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Demanding Their Welcome

Agency-in-Waiting at a Refugee Protest Camp in Dortmund, Germany

Lucia Volk

I did not leave everything behind in Syria to come here and be silent.
–Sakher Al-Mohamad in an interview, 2018

Introduction

On Tuesday, 9 June 2015, on Huckarder Street in a quiet suburban neighborhood of Dortmund, Germany, more than one hundred Syrian refugees gathered for a public protest outside the local branch of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015; Refugees Welcome Dortmund 2015). Holding up handwritten signs, the protesters demanded that Germany stop sending Syrians back to countries that did not want them, such as Italy, Greece, or Hungary, and that their asylum applications be reviewed more quickly. With every passing day, refugees' family members in Syria were exposed to attacks and bombings. The protesters wanted residency permits in Germany so they could bring those family members to safety via the legal route of family reunification. The officials working at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees—most commonly referred to by its German acronym BAMF (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge)—rejected the demands made by the protesters. Confronted with BAMF's dismissive posture, the protesters decided to turn their Tuesday

demonstration into a sit-in and a few days later, to move the protest to a downtown plaza near the city's main train station, until their demands were met. Despite neo-Nazi attacks, heavy rains, extreme heat, limited access to running water and other amenities, and the discomfort of sleeping under tarps on mats on the pavement, the protesters remained in the public eye for fifty-three days. It was the longest continuous protest (*Dauerprotest*) the city of Dortmund had ever seen (Bandermann and Thiel 2015).

This extraordinary refugee-organized protest has not yet been the subject of academic inquiry, which is surprising. Its duration, as well as the way it was organized and the diversity of persons that sustained it, make it worthy of attention. In what follows, I explain what made the Dortmund protest in the summer of 2015 possible logistically and show what strategies made it successful. I treat the Dortmund protest as a “diagnostic event” in order to reflect on the issue of refugees taking political action to negotiate regimes of exclusion in Germany (Moore 1987: 730). I use Moore's somewhat dated term because it explicitly asks ethnographers to look for events on the local level that are outside the ordinary and explain them in connection to ongoing larger political and economic changes. In 2015, the larger changes that triggered the protest in Dortmund comprised millions of ordinary people leaving their war-torn and poverty-stricken home countries in the Middle East and (North) Africa to find safety and opportunity, leading to social and political upheavals in the Global North (Bock and Macdonald 2019: 3). That year, Germany allowed close to one million asylum seekers into the country (Rosenhagen 2017: 134). The single largest group among them was comprised of Syrian civilians, fleeing the violent expansion of Islamist militants throughout Syria, as well as a brutal war waged by their government in response to citizens' demand for more democracy and justice.

While refugees spend a lot of their time, energy, and resources moving away from danger to areas of safety, they also frequently find themselves stuck in place. As scholars have noted, refugees, as well as marginalized citizens, are often forced into waiting patterns by border regimes and bureaucratic processes (e.g., Andersson 2014; Olson 2015; Pearlman 2017; Sanyal 2018). The Syrian refugees who had made it to Dortmund in 2015 were stuck in lengthy asylum proceedings, but they refused to sit around and simply wait. Drawing on Catherine Brun's work, I argue that the Syrian refugees in Dortmund exercised “agency-in-waiting” (2015: 23). Brun studied the case of ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia after it declared its independence from Georgia in 1992. Stuck inside Georgia with no discernible option of return, these refugees continued to anticipate their personal futures in Abkhazia in daily conversations and rituals, something Brun (2015: 24) calls “active waiting,” because these actions helped refugees make the uncertainty they experienced meaningful. Similarly, the Syrian refugees who gathered in the protest camp in Dortmund faced uncertain futures, while waiting for the

outcomes of their asylum petitions. Planning and running a protest camp provided the Syrians with agency in that they forcefully demanded that the German public pay attention to them *while they were waiting*. But more than that, their public protest cast waiting for an asylum decision itself as a dangerous activity that threatened the lives of family members left behind in Syria. The Dortmund protesters, in other words, in order to obtain faster asylum decisions, strategically deployed messages about the risks incurred *because of their waiting*. The Dortmund protest camp therefore illustrates two kinds of “agency-in-waiting”: political agency through public protesting and moral agency by pointing out the dire consequences of bureaucratic delays.

Methods

The research for this chapter was conducted between June 2018 and August 2019. It is based on a review of the German news coverage of the Dortmund protest, in addition to my reading of related Facebook, Twitter, and blog pages, as well as Instagram postings. I conducted four in-depth interviews with protest co-organizer Sakher Al-Mohamad in Cologne, Germany, where he is currently pursuing a master’s degree in international media studies, as well as several hour-long Skype interviews with Sakher after I had returned to California. With Sakher’s help, I contacted six more Dortmund protest participants via email and telephone. Four of the interviewed protest participants were German: Robert, a musician; Sigrid, a retired teacher of German as a second language; Jonas, a university student at the time of the protest; and Maria, a high school student at the time. I also conducted interviews with Majd and Mohamadali, both from Syria originally, currently enrolled in computer and international business classes in Dortmund and Cologne, respectively. The interviews were conducted in English or in German. Unless I received their permission to use their first names, I employ pseudonyms for my interlocutors.

Situating Dortmund within the Larger Refugee Context in Germany

In 2015, Dortmund was the fourth largest city in the state of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) and home to about half a million residents of whom 30 percent had a migrant background, and 13 percent did not carry a German passport (Council of Europe 2012: 4). In the 1960s and early 1970s, Dortmund became a destination for so-called guest workers from Turkey, Poland, Greece, Italy, and Morocco, who filled vacant jobs in coal mining and steel production plants; descendants of these workers still live in Dortmund

(Stadtportal Dortmund 2019a). Dortmund is, by all accounts, a multicultural city known for its ethnic restaurants, and it is featured in the Council of Europe’s Intercultural Cities Index (Council of Europe 2012).

The federal government assigns newly arriving refugees to the sixteen states following a quota system based on each state’s population numbers and tax revenues. The assigned quotas of refugees are recalculated every year but have remained relatively stable over time. In 2015, the states that were required to take the most refugees were NRW (21 percent), Bavaria (15.5 percent), Baden Württemberg (13 percent), Lower Saxony (9 percent), and Hessen (7 percent); all other eleven states divided up the remaining refugees, taking between 1 and 5 percent each (BAMF 2016). In other words, NRW is a state with a substantial pre-existing migrant population that has also been receiving the largest “share” of refugees in Germany. In 2015, Dortmund was asked to accommodate 215 refugees per week—whereas in 2012, they were allotted 333 for the entire year (Stadtportal Dortmund 2019b).

For most of the state’s post–World War II history, NRW has been governed by the center-left party, the Social Democrats (SPD). Hannelore Kraft was the SPD state minister in 2015, heading the state parliament in a coalition with the Green Party on a pro-environment, pro-immigrant platform. In 2015, Dortmund’s mayor also belonged to the SPD. Yet Dortmund has also been a hub of right-wing extremism for decades (Smale 2014). According to Dortmund’s police chief, five murders, including three murders of police officers, have been linked to neo-Nazis in Dortmund since 2000, and neo-Nazi attacks notably increased after 2012 (Cottrell 2012; Deutsche Welle 2015). The neo-Nazi party Die Rechte had a representative elected to Dortmund’s city council in 2014 and to six other city councils in other parts of NRW (Smale 2014). In February 2015, neo-Nazis rallied outside a Dortmund refugee center, chanting anti-foreigner slogans with burning torches in hand (Deutsche Welle 2015). Journalists and bloggers covering Dortmund’s neo-Nazi scene received death threats (Borrud 2015). Germany’s World War II history and culpability in mass murder and mass displacement make the early twenty-first-century manifestation of right-wing populism particularly troubling for many contemporary Germans. Some of them cite this contemporary extremism as the reason behind their political activism in support of refugees (Karakayalı 2019: 204–8; Pearlman 2017: 316).

How a Tuesday Demonstration Became a Fifty-Three-Day Protest Camp

In order for one hundred protesters to gather outside BAMF on 9 June 2015, and for about fifty protesters to continue protesting at any given time for

fifty-three days subsequently, groundwork had to be laid, and most of it was done via social media, especially Facebook and Twitter (#protestBAMFdo). Syrian refugees who had submitted their asylum applications in Dortmund had been assigned to shared living spaces, such as former military barracks or schools, in order to wait for their asylum notification from BAMF. One young man, Fadi Khatib, who had escaped escalating violence in Aleppo, and whose wife was living in exile in Turkey, became impatient with waiting (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). He kept hearing from friends in other states in Germany that they had obtained their residency notifications though they had submitted their paperwork after his. Via Facebook, he reached out to Syrians in and around Dortmund, many similarly anxious and frustrated, and collected their names on a petition that urged a quicker review of their files. He sent the petition to the BAMF headquarters in Nürnberg and received no response. So he went a step further and applied for a protest permit with the Dortmund police to hold a demonstration outside Dortmund's BAMF office on 9 June. Once his protest was logged, Fadi posted an invitation to all refugees worried about their applications pending with BAMF to join him. Sakher Al-Mohamad, originally from Homs, who had fled after Syrian authorities arrested and questioned him for his political activities at Damascus University, responded to Fadi's invitation as soon as he saw it on 1 June. With his background in political activism at Damascus University, Sakher quickly became a co-organizer.

Both Fadi and Sakher are university-educated, fluent in English, and social media savvy. Sakher had participated in demonstrations in Syria and understood that it was important to formulate clear, comprehensible demands: the timely processing of asylum petitions was the main concern, so that refugees with families could petition to bring them to Germany via legal channels. Moreover, a pressing issue for some was the real possibility of being sent back to the country where they had crossed into the European Union. Designed to prevent "asylum shopping," the so-called Dublin Regulation stipulates that an asylum claim be processed by the state of first entry into the European Union (Angeloni and Spano 2018: 477). If any fingerprints had been taken in Hungary or Italy, the asylum applicant was told to return to the country to apply for asylum there. The reality was that these countries were unable to process and provide for the large numbers of refugees who kept arriving every day. Nobody who had made it to Germany wanted to return to Hungary or Italy.

When BAMF officials showed no willingness to yield to the refugees' demands, the protesters decided to move from their geographically isolated suburban location across the street from the BAMF offices to a central plaza near the main train station in downtown Dortmund on 12 June (Bandermann 2015b). Fadi, Sakher, and a member of the left-wing Die Linke party who had offered her support went to the police station to file the required

paperwork to continue the protest in the new location. With their extended permit, the protesters installed sleeping bags under tarps affixed to trees in the plaza. The Dortmund police protected the camp around the clock against expected neo-Nazi attacks (Bandermann 2015b). Already on the evening of the first day, they made five arrests among a group of twenty neo-Nazis who showed up to disrupt the camp (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). Subsequent attempts of neo-Nazi sympathizers to approach the protest camp were spotted and thwarted by the police before violence could erupt. Throughout June and July, increasing numbers of asylum approvals reached Syrian applicants waiting in Dortmund, whether or not they were part of the public protest. Via social networks, they shared the good news with each other, which further bolstered the resolve of those still waiting. Initially all those who did not have their fingerprints taken in other countries received temporary residency permits for three years; those with fingerprints elsewhere had to keep waiting.

The protest ended on 31 July because the police were no longer willing to protect them around the clock, insisting that they protest weekly and during daytime hours instead. Meanwhile the protest organizers had decided to increase the visibility of their activism by setting up a new camp in the capital, Berlin. On their last day in Dortmund, the participants organized a march from the center of Dortmund back to the BAMF office, where the action had started, to submit the nearly 5,000 signatures of support that had been collected by that time. BAMF officials met the protesters outside their office, and they announced that they would review once more fifty already denied asylum petitions from protest participants who had their fingerprints taken in Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, or Spain. The officials contacted Sakher by phone several days later to ask him to collect proof of extenuating circumstances pertinent to their review. With the help of Majed, who was able to write German fluently, Sakher collected, translated, and submitted the requested paperwork while both were on their way to Berlin. Within a few months after the protest had ended, the last Syrian protesters obtained their residency permits, and all were eventually able to bring their families to Germany (Bandermann and Thiel 2015).

Refugee Protesters between Inclusion and Exclusion

In what follows, I argue that the Dortmund protest camp was a space of inclusion for Syrian refugees within state and national structures of exclusion. Together with their local supporters, the Syrian refugees engaged in the “bone-hard work” (*knochenharte Arbeit*, according to Robert) of camping out in a public square exposed to the elements for nearly eight weeks. They organized and kept unified a group of diverse refugees and German

supporters. That work deserves to be recognized, as well as analyzed. Refugees need to be recognized as persons exerting great efforts while living through times of great uncertainty. Forced to wait for notification by BAMF, the federal agency adjudicating German asylum law, the refugees became agents on the local level, leaving their assigned refugee reception centers to pursue public activism in downtown Dortmund. They exercised agency by setting up and running a protest camp with the approval of the police and the support of local pro-refugee networks. They exercised agency by reshaping the discourse about refugees, pointing out the dangers as well as the moral hazard of waiting for asylum approval. Finally, the protest camp generated a community of solidarity and common purpose among the Syrian and German protesters who waited together for fifty-three days in a public plaza. Through their protest work, the refugees, who were excluded from German society by virtue of their refugee status, were nevertheless included in an actual protest community alongside members of German society who supported their right to remain. More than that, the protest resulted in temporary residency permits for the Syrian protesters, who thereby obtained legal inclusion in Germany.

Setting Up and Running the Camp

A protest camp does not simply emerge; it must be planned and built, no matter how basic the equipment and supplies. Also, any protest community must follow certain rules that make living together for an extended period of time possible, including both rules they make and agree on and those imposed by society at large. While the 2015 protest camp in Dortmund was a grassroots phenomenon, it benefited from institutional protection and support. Initiated by a diverse group of Syrian and German volunteers, the movement had the approval of local police authorities and the support of local political actors. Fadi and Sakher created an informal camp council including Syrian refugees and German supporters who met to discuss issues and make decisions about day-to-day meal plans, water supplies, cleanup, and public outreach. Members of the committee were in regular contact with the dispatched members of the police force who protected them around the clock. The German volunteers who joined the political action helped mediate interactions with the Dortmund police. They also reached out to store owners in the square to obtain their support and provided the necessary personal connections to local refugee support organizations. Importantly, they agreed among themselves that they would not become decision-makers during the protest and that no German political group should be allowed to instrumentalize the protest to advance its own agenda.

Not surprisingly, the police wanted order in the protest camp and stipulated the number of people who were allowed to sleep outside every night,

as well as the sleeping arrangements: no more than fifty people under open tarps rather than inside closed tents. They had to adhere to a permitted level of noise and maintain sanitary conditions, including trash disposal and a toilet. The police were adamant that without the latter, nobody was allowed to spend the night outside the BAMF offices. It took several calls and pleas, and in the evening, Refugees Welcome Dortmund drove up with a truck and a portable toilet, thereby saving the first day. The police officers stayed on hand and responded effectively when individuals or groups hostile to refugees approached the camp, as happened repeatedly during the fifty-three days. The refugees decided that they wanted to follow the rules imposed by the German police, thereby demonstrating that they wanted to become citizens of Germany who obeyed the law. The German supporters confirmed the cordial relationship between police and protesters—as well as occasional friendly soccer matches on the plaza between some members of the police force and the refugees.

The protesters needed access to water to wash, drink, and cook; they needed electricity to charge their cell phones; and they needed food to eat. They needed blankets, tarps, and sleeping bags. In the absence of storage options, these basic life necessities needed to arrive at the camp at the time they were needed. The supply chain was organized via Facebook and Twitter #protestBAMFdo, with Sakher in charge of the former and Robert and Jonas in charge of the latter. Refugee rights groups across Dortmund, high school and university students, as well as individual, concerned citizens responded to posts by the protesters (Semenova 2015). Within an hour of a posting on #protestBAMFdo that the camp needed an item, it was dropped off at the camp. This efficiency was only possible because the protesters could tap into a long-established network of progressive, left-leaning groups who had experience organizing protests and counterprotests in Dortmund. Examples of mundane but important local support for the protest include a nearby flower shop that provided buckets of water for morning hygiene, an individual with a diesel generator who stopped by at night to allow protesters to recharge their phones, and Dortmund residents who offered their cars to run errands. A cooperatively run event space called Nordpol offered their kitchen facility to cook lunches, and the Abu Baker Mosque in northern Dortmund coordinated and provided most of the meals during the Muslim month of Ramadan. For the fifty-three days of the protest, at least fifty protesters a day received the provisions they needed. Sakher explained that they had so many offers for food that they could have kept the protest running for a year.

Anthropologists who have looked at refugee camps have argued that while camp spaces separate refugees from citizens in host countries, thereby perpetuating their exclusion, they additionally contain “zones of indistinction between exclusion and inclusion” (Oesch 2017: 110). Oesch (2017), in

his work on Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, remarked how neoliberal logic seeks to incorporate refugees as consumers and autonomous, productive subjects within Jordanian society at large. Other scholars have shown that even noncamp, urban spaces impose significant limitations on refugees (Peteet 2016: 217; Sanyal 2018: 74). A protest camp of the kind organized in Dortmund further complicates our understanding of a “refugee camp,” since it was organized and run by refugees, officially allowed and protected by the Dortmund police, and provisioned by Dortmund citizens in solidarity with the refugees. The protesters who stayed in the camp had rooms and beds in refugee centers where they could have slept, but they chose to sleep in sleeping bags on the pavement. Their objective was to be in plain sight in the center of a German city. By increasing the visibility of their ongoing, uncertain condition—their waiting—they highlighted the urgency of their demands.

Shaping the Protest Message

Organizing camp logistics was one thing, but organizing how the protest would be communicated to the public was another. Finding consensus among the participants was difficult because protesters came from different backgrounds: not only did the Syrian men belong to different generations, but a minority was Kurdish, the majority Arab; most men were Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, but of varying degrees of piety and daily practice; two individuals had Yazidi and Assyrian Christian backgrounds, respectively; almost half of the men had completed some level of higher education, but the other half were shopkeepers, tradespersons, or peasants. They came from every region of Syria, from Daraa in the south to Kurdish border towns in the north. Some of them had arrived in Germany without getting fingerprinted along the way, while others had submitted asylum paperwork in another EU country. Some were still waiting for answers to their initial asylum applications; others had already received rejections and had gone into appeal; and some had obtained notifications of extradition. Both Fadi and Sakher obtained their residency early on, yet they remained with the protest camp until the end out of a feeling of solidarity. What unified the group was their opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the constant worry about family members left behind. The families became the focus of their protest message: they were dying in Syria while the protesters were waiting for asylum adjudication in Dortmund.

This focus on family remaining in Syria was the outcome of extended discussions and disagreements among the protesters. For instance, while still outside the BAMF offices, one participant, Majed Morshed, a Syrian journalist who had been imprisoned four times for his critical writings about the regime, advocated that the refugees should go on a hunger strike to be



Figure 6.1. Dortmund Protest Banner: “We Are Waiting to Be Granted the Right to Stay, While Our Families in Syria Are Waiting for Death,” 2015. Photo by Robert Rutkowski, used with permission.¹

sure of media attention. Sakher and others disagreed, saying they would antagonize the public and create health emergencies in Dortmund that would detract from the war in Syria. So Majed later explained to the press that this approach was “too negative” and that the protesters “did not want to create any problems” (Bandermann 2015a). By focusing on the need for speedier asylum decisions and the risks their families faced in Syria, the protest message shifted away from the Syrian refugees themselves, who maintained that they were already in a safe place, and brought their parents, wives, and children who remained in danger in Syria front and center. The asylum they asked for was not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Once in their downtown Dortmund protest location, this message was communicated via large, simple, but compelling banners that were aimed at passersby. Three of the largest read, “Please help us save our families from dying,” “Our future is in your hands,” and “We are waiting to be granted the right to stay, while our families in Syria are waiting for death” (see figure 6.1).

Waiting creates urgency. For the protesters waiting in Dortmund, this situation was literally a matter of life and death. Making that connection visible allowed the Syrian refugees and their German supporters to place a moral burden on those institutions that made them wait. In other words, their protest action started “a debate about what really cannot wait” (Olson 2015: 523). By formulating their demand for residency in such compelling language, they also rejected being seen as second-class citizens waiting “for

the mercy of a residency permit [*die Gnade eines Aufenthaltstitels*]” (Refugee Welcome Dortmund 2015). Instead, they cast themselves as individuals with rights to make legitimate demands. Finally, by making German bureaucracy the target of their protest, they could also be assured of sympathy from German citizens at large, many of whom had their own experiences of being stuck in cumbersome bureaucratic processes.

Building Solidarity through Active Waiting

For fifty-three days inside the camp, Syrians and Germans mingled in the plaza and shared stories, laughter, and tears. They suffered through extreme heat and torrential rains. Together, protesters did physical exercises in the mornings and played soccer and volleyball, at times with the police. They broke the fast together during the Muslim month of Ramadan. The protest created new bonds of solidarity, enabled by cell phone technology, which rallied the people behind their screens to show up in person at the protest camp, drop off food or water, help cook or clean, or share a meal with them. The protesters established close relationships with local communities who supported them: for instance, Nordpol, a cooperative event space that hosted Refugees Welcome fundraisers, Antifa cafés, queer pub nights, and punk concerts, and the Abu Baker Mosque in a northern Dortmund neighborhood, which serves a predominantly Moroccan community. On two particularly hot days in July, the Dortmund fire department sent a truck that hosed the protesters down, providing much needed cooling relief. Dortmund’s existing communities dedicated to pro-refugee activism helped significantly, but so did many curious passersby on their way to the train station. Once the protest camp was in place in Dortmund, it engendered a broad range of practices of solidarity among diverse Germans and Syrians and among the refugees themselves.

Syrian protesters told me that they remembered the strong feeling of solidarity among Syrians from different regions, ethnicities, and faiths, which in itself was a powerful outcome of the protest. No matter where in Syria they were from, Mohamadali told me, “in Dortmund we were brothers.” Some of the Muslim refugees prayed together daily and fasted during Ramadan; others did not partake in religious rituals, although they identified as Muslim. All broke the fast together in the evenings, inviting passersby to join them (Kolle 2015). Kurdish and Arab refugees discussed their diverging views on a future Syria with each other until the early morning hours, and often disagreed. The more religious protesters disagreed with the more secular ones about the role of religion in postwar Syria. All of that difference was an open and accepted part of daily life in the camp. At times conversations were heated, and Sakher said that a few protesters left the camp and

never returned, presumably over disagreements. Given the many points of disagreement, it is therefore even more remarkable that the protest camp lasted as long as it did.

Germans learned about Ramadan during the month-long Muslim holiday, and some of them learned to cook Middle Eastern food. They learned from those Syrian refugees who spoke English or German about the uprising against the Syrian government and the experience of being a refugee. Some Syrians put together a short film about the origins of the Syrian uprising and the beginning of the refugee crises and screened it twice weekly at 10:00 pm to educate the public about why they were there. Since their cell phones allowed them contact with relatives in Syria in real time, protesters in Dortmund's train station plaza shared with their German supporters how much they missed their families. One day, all the protesters witnessed as one refugee's house was bombed in Aleppo. Another protester learned in Dortmund's plaza that his wife and daughter had been killed in an attack. The protesters rallied around the man with all the empathy they could muster and shared his grief. It is these intense emotional moments, some of the German supporters told me, that they will never forget.

As has been observed in other solidarity actions with war refugees across Germany, the Dortmund protest in 2015 elicited German responses that followed a less hierarchical, more empowering script for humanitarian activism (Schiffauer 2019: 299). This idea of working alongside refugees, rather than exposing and exploiting their positions of dependence, differs markedly from the more legalistic humanitarianism practiced in Germany three decades earlier, when asylum officers faced a different group of Arab war refugees: Palestinians escaping refugee camps that had become targets during Lebanon's 1975–90 civil war (Volk 2016). In Dortmund, a new form of intentional egalitarian engagement between those with cultural and financial capital and those without was implemented in daily camp interactions. Especially the Syrian refugees, who at that time had little control over the direction of their lives, said that the protest camp gave them a sense of real belonging in Germany.

Conclusion

All Syrian interlocutors emphasized that they could never have done this protest without German support, and that they felt overwhelmed at times by the extent and sincerity of the positive responses they received. Jonas, one of the German supporters who was part of the camp for its entirety, said his main regret—five years later—was that the protesters did not push harder to obtain even more rights for refugees at a time when German citizens demonstrated so much solidarity and German politicians could be swayed

to open Germany's borders. Much has happened since the summer of 2015: the "welcome culture" that defined that year has become muted, while right-wing parties have entered national and state parliaments on anti-immigrant platforms (e.g., Langenbacher 2018; Triadafilopoulos 2019). For instance, in North Rhine Westphalia, the anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to obtain seats in the state's parliament after the 2017 elections, when the Christian Democrats (CDU) replaced the Social Democrats (SPD) at the helm of state power. Meanwhile, conservative media outlets contributed to a climate of fear by overreporting incidences of violence, such as the New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne (e.g., Lalami 2016; Kosnick 2019; Weber 2016). A "welcome culture" in a host country, in other words, needs to be built by engaged citizens, and it requires sustained effort to keep it active (Schiffauer et al. 2017). In light of the successful outcomes of the Dortmund protest, such as the residency permits obtained and families unified, the cost of the disappearance of such a culture is high.

A discussion of Syrian refugees' agency-in-waiting should not lead us to conclude that refugees possess unlimited agency to determine their fates. They do not. BAMF officials determine whether refugees can stay or must leave the country. Refugees cannot vote and cannot influence German elections. The stereotyping of refugees continues in some parts of German society. Yet none of these sobering facts mean that restrictive asylum measures are the inevitable response of a nation-state faced with a significant influx of refugees. Politicians, just as citizens and refugees, have options of political engagement inside the host country, as demonstrated by Gifford (this volume) and Bune (this volume). Refugees can be agents within the limitations that have been constructed around them. Sherry Ortner (1994: 403) famously proclaimed that "history is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make—within, of course, the very powerful constraints of the system within which they are operating." This chapter is, at the most basic level, about history-making refugees and their supporters, who successfully challenged limits and barriers put before them through sustained and inclusive political action.

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Lucia Volk is professor of international relations and director of Middle East and Islamic Studies at San Francisco State University. A political anthropologist, her research focuses on the linkages and relationships between states and diverse ethno-religious communities. Volk is editor of *The Middle East in the World: An Introduction* (2015) and author of *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (2010). Volk holds a PhD in anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University.

Note

1. This picture, and many others, can be found on Robert Rutkowski's blog: <https://robert-rutkowski.de/das-protestcamp-von-refugees-dortmund/>.

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