

Voices from the Lagers in Germany: Necropolitics in the times of the coronavirus crisis¹

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[FBhimji@uclan.ac.uk] (University of Central Lancashire)

Abstract

This paper traces the everyday realities of refugees living in camps in certain federal states of Germany during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. It provides a systematic analysis of refugees' testimonies and demonstrates that they have not received similar levels of care and protection as German citizens, and that their movement has become increasingly regulated. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics', I argue that the German State has treated refugees' lives as less liveable than those of their own citizens during the pandemic, as was the case before it broke out. Much scholarship has explained the notion of refugee camps in various ways, but there has been less discussion of *Lagers* (camps) as a site where colonial oppression persists outside the temporal and spatial contexts of former colonies. Data are drawn from archived data sets and testimonies that refugees uploaded to websites of various refugee activist groups.

Keywords: Refugee accommodation; Covid-19; refugee voices; necropolitics; Germany

1. Introduction: Containing coronavirus in Germany

This study examines the narratives of refugees' everyday realities in the *Lagers* (camps) so called in order to underline the severity of the situation, and reception centres, which they communicated to the activists and the various initiatives launched to support them. In doing so, the study demonstrates how the lives of some people who had already been racialized and 'Othered' by the German State because of their particular status and origins came to be further denigrated, dehumanized and devalued at a time when the 'indiscriminate' coronavirus was spreading and infecting humans at a significant rate. Furthermore, this article is relevant for the understanding of the political genealogy of camps in Germany during the pandemic.

According to my observations, in Berlin COVID measures were being implemented quite strictly. Almost everyone on public transport wore a mask, and it was impossible to enter shops, museums, restaurants or any indoor facility without one. Moreover, on buses the front sections were completely sealed off to shield the driver from repeated interactions with the passengers. German citizens clearly benefitted from the State's commendable health-care sys-

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tem and the efficient measures that were introduced in each of Germany's sixteen federal states, which included an efficient track and trace system and a working Corona-Warn App.

This paper will demonstrate that refugees living in the *Lagers* in some of Germany's federal states did not experience comparable levels of protection. The study based on refugees' articulations of their quotidian experience will show that they became extremely vulnerable to becoming infected by the lethal virus because the necessary protective measures were not imposed on them. During this period, refugee councils across Germany also displayed concerns about the risk of infection spreading in camps where 'frequent hand washing and social distancing were next to impossible' (MacGregor, 2020).

Several scholars have discussed and debated the regimentation of refugees in German accommodation centres prior to the global pandemic (e.g. Dilger & Dohn, 2016; Kaye & Hamann, 2018; Hartmann, 2017). During the course of the ongoing pandemic, as this study will show, the uncertainties for refugees became heightened. This paper will illustrate how the pandemic and the ill-defined quarantine regimes became a pretext for increased regimentation, securitization and isolation, leading to further mental health problems in what was already a difficult situation. In contrast, during the same period, the State appeared to be highly protective of its citizens. The following excerpt shows the State policy that went into effect at the start of the pandemic:

On March 12, 2020 schools and childcare facilities were closed and the government issued recommendations regarding social distancing. On March 17th, the borders were closed, and on March 18th, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced the general lockdown with stay-at-home orders. 'This is serious,' she remarked in her speech to the nation. 'Please, take it seriously, too.' These measures went into effect on March 21st and were then further extended twice until the beginning of May. At the same time, the government reassured the population that they would do everything necessary to buffer the negative consequences of the lockdown. The debt brake was suspended, and the government announced an extra federal budget of 150 billion euros. Short-time work (*Kurzarbeit*) was introduced which allows firms to temporarily reduce hours worked while providing employees with income support from the state for the hours not worked. On April 22nd, the subsidy was increased to up to 80% of the regular salary. In mid-April, some states started to make the wearing of face coverings obligatory in public transportation and shops. By April 27th, face masks were obligatory in public transportation and shops in all German states. (Naumann et al, 2020)

In sharp contrast, as this study will demonstrate, the situation of people residing in *Lagers* across Germany's federal states remained precarious, and existing spatial distinctions and boundaries (see Kreichauf, 2018) between non-citizens and citizens were further exacerbated. When asylum-seekers first arrive in Germany, they are housed in central reception centres where they have very limited rights. Following their stay in these reception centres, they are subsequently transferred to shared or mass accommodation units in so-called *Gemeinschaftsunterkünften* or *GU* (collective accommodation centres) within a German municipality. Refugees are subsequently 'distributed' around German territory in a system called the *Erstverteilung von Asylbewerbern* (EASY), or 'Initial Distribution of Asylum-seekers'. Refugee accommodation falls under the jurisdiction of the various federal states and local authorities. In many cases, refugees are sent to remote locations, and the local authorities decide on policies regarding their movement in these areas. Federico and Hess (2021) draw attention to the fact that legal frameworks for migration and asylum diverge among 'RESPOND countries'. Consequently, the basis of the protection 'regime' differs considerably, to the extent that 'the certainty and predictability of the

law, which should guarantee protection, end up seriously undermining the right to protection' (ibid., p. 12). In Germany, refugees are required to stay at initial reception centres, and thereafter in the camps they are subject to control, confinement, and precarity since the 'legal uncertainties strengthen the discretion of authorities' (ibid., p. 14).

During the ongoing coronavirus crisis, the situation confining the refugees to these reception centres and accommodation centres has intensified. Several refugee activist groups provided support for the refugees confined in the camps, and published reports on their everyday experiences. For example, members of a feminist and migrant activist group, Women in Exile and Friends e.V., visited the *Lagers* and organized picnics with women refugees living there, who subsequently spoke to them about their situation. Another activist group, International Women's Space e.V. (IWS), contacted women living in various refugee accommodation centres and reception centres around Germany and inquired about their situations via electronic communication. Subsequently, refugee women sent them oral reports via WhatsApp, which the activist group posted as podcasts on their websites, having transcribed the information (see <https://iwspace.de/corona-lager-reports/>). Similarly, a refugee newspaper publication, *Daily Resistance*, published a special issue on refugees' experience during the coronavirus period in the German camps and the Moria camps in Lesbos, Greece. Another initiative, We'll Come United Berlin/Brandenburg, expressed solidarity with the refugees in their accommodation centres by visiting and supporting them with transport, bus services having been curtailed at the start of the epidemic in Germany. The initiative called this action *Aktion Supermarkt: Shuttle 'Busverbindung jetzt!'* ('Supermarket action: shuttle-bus link now!'), which supported refugees in a reception facility in Doberlug-Kirchhain by organizing a supermarket shuttle with six private cars. The group's aim was to replace the bus that had linked this camp to the city centre, but had recently been discontinued by traffic management at the beginning of the crisis. In addition to the actions undertaken by some refugee support groups in Berlin and Brandenburg, individual refugee activists also tried to make their voices heard with respect to the situation in the camps during this period.

This article therefore demonstrates how some people's lives have been made more vulnerable than those of others, since this new disease has infected people who did not have the privilege of being able to keep to social distancing, maintain hygiene or have access to appropriate medical care. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's (2019) necropolitical theory, this study shows that refugees' lives in the refugee camps appear to have been of little importance to the German State, since the latter has given those living in the camps only limited protection. Davies and Isakjee (2019) have recognized the need to extend the notion of necropolitics beyond the spatio-temporal confines of the colony. When refugees' lives are made so very vulnerable that they can be rendered subject to different rules, protection and levels of confinement within Germany during a crisis, extending the notion of necropower to them becomes even more apparent and necessary to apprehend. Speaking of 'necropower', Achille Mbembe aims 'to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the *creation of death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*' (2003, p. 80).

Bhambara (2017) contends that rights granted to European national citizens without being extended to others are privileges, this being how imperial inclusion based on hierarchical and racialized domination is reproduced as national or joint European exclusion, reflecting earlier forms of domination and being similarly racialized. Thus, the fact that refugees have come to be visibly excluded through the imposition of unclear, ambiguous and contradicting laws in

segregated housing during the coronavirus crisis, which gave rise to high levels of uncertainties and threat to their lives, should be understood as an example of hierarchical and racialized domination being reproduced outside the colonies and within the German State. As one refugee stated in his testimony, ‘almost nothing is done to save the *death conditions* refugees are facing at the moment’.

2. Debating camps and shelters

There has been much discussion about the exclusionary aspects of refugee camps in nation states. Several scholars describe them as ‘states of exception’, closed camps, or regimented institutions (Agamben, 1998 [1995]; Pieper, 2008; Taubig, 2009; Wendel, 2013). Studies of such shelters have understood them as closed systems and have treated them and their inhabitants as anomalies, demarcated and distanced from the places in which they are located. For example, Wendel (2013) comments on the spatial restrictions placed on refugees in Germany, the federal authorities having the power to decide whether refugees may leave their districts to undertake other activities. Taubig (2009) draws parallels between the authorities’ control over prison inmates and the lives of those living in refugee accommodation, and understands the living situations of asylum-seekers in Germany as a state of ‘organized disintegration’ marked by the existing asylum and residence structure that the federal states have created.

Scholarship has also addressed the ideological functions of refugee accommodation. Pieper (2008) understands the ideological underpinnings of the camps as spaces from which ‘voluntary departures’ are promoted and argues that the presence of all the facilities concerned with regulating asylum in the refugee camps become instrumental in isolating the refugees from the rest of society. Refugee camps have also been described as exclusionary, isolated and regimented spaces. Bigo (2007, p. 23) notes that detention centres are, for the most part, set up to ‘defend society’ from the asylum-seeker through distancing techniques, so that, for the latter, the ‘possibility of staying and living inside a country not considered their own’ diminishes.

Thus, much previous scholarship has understood refugee accommodation to consist of camps of exceptionality separated from citizens or as sites in which multiple state actors and forms of authority co-exist that deny the experience of self-governance to their residents. Refugee accommodation is regarded as an exceptional space, its residents consequently being understood as the victims of such exclusionary practices and as leading ‘bare lives’ (Agamben, 1998 [1995]).

Recently, there has been much focus on camps at ‘hot spots’ such as the former Moria Camp in Lesbos, Greece. Scholars working on the lived experiences of refugees regard these camps as ‘anti-shelters’. Howden (2020) argues that Moria is an ‘instructive microcosm of broader European border practices,’ one that features ‘an architecture that is the very antithesis of shelter,’ being designed ‘to produce a spectacle of fear, uncertainty and danger for possible migrants.’ Given the poor conditions and levels of increased securitization that their residents experience, refugee camps have also been understood as deliberate forms of deterrent, with the extent to which they offer protection being questioned (Bhimji, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Scott-Smith, 2020). Similarly, Andrijasevic (2010), who has analysed the camps on the Italian island of Lampedusa, asserts that these should not be viewed as abstract and dematerialized ‘spaces of exception’. Rather, detention within them must be seen as related to deportation, while the camps themselves should be regarded as modes of the ‘temporal regulation’ of transit migration.

While several scholars understand camps as confining, regulatory and closed spaces, others have argued that, even though the refugee camp may have exclusionary characteristics, those who reside in it should not always be seen as passively accepting their circumstances, but be understood instead as possessing agential abilities enabling them to resist their regimented lives and to work to normalize their everyday existences (Bhimji, 2019; Turner, 2015; Bhimji, 2016; Rygiel, 2012; Sanyal, 2011; Sigona, 2015).

Although there has been much discussion of and focus on the exclusionary politics of the camps, there has been little recognition of refugee camps as sites of colonial and racial oppression. As Davies and Isakjee (2019) have pointed out, ‘in practice, the founding and continuing logic of the modern European state is one which sees European space and citizenship as a right for the “native” European, but a precious and scarcely distributed gift to those outside its political borders’ (ibid., p. 215). In the context of the coronavirus crisis, the operation of this logic has become increasingly apparent. While the German State has proved to be efficient in protecting its own citizens, given the relatively low level of fatalities in comparison to other EU countries, similar levels of protection have not been provided to those already confined in the camps.

The following sections will illustrate the extent to which refugees residing in the camps became increasingly segregated, othered and racialized from German society during the coronavirus crisis and thus the need to understand camps as sites of necropolitics and necropower outside the colonial context.

3. Methodology

The data employed in this study are drawn from fifteen testimonies archived in the form of podcasts, online publications and websites by various refugee activist groups based in Berlin and Brandenburg. I have known these groups for over seven years and have consistently followed and participated in some of their related activist work (see Bhimji, 2020). They have earned themselves a considerable reputation for their activist work in Berlin and Brandenburg, and have also received funding from various sources to enable them to continue with their activism and advocacy work. One such group, International Women Space (IWS), which is in regular contact with women living in various refugee accommodation centres, collected over thirty testimonies of their experiences via WhatsApp audio-messages starting in April 2020. They continue to collect stories up until today. IWS consists of several working groups, one of which, called the ‘Break Isolation Group’ and led by migrant women, invited women staying in different refugee accommodation and reception centres to share their experiences with respect to their ongoing situation. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, in order to collect women’s testimonies, women from this sub-group had received funding to visit the *Lagers*. However, with the onset of the pandemic, they were unable to visit the camps because of increased restrictions and securitization. Nevertheless, the ‘Break Isolation Group’ managed to record several testimonies in the form of audio-messages, which they uploaded to their website, subsequently transcribing the interviews. The webpage is entitled ‘Corona-reports: women report about their situation in the Lagers.’ The group started to gather messages in April 2020, and have continued to do so up until the present day. IWS anonymized the interviews and did not reveal the identities of their respondents in either the podcasts or the transcriptions, but numbered the interview excerpts instead. For the purposes of this study, I refer to the same numbers as those used by IWS. These recordings and transcriptions of the interview data can be found at <https://iwspace.de/corona-lager-reports/>.

Women in Exile and Friends e.V., a Brandenburg-based activist group, also reported on women's experience at the camps on their website. The activists had organized a rally and picnics in some camps, such as that in Wünsdorf, as part of their annual summer action bus tour in Berlin and Brandenburg. At the picnic, they spoke to the women about their experiences, which they summed up and uploaded to their website: <https://www.women-in-exile.net/kundgebung-und-picknick-im-wuensdorf-lager/>. I also discuss excerpts from these reports in this study.

In addition to refugee women's activist groups, in August 2020 a publication called *Daily Resistance*, which publishes critical perspectives on refugees' experiences, also brought out a special issue on refugees' experience in the *Lagers* in Germany, as well as in camp Moria in Lesbos, Greece. The editors believed that it was important to do that since, because of the EU's policies, the refugees had been exposed to greater risk, were isolated, and received racist, discriminatory treatment during the epidemic (Ulu, 2020).

We'll Come United, another activist group consisting of several networks and initiatives, organized an action to provide the refugees with a taxi service following the suspension of buses at the start of the pandemic. This was the only connection between one particular camp and the city centre five kilometres away. Subsequent to their action, on 9 April 2020 the group gave a summary of the situation and their action in support of the confined refugees on their Facebook page.

This study provides an analysis of some of the reports, testimonies and narratives collected by these activists. The methodology I employ represents a departure from using quantitative data, as it draws on ethnographic methods involving interviews and participant observation. Finally, while in Germany, I also visited one of the refugee camps, at Doberlug-Kirchhain (DoKi), with an activist group. This helped me visualise and further confirm the testimonial data I employ in this study.

David Zeitlyn (2012, p. 464) argues that every ethnography, history or archive is positioned or biased in one or several ways, which still does not make archival (or any other) research worthless; rather, we must deal with the positionality or bias of the accounts. For the purposes of this study, therefore, I apprehend the complex positionality of these groups, some of whose activists are white, alongside others who are first-generation migrants from the Global South or German-born people of colour. Although the activists claim to work in solidarity with the refugees and try to form equal relationships, their positionality with respect to the refugees need to be recognized as more complex: for example, hierarchical relationships do tend to develop in situations where one group supports another group (see Bhimji, 2020). Nevertheless, the significant political role these archives play in describing the experience of refugees residing in German camps also needs to be acknowledged. Furthermore, I must take into account my own positionality as a researcher, since I have decided which reports to include and which to exclude for the purposes of this study. Thus, power imbalance exists between the researchers, activist groups and the participants whom we write about. Furthermore, the employment of archival methodology was additionally limiting because I was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews, and thus it was difficult to determine the entire ethnographic context of the situation.

The following paragraphs will provide an analysis of the testimonies and reports published by the four activist groups based in Berlin.

4. Analysis

4.1 Detention-quarantine in the camps

Several of the refugees living in the camps felt that the state had curtailed their freedom of movement still further during the coronavirus pandemic. They did not believe that the additional restrictions had been introduced simply to protect people against this new virus, but rather regarded those as a method and an excuse for the state to increase its control and power over those who were already being confined in difficult circumstances. A number of respondents mentioned that some states had re-imposed the *Residenzpflicht*, a law in Germany which restricts the movement of refugees within the state. According to this provision of the Asylum Act (Section 56), asylum-seekers and those staying in Germany on *Duldung* (deportation postponed until the obstacles for deportation—e.g., a severe disease, lack of papers, pregnancy, etc.—are out of the way) may only move within the federal state or residence area assigned to them. The residence obligation applies to asylum-seekers as long as they are being accommodated in a country-run initial reception centre for up to six months. For asylum-seekers who are from what are deemed to be ‘safe countries of origin’, the residence obligation applies until their application for asylum has been processed. In the case of the ‘tolerated’, the restriction on geographical residence can be lifted after three months. Over time, following much activism and resistance, this apartheid-like law segregating asylum-seekers from citizens had been relaxed, though some states have reimposed it during the pandemic, subjecting asylum-seekers to even more segregation by severely restricting their mobility. The following excerpts illustrate the ways in which the state restricted the movement of those living in camps:

Report No 17: ...And then the insurance cards were closed, they blocked the insurance card, so that you can only stay in Neuruppin and go to hospital in Neuruppin. People are very, very worried. Then they wrote that women who have children, they could go to [the] *Frauenhaus*, the Women’s Place to stay for the time being, until they find a solution. There is no solution. People are worried. (IWS, 13/05/2020)

Report No. 6: I went there [to Treskow in Neuruppin] personally to visit a Cameroonian woman with two children. She called me and I was concerned, it was very painful. She got *Residenzpflicht* – just like that! She couldn’t move, and she was worried about the children, they are sharing showers and toilets with different people, and she was so worried. (IWS, 04/04/2020)

Report No.18: As I’m speaking now, there are already people who are in Wüsterhausen. They are already in quarantine. They are not sick whatsoever. According to the law, I think it’s enough if they give people the so-called *Residenzpflicht* [mandatory stay in place of residence], to stop them from going to another town. Why should you put people who are not sick in a quarantine, block them? Why? These questions I’m trying to ask some people. We have to get out the information. Why? In this time? Are you taking advantage of corona? It’s not really funny. This is a shit politic. It’s not even politic – it’s just shit. (IWS, 13/05/2020)

The above excerpts demonstrate the lack of belief among these women that the state is protecting people against the new coronavirus; instead, they think it is making their difficult situations in the camps worse by restricting their right to move from place to place. In fact, in order to enforce this law, the state authorities went to the lengths of putting a hold on residents’ health insurance cards so that they could not move from one town to another if the

need arose, thus restricting them to accessing health services in the towns where they resided. As *Lagers* are often not centrally located, and situated far from major cities and towns, it is not always possible to access healthcare (Dilger & Dohrn, 2016). Although during the lockdown many German citizens in various states were discouraged from making day trips and visiting members of their families who were living in other towns, they could continue to access adequate health care as they did not experience strict restrictions on their movement and their insurance card was not altered. However, because of the strict enforcement of their movement and the alteration of their insurance card, the refugees could only use their insurance cards in the smaller towns in which they lived.

Thus, the enhanced restriction of movement reproduced inequalities and segregation between citizens and non-citizens, since refugees could not move from their *Lagers*, which were often located in smaller villages with limited amenities and healthcare facilities.

Conversely, German and EU citizens living in Germany could leave their houses and flats to exercise or go shopping, and were not confined to their places of residence. However, in one instance following an outbreak of COVID-19, the police enforced a quarantine in a tower block with a majority of East European residents, who mainly worked in meat-processing plants in Nord Rhine-Westphalia. However, the quarantine was for a limited period and was quickly lifted after a few weeks because of the considerable attention it created in the mainstream media. In contrast to this situation, refugees remained confined to their camps for an indefinite period.

While some residents felt that the *Residenzpflicht* was being reimposed, others viewed the quarantine period as a form of detention that would lead to deportations.

Statements of inhabitants from LEA Ellwangen: Where lies our Freedom of Movement? Consequent upon the outbreak of COVID19, we understand that measures were put in place to reduce movement as well as establish social distancing as far apart as possible. We also are aware that those [who] tested positive are mandated by law to go straight into isolated quarantine for a specified period, ranging between 10 to 14 days, after which their emerging status will determine whether the quarantine continues or not. Unfortunately, and curiously so, we have been subjected to an indefinite quarantine (both positive and negative persons) as the entire camp remains locked down for close to one month now, with no indication of it being re-opened anytime soon. (04/30/2020, *Daily Resistance*)

Rahul: We are appealing for help! Some of us refugees are under detention – ‘quarantine’ for COVID-19. While we can’t get out, other refugees are being deported to Afghanistan from this same claimed contaminated area. This is unacceptable and unfair. (07/01/2020, *Daily Resistance*)

Thus, during the coronavirus crisis, German federal states increased restrictions on refugees’ mobility. Prior to the crisis, refugees experienced a ‘regime of mobility’ (Salazar & Smart, 2011), as well as many different types of internal border regime (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018). However, these regimes were intensified during the height of transmission of COVID-19 in Germany. Refugees thus made a distinction between quarantine and detention. Since they knew the quarantine period lasted from ten to fourteen days, being in so-called ‘quarantine’ did not make much sense to them, and they came to view the State’s unjust and racist policies as directed towards them. One person tellingly termed this period ‘detention-quarantine.’ Furthermore, on my visit to the DoKi camp I was told that anyone who managed to leave the camp for more than 24 hours would become subject to quarantine for two weeks even if they

tested negative. Refugees therefore demanded that their freedom of movement be restored and understood the quarantine period as nothing other than an increased level of detention, ultimately causing them mental health issues and making their lives unliveable. In this manner, the camp environment instilled threat of fear, uncertainty and danger amongst the refugees at a time when reassurance was most needed. In this manner the camp system does not only deny the refugees their basic rights, but by curtailing their freedom of movement they are further isolated and segregated from citizens and thus rendered invisible for mainstream society.

4.2 *The Suspension of buses*

Some federal states stopped regular bus services from the *Lagers*. Consequently, not only could the refugees not get to the main railway station, they could not even go to the supermarkets to purchase food or everyday items, since many camps were located in distant areas, and it was not easy to access shops on foot if one did not have access to a bicycle. The following excerpts demonstrate the ways in which those who were affected by that articulated their difficulties:

Report No. 3: Hello, this is the update from Doberlug-Kirchhain about Corona. Because of this outbreak, the buses which used to take people to the market were removed. So, when we asked about it, it was told to us that the bus will be available again once the epidemic goes down. But if you want to go to the market now, you have to walk all the way. (01/04/20)

Report No. 24: Good morning ladies, this is a record from DoKi (Doberlug-Kirchhain). The bus which used to take people to the *Bahnhof* [railway station] is still not available, and they're saying maybe it will be available by September. (06/07/2020)

Report No. 23: Hi everyone, this is the report from _____, Potsdam. Another thing is transport. The first bus comes here at 8 am and the last bus comes at 17:49 from town. So if someone... like I'm late, to come back or to catch the last bus, it's either I take a taxi, or I find a way to get here, or I look for somewhere to sleep out there. Because to walk here it's not safe, it's in the middle of a forest. You can't see anyone walking around you – you're all alone walking here, it's not safe for us. So this is another big challenge for us. (06/07/2020)

Thus, refugees not only experienced the denial of their fundamental rights such as access to the main railway stations and shops (already a contentious issue prior to the COVID crisis), they became vulnerable to violence since they were forced to walk by themselves where there was little foot traffic. In contrast, one can safely assume that many of the citizens who lived in these villages and rural towns owned cars and relied less on public transport. Mobility is in some respects constitutive of democracy (Sheller & Urry, 2000). In this sense, the denial of fundamental rights to refugees residing in the camps can only be understood as an example of necropower, since German citizens were not treated in the same manner, given their greater ability to access cars, bicycles and public transport in cities and towns.

Nevertheless, those affected resisted the sudden suspension of bus services, and refugee activist and advocacy groups began to provide them with a 'taxi service':

Report No. 16: So, this group went ahead and organised a protest at the market area in Doberlug-Kirchhain. They were protesting for the bus services to be resumed on the route. This was the only bus service connection that was available for the residents in the camp. And since the

discontinuation of the bus they have been walking all the way to the *Bahnhof* [train station] and walking to the markets – to and from. And some of them have small kids so they keep on pushing their *Kinderwagens* [baby buggies] all the way up to the market to buy whatever they need, and back. (13/05/2020)

On 9.4.2020 we as We'll Come United Berlin/Brandenburg supported the people from the first reception facility in Doberlug-Kirchhain through a supermarket shuttle with 6 private cars. With this we tried to replace the bus 571 from the first reception to the city center. It was discontinued by the traffic management ElbeElster at the beginning of the Corona crisis. One resident said: 'The interesting thing is: the other buses are running. So why only us? Why are we so isolated?' Another resident added: 'The bus was abandoned about a month ago. We now have to walk or cycle. 5 km is far. On foot it is an hour there and one back. We are totally cut off and stuck here, we can't move freely at all.' (We'll Come United Report)

Thus, through protests and by collaborating with solidarity groups, those affected managed to make their plight visible to refugee activists and support groups, though the quotidian lives of the refugees in the camps during the coronavirus crisis remained largely absent from the mainstream news. What is especially significant in the above excerpts is that refugees recognized the processes of their racialization and the different treatment they were subject to compared with German citizens, who continued to have access to essentials even during the lockdown. As one of the respondents remarked, 'The interesting thing is: the other buses are running. So why only us?' Thus, it should be understood that what those living in refugee accommodation experienced during the crisis was nothing less than a regime of increasing confinement, and that their lives were of little value to the state. As Achille Mbembe stresses:

Colonial occupation itself consisted in seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a geographical area—of writing a new set of social and spatial relations on the ground. The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) ultimately amounted to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the differential classification of people; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. (2019, p. 79)

Thus, the ways in which the federal state in Germany asserted its control over refugee accommodation and refugee reception centres by restricting refugees' mobility through the suspension of public transport in specific geographical areas show that the State was instrumental in the production of hierarchies, zones and enclaves in ways which resembled a colonial occupation. Activists and academics focused on the refugee camps on the borders of the EU with campaigns such as *#LeaveNoOneBehind*, which attracted some public attention (Bojadžijev & Al-Kashef, 2020). However, as the above interview data and testimonies show, the catastrophic effects of the pandemic proved to be especially difficult for refugees even *within Germany's borders*, when border regimes were implemented through the suspension of public transport.

4.3 State negligence and boundary making

This section of the study illustrates how the State created further boundaries between its citizens and refugees by failing to provide the latter with adequate measures to protect them during the continuing pandemic.

While hand sanitizers seemed to be freely accessible all over Germany in several indoor places such as supermarkets, libraries, cafés and restaurants, those residing in the camps encountered shortages as the transmission rate of the new virus reached a significantly higher rate in many states within Germany. Many people complained that the camps did not provide gels, soaps or hand sanitizers and asked why they did not take such basic measures, which were fundamental for stopping the spread of the disease.

Rahul: One suspected person was brought to our room by security guards. When we rejected him on conditions of safety and security, they spoke to their leaders. They tried to use force. We told them, they can do it on their own, but in case one gets sick due to the new man they will be responsible. They decided to call the police and also the police tried to convince us that we are all asylum-seekers and that it doesn't matter, we could stay together. We asked the police: what is isolation? We asked the police to give us assurance, that they will be accountable in case one of us gets infected because of him. The police officer said they are not responsible. Then they left, [and] the man was put in the opposite room. Not only we are close contact persons, but almost 400 were also in close contact. Then, why they isolate only us, and they don't provide anything to us which we need? We are not provided [with] disinfectants. We need hygienic and healthy equipment and a permanent possibility to wash. Most of all we need separate rooms and toilets for safety!

Report No. 21: Good afternoon everyone, I am _____ from Eisen. About sanitizing, the only area with a sanitizing container is in the kitchen, which sometimes is not flowing. Sometimes you go to the kitchen and you don't find anything. So, it's a bit worrying. And then the cleanliness in our corridors. But for the corridors and the kitchens they are very, very very untidy and when I say untidy I mean very, very untidy. (5/07/20)

Report No. 14: Now about the social distancing: OK, it only applies in offices, in the canteen, they put the mask where one person is supposed to stand that is 1.5 metres distance. But when it comes to the rooms, we find that in a room there are 4 beds, so when you are sleeping there's no social distancing in the rooms, so I don't know how we can go about it.

Report by Women in Exile. In spite of the social distancing rules [and] lockdown, their families are still sharing rooms without enough space for all of them. They demanded that they should be moved out and accommodated in dignity because they are getting psycho problems when being in the camps without any perspectives. (19/07/2020)

Report No. 61: ...the social worker explained to us that the money (state aid) that we were given, the 150 Euros, [with] that money we are supposed to buy our own sanitizers.

The above excerpts reveal that the basic protective measures such as hand sanitizers were not provided for in the camps. Significantly, social distancing which is so very crucial in protecting oneself from COVID becomes an impossibility for refugees residing in the accommodation since 2 to 4 refugees are required to share small sized rooms. According to the above accounts, the number of people required to share a room has remained unchanged. Furthermore, refugees are neglected by the State, the management staff within the camps, as well as the police, and thus their lives remain inconsequential. As Sabine Ruske from the charity Doctors of the World asserted, 'the risk of transmission in communal facilities is especially high.

Residents live close together. Distancing is almost impossible. They also use common rooms where the risk of coming into contact with pathogens is particularly great' (MacGregor, 2021).

Silke Betscher (2020) contends that the lack of adequate public health measures can only be understood when we consider how 'the refugee' is discursively established as a 'border figure' such that the 'border figure' of the refugee and the social, discursive and emotional demarcations between the German 'we' and the non-German 'Other' seem to be essentialized and embodied. Bosworth et al. (2016) have noted that through the creation of refugee camps, the State exercises their sovereign power in order to 'delineate membership and cast non-members out of the country, often at the expense of their human rights'. The lack of basic provisions to refugees during the time of the COVID crisis illustrates the State's practice of exposing the body of the refugee to excessive vulnerability and inequality. The withdrawal, in times of crisis and extreme uncertainty such as during an outbreak of this unprecedented and highly infectious virus, of the basic resources and measures needed to restrict human to human transmission, such as 'basic hygiene', 'social distancing' and 'the availability of hand sanitisers', demonstrates that for the State, refugees' lives were of little consequence. More significantly, the refugees were conscious of the fact that they were being mistreated, as one of the interviewees expressed, 'But for the corridors and the kitchens they are very, very, very untidy and when I say untidy I mean very, very untidy' (Report No. 21). Therefore, it should be understood that refugees who experienced such conditions were subject to necropolitical power and oppression even in the contemporary context and outside the colonized states. Refugees' narratives show that they recognized the power of the State that had racialized them and set them apart from its citizens. As Rahul stated in his testimony, 'it was the police who tried to convince us that because we are all asylum-seekers and that it doesn't matter, we could stay together.' This overt implementation of segregationist policies can only be understood in terms of the continuity of the imperial legacy. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1961) showed that societies continue to be compartmentalized along the lines of marked inequalities in all aspects of human existence through the use of force, the denial of educational opportunities and forced segregation in living conditions, ultimately leading to the depreciation of one's self-worth. The denial of basic measures, such as those needed to survive the COVID crisis, to refugees and the practice of housing them together have not only divided societies: the State's different policies clearly demonstrate that for the politicians some lives are inconsequential, disposable and less worthy. Thus, German refugee accommodation, which has been recognised to operate in a manner following from the German State's racist laws (Pieper, 2008) should be understood as a form of systemic violence upon refugees and systemic boundary making between citizens and refugees.

4.4 Uncertainties and death conditions

In addition to being subject to excessive confinement regimes and being denied access to basic necessities and social distancing, refugees living in the *Lagers* did not have access to basic information like other people in the country. Consequently, the lack of clear information and clear guidelines created an environment of uncertainty. This fact was pointed out by several people:

Report No. 6: The situation is not good, people don't have information. According to what I understand the people are not aware, unlike if they are somewhere in Berlin, where you can go to KUB or whatsoever to get information. Here there is no information, everything is closed, because of Corona. Even getting money [state-aid] is a problem: ...So, there is not so much information

[regarding how to access state-aid]. The *Flüchtlingsrat*, [the refugee council] they are there, but they don't help. It is closed. Everything is closed there. It is a village. It is closed. And they even treat you bad, it is some kind of racism, they tell you: stay 2 meters away from I don't know what, and it is not funny. It's really sad. (04/04/20)

Rahul: As a result of two refugees who claimed to have been infected by the virus many refugees who are not confirmed sick have been piled in the same room on conditions of suspicion without any sign of the virus. Security guards were shouting and forcing them by hand and pushed them to stay inside without food and washing machines to clean clothes or bedsheets. They were not allowed to get food or tea from the canteen. There is no clear information flow between security guards and government as different orders are being issued at the same time. The work is very slow, almost nothing is done to save the death conditions refugees are facing at the moment.

The above excerpts demonstrate that refugees could not access basic information and that the information flow between security guards and the government was inadequate. Under 'normal' circumstances, refugees rely on a number of sources for their information such as volunteers, activist groups, health care workers, and lawyers who may visit the camps regularly (Dilger & Dohrn, 2016). However, it is evident from the above articulations that during the pandemic crisis the flow of people coming to the camps has been limited since lawyers and volunteers could not visit them and the refugee council office remained shut. That latter is significant since within Germany, it is the *Flüchtlingsrat* (refugee council) that advocates for the rights and dignity of the refugees and serves as an important source of information regarding their basic rights. One of the refugees also made a reference to KUB, a Berlin-based organisation that provides information and legal counselling services to refugees, and functions independently of the State. Although it is based in Berlin, refugees visit this organization from across Germany, but they could not access it during the time of COVID since their mobility was restricted. Thus, refugees contend that in such times, they come to depend on the security guards for accessing information who, instead of offering reassurance, were 'shouting and forcing them to stay inside without basic information' and thus creating an environment and mode of governance which led to uncertainty, anxiety, and the precarization of refugees. Governance through modes of uncertainty have a long colonial genealogy, as it serves to 'reproduce the racialised distinction between "citizens" and "noncitizens"' (Fortier, 2021).

Lack of information resulted in financial losses for those residing in the camps. Meanwhile, citizens received various forms of compensation through the state and various agencies during the closure of business. For example, the Berlin government released thirty million Euros in emergency grants for private institutions, including clubs. In addition, private citizens in Berlin set up a 'Nightlife Emergency Fund' in order to provide emergency aid to those most at risk from COVID-19. In sharp contrast, refugees in the camps could not access their 'money' (state-aid to cover essentials for people who have not paid into unemployment) or basic amenities because various offices responsible for income disbursements had been closed, thus causing incredible hardship and confusion. There appeared to be a lack of information flow between the local health authorities, the local refugee council, and the caretaking staff of the camps. That latter resulted in refugees in the *Lagers* becoming highly vulnerable and being mistreated by security guards.

The federal government in Germany had set up an inter-ministerial national crisis management group as early as February 27, 2020, when only a total of 26 confirmed cases had been recorded in the state (Wieler et al., 2021). However, this group appeared to be solely

responsible for the lives of the citizens. Refugees were thus forced to stay with other refugees who were sick, social distancing became a privilege, and food and basic necessities became difficult to access. It is significant that Rahul mentions that ‘almost nothing is done to save the death conditions refugees are facing at the moment,’ a realization that the lives people in the camps were leading were simply like ‘death’. This illustrated the subjection of refugees to necropower governance in ways they could not easily escape or free themselves from. Taking into consideration Mbembe’s notion of ‘necropolitics,’ and the situation of the refugees in the camps, it is evident that the State did not consider refugees’ lives to be as worthy as that of its own citizens since they deny them basic information and updates which is so very essential during the pandemic. The above excerpts reveal that within the COVID context, refugees are of the view that lacking adequate information they are subject to high levels of stress, uncertainty, and fear. The refugees may have potentially survived the virus but their lives become less ‘liveable’ as they are continually excluded even from receiving basic information pertaining to COVID rules and infection rates.

People’s everyday resistance in the camps needs to be recognized, since they have taken it upon themselves to challenge this excessive degree of control, with its segregationist policies and the lack of basic protective measures against COVID-19. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

Report No. 12: We’ve not seen change, some of us are the ones that are taking their time to clean the toilets, to clean the kitchen, to take the *Müll* [garbage] outside when it’s full. And now people are tired of telling the social, until today, one man decided that he himself is going to face the social who is managing this area, this *Heim*, and talk to her. So, we don’t know if there will be any change after he talks to the social. So, we are just hoping and believing there will be change. Because I think by now because of this pandemic the toilets should be clean, even more than before, and the kitchens should be clean, even more than before. (5/5/2020)

Thus, not everyone in the shelter resorted to overt political resistance. Rather, they made their concerns known to the activists, as well as to the management. For example, they willingly shared their concerns with activist groups through audio messages, as well as when they were visited in the camps. Thus, when Women in Exile visited the camp at Wünsdorf, several women picnicked with the activists and shared their difficulties with them. They also assumed responsibility for conducting daily chores to protect themselves from the virus and thus took it upon themselves to clean the toilets. This shows the residents’ agency being manifested in their everyday efforts to restore normality, rather than in organizing demonstrations.

5. Concluding comments

Refugees’ testimonies revealed that during the pandemic they have not received adequate care, that social distancing has become a privilege, that their basic rights to mobility have been curbed and that quarantine measures have become a form of detention in the country with the world’s fourth largest economy. Furthermore, deportations from the camps continue to take place during the time of lockdowns, as indicated in one of the reports. Thus, refugees in the *Lagers* not only live with fear of COVID but continue to live with the threat of deportations. In this sense, it should be understood that refugees living in camps have experienced colonial and racialized violence even though these ‘disposable “Others” were not actively killed,

but were instead kept injured, dehumanized and excluded, often through the deliberate and harmful inactivity of the State' (Davies et al., 2019) and thus became subject to 'death-worlds'.

An ECRE (an alliance of 107 NGOs across 40 European countries to protect and advance the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers) editorial characterized Frontex as a 'member States man' (including Germany) and claimed that Frontex has been directly involved in the 'push-backs' taking place on the Greek/EU border (during the pandemic) and going against some of the tenets of international law which protect refugees (ECRE, 2020). Thus, the State participates in the dehumanization of refugees' bodies within its territories as well as at its borders.

Refugees living in Germany have shown that living conditions in reception centres and camps during the pandemic have become 'death-like', given the lack of safety measures such as social distancing and basic hygiene. Furthermore, they have been subjected to increased regimentation and securitization, as well as the denial of their mobility. Such levels of precarity reflected exertions of necropower and necropolitics in the camps such that the borders between citizens and non-citizens intensified during the pandemic. As Mbembe notes:

In fact, everything leads back to borders—these dead spaces of nonconnection which deny the very idea of a shared humanity, of a planet, the only one we have, that we share together, and to which we are linked by the ephemerality of our common condition. But perhaps, to be completely exact, we should speak not of borders but instead of 'borderization.' What, then, is this 'borderization,' if not the process by which world powers permanently transform certain spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations? What is it about, if not the conscious multiplication of spaces of loss and mourning, where the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable come to be shattered? (2019, p. 99)

In Germany, there are no statistics demonstrating how and to what extent refugees, migrants and people of colour have been affected by COVID-19. This contrasts with the situation in Britain and the United States where the Office for National Statistics and Public Health England and the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (US) have both concluded that Blacks, Asians, Latinx and ethnic minorities have all been disproportionately affected by the virus. Among the reasons for such levels of disparity are existing health inequalities, housing conditions, public-facing occupations and structural racism (Butcher & Massey, 2020). The conditions that refugees have been subjected to in the *Lagers* have potentially made them more vulnerable to the disease than the rest of German society, given their being faced with inequalities of health, inadequate housing conditions and structural racism—the very same factors that have led to black and ethnic minorities in Britain and the United States becoming disproportionately vulnerable to the disease.

Didier Fassin has pointed out that traditionally medical institutions in France distinguish between three types of affliction among immigrants: the 'pathology of importation', that is, diseases brought from their countries of origin; the 'pathology of acquisition', which reflects the impact of the new environmental conditions in which the migrant lives and which affect his or her health negatively; and finally, the 'pathology of adaptation', which references the psychological disorders that result from the difficulties in adjusting to the new society (Fassin, 2005, cited in Sargent & Larchanche, 2007). As a consequence, migrants' bodies become subject to further racialization when they fall ill. In situations where refugees encountered immobility and border regimes, ostracism and racialization while living in the camps, it has become evident that during the pandemic, refugees have come to be defined as less valuable, the State

denying them basic care and the basic resources they need for their day-to-day survival. Such practices simply serve to reproduce racial inequalities in everyday situations.

Thus, on the one hand, refugees become vulnerable to sickness because of the inadequate implementation of preventive measures, while on the other hand, when they fall ill, they are racialized and segregated from German society through excessive quarantine and securitization. As Susan Sonntag pointed out several decades ago, 'the onus of the disease is put on the patient' (1978, p. 46). In this sense, the pandemic has become a pretext for the state to impose further regimes and to create punitive conditions that cause the refugees in the camps to 'permanently live in pain', which in turn might deter people from African and Asian countries in the Global South coming to settle in Germany or encourage them to leave 'voluntarily'. Thus, the pandemic serves as an excuse for the State further to increase its governance of 'unwanted populations'.

The measures or absence of measures adopted by some federal states to control refugees during the pandemic did not take factors of social class in the health situation into account. In Germany, as in many other European countries, class-based mobility contributed to spreading the virus when people returned from skiing holidays and again later in the summer, when they started to return from their summer holidays. The Austrian ski resort of Ischgl was commonly understood to be ground zero for the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus across Germany. In late summer, Germany witnessed 1,445 new infections, the highest number of daily infections in more than three months, because the middle classes and young holidaymakers were not prepared to compromise on their summer vacations, which included bar-hopping, clubbing and partying (Sridhar, 2020). The closure of internal borders for a particular group of people within Germany who were not allowed to travel outside the country while their asylum cases were pending amounts to the dehumanization of a group of people who had limited access to the levels of mobility enjoyed by the middle classes and the rest of German society. They must therefore be understood as having been exposed to necropolitical domination in the sense that people did not necessarily die of COVID, but that they continue to live a less 'liveable' life in camp environments during the pandemic with much fear, agony and distress.

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