

Semester Paper – “Refugee Struggle for Freedom”

"The hunger strike began, because we tried to defend ourselves when the politicians of our countries of origin did not care about our lives and when the politicians of Germany were not interested in our lives. So we began to suffer in front of the eyes of society, in front of the media and the politicians. The result thereof; All could see it - no dialogue, no respect, no humanity, but an eviction. [...] A very well-known saying about self-defense is: If someone wants to murder you and you defend yourself, it is not crime but self-defense. What is the conclusion for us? We defended our lives, we fought for our case, for justice, and we demanded the basic human rights for us."

– Refugee Struggle for Freedom, November 2016

This paper seeks to describe a current movement of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany who organize protests and strikes across the country in order to make people aware of the living conditions they face and with the goal to eventually change German asylum laws (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2016, October 17).

This protest movement fits what Rubin and Rubin (2008) describe as community organizing. Through their protests, the activists of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” seek to empower fellow refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. They want to “help them recognize that they face shared problems and [...] discover that by joining together they can fight to overcome these problems” (Rubin & Rubin, 2008, p. 5). “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” tries to bring people together in order to “gain the capacity to take actions for change” (Rubin & Rubin, 2008, p. 6).

THE COMMUNITY

The protesters describe themselves as “a group of non-citizens who left [their] countries because of concrete political reasons [like] war, poorness, sanction and occupation as the result of imperialism [...] [and] not having any secure life under dictatorship in [their] country of origin” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a). It should be noted here that the protesters refuse to call themselves refugees or asylum seekers but identify as non-citizens, a term directly opposed to the concept of citizenship. This identification is crucial since it reflects the notion that the protesters feel they are not provided with basic human rights in Germany, such as the freedom to move, because of their legal status as the following statement shows: “We aren’t accepted here as humans yet, in the eyes of the German state we aren’t worthy of living here as humans” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2016, October 17).

The protest movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” is mostly active in the southern German state of Bavaria, where it organizes strikes in several big cities and protest marches throughout the state from one city to another. During these marches, protesters make stops at refugee housing facilities cross the state in order to recruit new fellow non-citizens so they can join them in their “march for freedom” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a). While the movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” is mostly active in Bavaria, it is, however connected to other protest movements in other parts of Germany and the European Union through a close network. Connected organizations include movements like “Refugee Struggle Dreseden,” (Germany) “Woman in Exile – Flüchtlingsfrauen werden laut,” (Germany) or „Asyl Stafetten 2013 Malmö-Stockholm” (Sweden) (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. b). It seems the activists understood that “behind every successful social movement [lies] a community or a network of communities” (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 729).

As mentioned above, the movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” protests current living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. The following statement, however, makes clear that it is not just the status quo they protest, it is also the consequences that follow these conditions, namely the negative impact on mental health which in some cases has even led to several asylum seekers committing suicide.

“But what we face in Germany is totally something else: Inhuman [sic] living conditions like being forced to live in asylum camps and the general isolation as the result of it, deportation, Residenzpflicht¹, food packages, not having permission to work and study, are just some examples about what we experience every day. The result of this situation is the countless numbers of suicides of non-citizens in the camps. We as room mates can not just sit and watch our room mates’ deaths anymore” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a).

In this statement, protesters address the tragic fact that cases of suicide occur in German refugee camps. One of these sad incidents, an Iranian refugee who hung himself in Würzburg in January 2012 (Jungbauer, 2012), was actually the reason why refugees and asylum seekers in Germany found the courage to start their first protests and address the conditions they face every day. On their website, the activists describe this suicide as the starting point of their movement:

“On 28 January 2012 a non-citizen hung himself because of the frustration, the fear of deportation and the way non-citizens have been treated in this part of the world, in

¹ **Residenzpflicht:** “Upon filing an application for asylum in Germany, the applicant receives a certificate (*Aufenthaltsgestattung*) confirming identification and temporary residence permission. The applicant must carry this certificate at all time for the duration of the asylum procedure. Asylum seekers may not choose their region of residence and ‘may not leave the district [of the] *Ausländerbehörde* (immigration authorities office) at which they are registered.’ These districts can be as small as fifteen square kilometers, with the Asylum Procedure Act (*Asylverfahrensgesetz*) authorizing fines and ultimately up to a year’s imprisonment for violations.” (McDonough, 2008, p. 519)

Germany. On 19 March 2012 non-citizens went into the street with protest tents and on 2 July 2012 Tent Action started, as there was no positive response from the authorities. Again, on 8 September 2012 non-citizens organized a protest march to Berlin and after 28 days the march arrived in Berlin. On 13 October 2012 a big demonstration took place with the participation of 7000 people” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a).

This statement describes the first year of protest conducted by refugees and asylum seekers in Germany which led to the formation of the movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” in the following year. The initially spontaneous protest of Iranian asylum seekers in Würzburg (Der Standard, 2012, April 3) soon developed into a more organized and structured movement. The protest “Refugee Tent Action” initiated a central committee with the goal to connect different refugee protests into a single network (Refugee Tent Action, 2013, September 9). What followed were several hunger strikes in different parts of the country, a protest march to Berlin and a “non-citizens congress” – efforts that turned out to be unsuccessful with regard to the improvement of living conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in Germany (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a).

Because of the numerous setbacks, the protesters decided for a new approach which they describe as follows: “That’s why we non-citizens decided to start a protest march on the streets of Bavaria for our freedom, for our basic rights as human beings. We want to start walking to spread our voice with our steps” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n.d. a). The first protest marches conducted by “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” were from Würzburg to Munich and Bayreuth to Munich, all cities in Bavaria (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2013, September 3). The most current protest march from Nuremberg to Munich (100 miles) took place in October of 2016. These

marches are always documented by video footage in order to spread the activists' message through social media.

Before refugees and asylum seekers organized into a broader protest network in the spring of 2012, there was no sign of empowerment within this group of people. One reason might be that many asylum seekers do not want to take on the risk of being arrested because of violations of the *Residenzpflicht* and thereby risking their chances for asylum in Germany (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2013, August 25). Power structures within the movement "Refugee Struggle for Freedom" are rather opaque, judging from the information they offer on their website.

THE PROBLEM

Refugees and asylum seekers in Germany who are part of the protest movement "Refugee Struggle for Freedom" protest the living conditions they face in Germany. Within the last years, Germany has been confronted with a high influx of refugees and asylum seekers, in the last year mostly from Syria (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 2016, October 19). "Refugee Struggle for Freedom" protesters started their movement in 2012, a year that saw a relatively small number of applications for asylum in Germany. In 2015 and 2016 (January to October) the German state was faced with almost 1.1 Million applications for asylum (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 2016, October 19), a situation that did not improve the already bad living conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. The very high number of people coming to Germany pushed many local governments to their limits. While there was not enough staff to work through all applications for asylum in an appropriate time frame, the lack of sufficient housing for refugees and asylum seekers was even more pressing. Many people still live in tents, vacant school buildings or container settlements (Wendel, 2014) – a situation that was made even worse by more

than 1,000 attacks on refugee housing by rightwing nationalist groups in 2015 alone (Diehl, 2016, January 28).

While the “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” protesters mostly address their general living conditions in Germany as unacceptable, they also have some very precise demands. The two most prominent are the abolishment of the so called *Residenzpflicht* and the possibility to earn money or enroll in a university right away after their arrival in Germany, which is at the moment not possible on a legal way (GUSTreik, 2012, May 11). They furthermore operate under the slogan “No human is illegal! We will all stay!”² On their website, the protesters give information about how they are approaching the above described problems.

“We can’t solve all of these problems, but we want to introduce certain ideas and suggestions with our actions. We as people that have direct experience with these various problems know, that we can only solve them together. So it is urgent that we build a common struggle together. We can only reach anything if we go on strategically. What do we mean by that? We are those that are excluded from education, from work, so finally from society. We can only fight for our participation in society. For example we have to win over the support of unions and workforce for our fight for working rights. We have to win over students and teachers for our right to education. We have intervened as an actively fighting subject and we continue to take part in alliances with political groups and organizations to protest against further restrictive legislation, like the so called Bavarian integration law or the new law-draft by the Minister of Interior Thomas de Maizière and against the existing asylum laws” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2016, October 17).

² Translated from German by the author.

This statement shows that the protesters first goal is to make people in Germany aware of the struggles refugees and asylum seekers face every day. By gaining the support of the German society, it is their eventual goal to influence German legislature and change asylum laws, especially in the state of Bavaria.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

The protest movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” originated from a hunger strike conducted by Iranian refugees in Würzburg after one of their fellow refugees had committed suicide. Over time, this rather small and spontaneous protest developed into a larger movement which includes a diverse population of people. Video footage on their website suggests that protesters today come from a number of countries all over the world and speak several languages. Video statements are therefore often conducted in four or more languages (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2016, October 7). This shows that the protesters work from a multicultural perspective of community organizing. Organizers recognize and value “cultural diversity while working to dismantle structures of inequality” (Gutierrez et al, 1996, p. 503).

While the movement can be described as indigenous since leaders and protesters are refugees or asylum seekers in Germany, many groups within German society have by now expressed solidarity for the movement. Many of these are youth organizations of worker unions and political parties. Parties that expressed solidarity with the movement are Bündnis '90/Die Grünen, Die Linke and Piratenpartei, all these parties, including the worker unions, can be described as part of the left on the political spectrum.

While the first protests did not display any specific political or theoretical frameworks, the movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” seems to be developing in a direction that could be described as communist. In a press statement, they for instance, describe what they are fighting for

as a “class struggle” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2013, September 3), clearly a term coined by communist and communist movements in the past. Unfortunately, one cannot find much information about the protesters’ background. It is therefore not possible to distinguish if the protesters’ political orientation is rooted in their own past or influenced by the supporters they met on the way.

ANALYSIS

“Refugee Struggle for Freedom” defines itself as a group of non-citizens who fight for basic human rights in Germany. More precisely, they protest the circumstances that refugees in Germany face before their application for asylum is decided upon. Thus the activists of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” fight “inhuman [sic] living conditions like being forced to live in asylum camps and the general isolation as the result of it, deportation, Residenzpflicht, food packages, [and] not having permission to work and study” (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n. d. a). Coming to Germany as an asylum seeker, support like language classes or assistance for job search is only available after the refugee’s application is processed and official asylum status is granted. In some cases this process can take several years, especially after the German state was confronted with more than one million applications for asylum in 2015 and 2016 alone (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2016, October 19). Up to the point when asylum is granted, refugees have to stay in the county they were registered in and do not receive any permission to work or study. The activists that protest as part of the movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” belong to this group of asylum seekers in Germany who cannot do much more than wait for their applications being processed, which leads to the above described feelings of exclusion and isolation. Reading through different statements and articles online, the general picture is that the movement does not have a precise agenda. It protests the living conditions of asylum seekers in Germany and how they are

not treated equal to the rest of German society. The most concrete goals one can find are the demands for the freedom to move, work and study.

The movement “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” can be described as very weak with regard to assets and resources. The mere fact that the activists are protesting their lack of possibilities to work, study, gain any money or, more generally, participate in German society paints a very clear picture of their weaknesses and lack of relationships or networks. They, however, have found a way to spread their message outside the immediate circle of activists. Through videos and social media, protesters try to reach a broader audience with their message than only the people that walk by their protests on the street. “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” also puts effort into finding more support from the inside by recruiting more refugees and asylum seekers. Visiting refugee camps mainly in the state of Bavaria, the activists try to find more people who are willing to join them in their fight for human rights and equality. The fact that some protests, for instance the marches that stretch across counties and even states, violate parts of the German asylum law (i.e. Residenzpflicht), however, might challenge the success of recruiting a high number of new protesters. “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” represents a community where many people fear for their future in Germany and might fear negative consequences if they speak out in front of police and officials. Depending on what the German state’s decision with regard to their asylum applications is, these people either get a chance to build a new life in Germany or have to go back home, a consequence many people are probably not willing to risk. This lack of support within the community leads to a weak basis which makes it even harder to fight for goals “through long and sometimes dangerous struggles” (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 730).

It seems that the activists of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” struggle with the development of relationships outside their organization. While one can find a list with

organizations that stand in solidarity with the protesting refugees and asylum seekers on their website, it seems that there does not exist much further collaboration. The groups which stand in support for the activists of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” can be described as other refugee protest organizations throughout Europe, worker unions, and the political party “Die Linke” (The Left). These organizations use a clear socialist / communist vocabulary and it seems that they understand the refugee protests rather as a class struggle than a struggle for human rights and equality (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n. d. c).

The development of good relationships which can be used as resources to achieve their goal seems to be something the “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” is lacking. In an open letter to the political party “Die Linke” (The Left), the activists request political action that goes beyond mere verbal support and solidarity. The letter uses very strong language which makes the protesters’ disappointment in the people and organizations that expressed solidarity clear. Instead of effective support, the activists argue that they were confronted with paternalism and not treated as self-sufficient individuals (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2016, October 7). Thus, they found their supporters to be using the exact same patterns that the protesters criticize with regard to the broader German society and German officials. The protesters furthermore need allies who know about German bureaucracy and how to influence politicians and officials. The last years of protests have shown, that a strategy that solely focuses on confrontation does not change the minds of important policy makers in Germany (Rubin & Rubin, 2008).

“Refugee Struggle for Freedom” can clearly be described as a movement with indigenous leadership. It was founded by refugees who mourned the loss of another refugee who committed suicide in a German refugee camp and who thereafter felt the need to take action against the circumstances that asylum seekers face in German refugee camps (Refugee Struggle for Freedom,

n. d. a). As far as I can tell after my research, all members of the protest movement are refugees who came to Germany to apply for asylum from different parts of the world. They thereby automatically take on “a multicultural perspective [which] recognizes and values cultural diversity while working to dismantle structures of inequality” (Gutierrez et al, 1996, p. 503). The movement is not structured like a long planned community organizing campaign would be, including professional staff. The movement grew out of a spontaneous protest and has tried ever since to connect refugees and asylum seekers across Germany and Europe in order to give them a voice in the discussion about asylum and integration laws.

Looking at the protests and efforts of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom”, their main opponent is German legislature and policy. Eventually, activists would like to change asylum laws in Germany so they can work, study and travel, even though their application for asylum is not yet processed. They would like to change current laws in Germany (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, n. d. a). Therefore the activists’ primary targets are German and Bavarian politicians and officials.

“Refugee Struggle for Freedom” is a very young community organizing movement which seems to be struggling at the moment because of a lack of success and support. While community development, as discussed in many class sessions, might be helpful for their cause, the activists simply have no resources to accomplish any community development. At this point the challenge of community organizing might even be one the group will not be able to meet. “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” is not yet a full developed community organizing campaign, it is rather a protest movement which tries to develop into a community organizing movement but is lacking resources and support.

“Refugee Struggle for Freedom” employed three main activities in its young history – street protests, hunger strikes and protest marches. All of these have until today not seen much

success. If one wants to look at which of the efforts achieved most attention by the public, it was probably the three hunger strikes that the activists have organized so far. Tragically, this attention was mainly caused by a number of refugees and asylum seekers that were hospitalized as a result of the strike. But not only the hunger strikes, also the street protests in Munich and several protest marches throughout Bavaria and all the way from Munich to Berlin did not get the attention that the protesters had hoped for. As it gets clear from the quote at the beginning of this paper, the only reaction the protesters received was eviction, but no dialogue or negotiation.

While it is hard to define reasons for the lack of success of a movement that is still fighting to achieve its goals, I think one can say that the approach is very onesided, leaning towards confrontation. Through the use of rather aggressive protest methods like, for instance, protest marches that stretch through the whole country and several hunger strikes with activists being hospitalized, the protesters of “Refugee Struggle for Freedom” managed to get at least some local publicity but their progress stopped right at that point. The first years of the movement have so far shown that the Bavarian government does not react to these actions in a way expected by the activists. So far there has been no dialogue or negotiation between the protesters and the government, a necessary step to achieve the goals the movement asks for. Therefore I think that the activists need to structure their campaign in a less aggressive way. Some politicians and human rights organizations have expressed solidarity with the movement and the activists should use this to connect with persons that can more easily approach people who have a say in politics and legislature.

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