because they are at risk of deportation. Police often enforce deportations during the night by conducting raids in shared accommodation and without informing the person subject to a deportation order.

In the last two years, activists in Berlin have launched the campaign Burger*innen Asyl (Citizen Asylum), which aims to establish a network of citizens willing to shelter non-citizens who are at risk of deportation and who want to move out from camps.²⁶ In October 2018, the organizers of the campaign announced that they had successfully facilitated the first case of citizen asylum by providing a shelter to a family who were threatened with deportation and who subsequently obtained residence rights in Germany. In April 2020 the initiative announced that it would stop to function as a platform that facilitated citizen asylum as it was logistically burdensome. They produced a handbook providing tips to anyone who could offer citizen asylum to a non-citizen who felt unsafe to live in camps because of their deportation looming.²⁷

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the long-term demands of self-organized groups of refugees* against camps acquire a wider resonance. Forced quarantines have become exemplary of the biopower that authorities exercise on racialized non-citizens in camps. Authorities have rushed in to enforce measures that, in many instances, proved ineffective to protect refugees* from COVID-19. The pandemic has laid bare the flaws of camps in Germany. In an unprecedented move, large NGOs, in particular Pro-Asyl, have demanded the closure of camps and the transfer of refugees* to private accommodation. In some individual

²⁶ <https://buerger-innen-asyl-berlin.org/>

²⁷ https://buerger-innen-asyl-berlin.org/static/blog/SolidarityAsyl_handbook_ENG.pdf

cases, Courts have ruled that camps were not an adequate solution to protect refugees* from COVID-19.

Self-organized groups of refugees* rallied with other social movement organizations to call for the abolishment of camps. During the lockdown, they continued to document the lives of refugees* in camps and assisted refugees* who were under forced quarantine. As soon as the lockdown measures were eased, they resumed their plans to engage in submerged forms of mobilization through which, by promoting collective struggles, they daily resist and transform the isolation that refugees* experience in camps.

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