4. POLITICIZING SOLIDARITY: The Contested Political Meanings and Effects of Refugee Support

4.1. "We are also Political Volunteers!"

On a Saturday in March 2015, I attended one of the regular conferences of the Refugee Council of Baden-Württemberg ("Flüchtlingsrat Baden-Württemberg"), the non-governmental umbrella association of citizens' initiatives at the level of the state. Its regular meetings in Stuttgart, the capital city of the southern German state, take place every three months and are open to all interested. They aim to facilitate networking, information exchange and discussions among those supporting refugees across Baden-Württemberg. Participants attend workshops from morning until late afternoon, listen to 'expert talks', swap news and socialize during lunch and coffee breaks. Around the long summer of migration, these conferences were full to bursting, with around 200 persons crammed into a room at a church-run conference centre, the majority of them seemingly well past the age of fifty.

In the late afternoon of the conference in March 2015, an announcement by the steering committee of the Refuge Council caused a heated debate among the participants. In its closing plenary, it informed that, due to the increased budget provided by the state government for the year 2015, the Council aimed to implement new activities and programmes in the months to follow. One of these new activities caused the anger of numerous audience members: the steering committee's plan to implement a new training scheme for people supporting refugees across the state. For instance, a woman, introducing herself as a pastor working with refugees in a small town, openly questioned the value of such a training scheme, problematizing that "at the

moment, there is a flood of trainings for people supporting refugees" (Field notes: 7/3/2015). A second woman commented that she was worried about the tendency that governmental actors and social welfare organizations were increasingly competing to provide seminars and trainings to volunteers in her town. Another participant then stated that such trainings had "clear preconceptions of what volunteers were allowed to do and what they were not allowed to do" (Field notes: 7/3/2015). Joining the debate, a man in his sixties argued that what volunteers really needed were seminars on asylum law and policies, whereas existing training schemes focussed merely on practical aspects of helping. Such seminars on the legal and political asylum system, he claimed, were undesirable to and sometimes even hindered by governmental actors because "they don't want educated volunteers!" (Field notes: 7/3/2015). During this heated discussion, I could clearly sense that many of the present volunteers were deeply critical of the rising number of governmental interventions in their role and conduct (see Chapter 3). After several minutes of debate, the head of the Refugee Council's steering committee eventually took over again. In an attempt to allay the growing anger among the audience, she argued: "The decision as to who trains whom should be made first and foremost by volunteers themselves!" (ibid.). She acknowledged that the discussion touched upon key questions for practices of refugee support, namely "What is a volunteer?" and "Do volunteers only provide bikes and clothing or do they also give legal advice to asylum seekers?" For the steering committee, the latter formed an essential part of refugee support, which is why the Refugee Council's new training scheme would include education on asylum policies and law. In a loud, confident voice, she then proclaimed: *"We are also political volunteers!"* (Field notes: 7/3/2015). The audience burst into applause.

This intriguing moment is a striking illustration of how, in the course of my field research, the distinction between forms of political action and ostensibly 'apolitical' humanitarian volunteering became increasingly blurry and untenable. Although governmental actors put much effort into promoting forms of volunteering they deemed beneficial to the governance of migration, many of the volunteers voiced a clear will to remain independent, to stay informed on asylum politics and law, and to oppose governmental actors when they perceived the necessity to do so (see also Fleischmann 2017). I also witnessed numerous instances during my field research when volunteers actively intervened in order to influence political decision-making processes, voiced dissent towards existing asylum laws and governmental policies or openly

contested them through letters, campaigns or other more hidden forms of protest. While some claimed to be "apolitical", others acknowledged that they were "political volunteers", as illustrated in my observations at the conference of the Refugee Council. At the same time, many were quite uncomfortable with being classified as "left-wing" or "activist". And yet, some of their practices and positions were actually not that distinct from those of self-declared political activists. In her telling account on *The Politics of Volunteering*, Eliasoph (2013: 43) notes that 'volunteering' and 'political activism' are often thought of as distinct types of action, while they actually "blend and separate in many ways". Rather than being mutually exclusive, she argues, they frequently go hand-in-hand as a "mix of hands-on and abstract involvement" (ibid.: 61). Many times, she asserts, those who start out as 'volunteers' can also turn into 'activists' over time.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the political dimensions of refugee support. My aim is to investigate how the manifold practices of refugee support that emerged around the long summer of migration were invested with political meanings. These political meanings were often situated *in-between* more radical calls for equal rights and mere complicity in the governance of migration. In what follows, I interpret practices of refugee support as *political* when they – intentionally or unintentionally – challenge the exclusions and discriminations of refugees and asylum seekers in migration societies and aim to bring about change towards what those engaging in relationships of solidarity consider a 'better' alternative. Such political forms of refugee support, I will argue, do not always form in direct opposition to the state nor do they necessarily emanate from individuals or groups that openly identify themselves as "political" or "activist". Rather, they often arise out of the impulse to change the status quo and to build a different alternative through hands-on interventions. In what follows, I thus explore the alternative visions of citizenship and belonging that were articulated and enacted through practices of refuge support.

I am also interested in moments when individuals and their practices become *politicized*, i.e. moments when actors try to shape the social imaginaries of refugee solidarity in ways that open up political possibilities and induce change towards a 'better society'. In the area of my field research, the Refugee Council played an important role in the *politicization* of those who became active as volunteers around the long summer of migration. For many, this non-governmental organization served as a key contact point and source of information. Its conferences, which I regularly attended between

late 2014 and mid-2016, provided volunteers with an important platform for discussing problems and formulating positions relating to the most recent developments in the governance of refugees and asylum seekers. It should be acknowledged, however, that these conferences may have attracted those volunteers from across the state who were already more politically informed than others. Nonetheless, almost all of the citizens' initiatives I spoke to in the course of my field research considered the Refugee Council to be a central source of information. Besides organizing conferences, the Refugee Council also kept citizens informed about and expressed views on the latest local, national or European developments via regular email newsletters, its magazine and a website. In addition, it provided legal advice to volunteers, for instance via a counselling hotline, and also conducted lobbying work, representing the interests and concerns of citizens' initiatives at the level of the state government.

During my field research, I also came across instances of left-wing activist groups from across Germany intervening in a politicizing way in the practices and discourses of refugee support that emerged around the long summer of migration. Many of these groups had been committed to refugees for years, advocating for equal rights and freedom of movement (see Sasse et al. 2014). In the second chapter of this book, I illustrated how, in the small town of Ellwangen, a group of left-wing antifascist activists organized an ostensibly apolitical "solidarity march" in order to transmit their political worldviews and voice dissent towards governmental actors. I came across several similar instances when political activists aimed to influence the social imaginaries of newly committed volunteers or forged alliances with individuals who did not necessarily regard their actions as "political".

The investigation that follows draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between late 2014 and mid-2016 in the southern German state of Baden-Württemberg as well as in other localities across the country. I draw on interviews with volunteers and activists, on participant observations at conferences that brought together people engaging in refugee support, and analyse written documents such as flyers and websites. Of particular importance for the purpose of this chapter are my observations at the conferences of the Refugee Council Baden-Württemberg. Through these events, I gained insights into the discussions that developed between volunteers at the time.

The following chapter is divided into five parts. I start off by scrutinizing my analytical perspective on a *politics of presence*. With this terminology I grasp the political possibilities that unfold when alternative visions of society and

belonging in migration societies are formulated and enacted, alternatives that revolve around the criterion of co-presence. These alternative visions, however, proved to be highly contested and debated among those who supported refugees in the area of my field research. As I will illustrate in sections three to five, people held differing and ambivalent standpoints in relation to a demand for equal rights (section three), a demand for a right to stay (section four), and a demand for a right to migrate (section five). In the concluding section, I summarize my findings on the political dimensions of refugee support around the long summer of migration.

4.2.   Politics of Presence: Enacting Alternative Visions of Society

For the purpose of investigating the political dimensions of refugee support, I suggest to step back from clear-cut distinctions between ostensibly 'apolitical' forms of humanitarian volunteering and political activism. Instead, I look at practices of refugee support through the analytical perspective of a *politics of presence*. With this terminology I refer to the political possibilities that unfold when alternative visions of society and belonging in migration societies are formulated and enacted; alternatives to the exclusionary and discriminating effects of national citizenship that became increasingly pressing around the long summer of migration. I argue that these alternative visions centrally built on *presence*, i.e. the material act of being there, as the defining criterion for social membership. Nevertheless, as I will outline in more detail later on, these alternatives were highly contested among different groups and individuals and oscillated between a radical call for the universal inclusion of all those present on the ground to more conditional and hesitant views. In this section, I outline the conceptual contours of such a perspective on *politics of presence* in more detail. In the first part, I draw on works in the field of critical citizenship studies. In the second, I look in more detail at how 'presence' functioned as a (nonetheless contested) mode of belonging during the long summer of migration.

4.2.1.   The Deficiencies of National Citizenship

Since the 18th century, the nation-state has formed the primary locus for political belonging and it still determines how we think about the political today (see Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). In more traditional understandings, na-