

## 2. MOBILIZING SOLIDARITY: Building Local ‘Welcome Culture’ through a Moral Imperative to Act

---

### 2.1. The Notion of a ‘Welcome Culture’ and its Mobilizing Effects

Peter Bauer greeted me in his office with a heavy Swabian dialect and a friendly smile when I met him for an interview in April 2015. The grey-haired man in his fifties had been working for the local authority of Ellwangen for several decades. Shortly before I met him for an interview, he was internally relocated to the newly established office of “Refugee Commissioner” (“Flüchtlingsbeauftragter”), meaning that he took on responsibility for all matters concerning the reception and accommodation of asylum seekers in the town. Such offices were introduced in many places in the area of my field research from 2014 onwards, when the arrival of asylum seekers increased and received growing public attention. During my fieldwork in Ellwangen, the small town on the edge of Baden-Württemberg that became a locus of my field research in 2015 and 2016, Peter Bauer was a central contact person, one I met several times to discuss the recent developments surrounding the reception of asylum seekers in the town.

At the first of our meetings in April 2015, I questioned him about the attitudes amongst local residents towards the rising number of asylum seekers arriving in the town. He replied that citizens had shown an extraordinary level of compassion and a remarkably great willingness to “help” the newcomers. Ellwangen, he asserted, presented a particularly successful example for the local implementation of a “welcome culture”. He put this as follows:

“People simply want to help the refugees and that’s something I think is really great here in Ellwangen [...] there are so many people volunteering because they see how bad the situation is in their country of origin and because

they see that, here in Ellwangen, they have support. And I always say that the *welcome culture* really means something here.”<sup>1</sup> (Interview with Peter Bauer: 16/4/2015, emphasis added)

What remained unspoken during our first conversation, however, was the fact that the arrival of asylum seekers was also accompanied by a remarkable rise in hostile attitudes amongst residents. In late 2014, a new Facebook group protesting against the reception of asylum seekers in Ellwangen gained thousands of members within a few weeks. And yet, Ellwangen’s Refugee Commissioner presented the town as a particularly positive example for the creation of a local ‘welcome culture’.

Throughout 2015, the notion of a German ‘welcome culture’ circulated widely across the media and among the public (see for instance *Die Zeit*: 12/9/2015)<sup>2</sup>. In a nutshell, this vague catchphrase denoted a generally positive or supportive attitude towards the reception of asylum seekers among German citizens (cf. Hamann & Karakayali 2016; Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Karakayali 2017; Sutter 2019). It presented German society as being characterized by a remarkable level of open-mindedness, hospitality and compassion for those in search of refuge and asylum. In the course of my field research in southern Germany, I soon realized that this idea of a ‘welcome culture’ was also evident at a local level, where it played out in manifold practices of refugee support and was appropriated by a wide range of actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers (cf. Turinsky & Nowicka 2019). Many people emphasized that their town, neighbourhood or village represented a particularly positive example for the creation of a ‘welcome culture’.

In this empirical chapter, I investigate how the notion of a ‘welcome culture’ played out in a specific local context. Taking the small Swabian town of Ellwangen as a case study, I provide insights into the practices of refugee support that emerged around the long summer of migration, illustrating how they became embedded in social imaginaries that framed the reception of asylum seekers in humanitarian parameters. Through a multi-perspective view,

---

1 Translation by LF. German original: “Man will den Flüchtlingen einfach helfen und das find ich einfach bei uns in Ellwangen klasse [...] da gibt es einfach so viele Leute, die sich sozial engagieren, einfach weil sie sehen, wie schlecht es denen im Heimatland geht und weil sie einfach sehen, hier in Ellwangen haben sie Unterstützung und ich sag immer, die Willkommenskultur wird hier einfach groß geschrieben.“

2 See: <http://www.zeit.de/2015/37/willkommenskultur-deutschland-fluechtlinge-zeitge> ist (last accessed 1/8/2020).

I scrutinize how practices and discourses of refugee support were mobilized, appropriated and shaped by different actors and individuals. This will demonstrate that, on the one hand, the notion of a ‘welcome culture’ opened up political possibilities to insert change and transformation towards a different alternative. On the other hand, it functioned as a means for governmental actors to take hold of committed citizens and to shape their conduct in ways that benefitted the governments’ aims in the reception of asylum seekers.

My local case study of Ellwangen should be read as an extraordinary and intensified example of the developments that unfolded in the course of the long summer of migration. The town sparked my interest in early 2015, when it became the focal point of political and public debates surrounding the reception of asylum seekers in Baden-Württemberg. Shortly before, the government of this south German state had announced its plans to open a new initial reception centre (‘Landeserstaufnahmestelle’) – or “LEA” as my interlocutors called it for short – in the abandoned military barracks of Ellwangen (Baden-Württemberg: 2/10/2014)<sup>3</sup>. The government chose these premises since they could be easily converted into accommodation for a projected 500 to 1,000 asylum seekers, which equated to a capacity of several thousand processed asylum seekers over the course of a year. During the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, however, these numbers were easily exceeded and the facility was hopelessly overcrowded, hosting more than 5,000 asylum seekers at a time. Within a short period, this small town with a population of 25,000 thus came to play a major role in the reception of asylum seekers not only in Baden-Württemberg but in Germany as a whole. Initial reception centres across the country fall under the jurisdiction of the German *Länder*, Germany’s 16 federal states, which in the case of the LEA Ellwangen meant Baden-Württemberg. These facilities served as the initial point of contact for asylum seekers entering the country; it was where they registered their asylum claim, where they received a health screening and where they lived during the first weeks after their arrival, until their transfer to a shared accommodation facility (‘Gemeinschaftsunterkunft’) in one of the districts of the federal state or their relocation to another federal state<sup>4</sup> (cf. Nettelbladt & Boano 2019: 81).

3 See: <https://www.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemitteilung/pid/plaene-fuer-landeserstaufnahmestelle-in-ellwangen-vorgestellt/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

4 Asylum seekers within Germany are distributed among the 16 federal states according to the “Königsteiner Schlüssel” (literally “Königstein Key”). This distribution quota is calculated on an annual basis and determines the share of asylum seekers received

The decision to establish the new LEA in Ellwangen was taken at short notice. In mid-2014, the state government of Baden-Württemberg came under increasing pressure to restructure and extend its modes of reception.<sup>5</sup> Around this time, the LEA in Karlsruhe, previously the central reception facility for asylum seekers in Baden-Württemberg, became the subject of media controversy. With the rapidly rising number of asylum seekers since at least 2012, the facility had become hopelessly overcrowded, hosting up to 2,700 individuals at a time (see KA-News: 22/9/2014)<sup>6</sup>. Various media articles reported “chaos” at the facility, a “measles outbreak” among its inhabitants (Bild: 18/7/2014)<sup>7</sup>, people sleeping outside due to a lack of spare beds (see KA-News: 8/8/2014)<sup>8</sup>, and other examples of deteriorating conditions. Paradoxically, in the years prior to these reports, capacities for asylum seekers had been subject to strategic cutbacks, until, in late 2014, the state government announced plans to decentralize and extend its initial reception capacities in order to bring “urgently needed relief” to the Karlsruhe facility (Baden-Württemberg: 10/3/2015)<sup>9</sup>. One of these new reception centres opened its doors in Ellwangen in April 2015.

I visited the LEA in Ellwangen for the first time in May 2015, just a couple of days after its official inauguration. In the course of my field research the following year, I then returned to the town several times. I was thus able to observe the developments that occurred in Ellwangen before, during and after the long summer of migration. I conducted interviews with diverse actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers, including volunteers, local government representatives, a Catholic priest, employees of social welfare organizations, and the manager of the LEA. In addition, I attended various seminars

---

by each *Land* (see BAMF: 1/10/2016). These numbers are calculated based on the tax receipts and populations of the respective states. Accordingly, the state of Baden-Württemberg was allocated 12.9 per cent of all asylum seekers arriving in Germany in 2016 (*ibid.*).

- 5 This was illustrated in a discussion at the regional parliament on 17th July 2014.
- 6 See: <http://www.ka-news.de/region/karlsruhe/asyl-karlsruhe./LEA-Chaos-in-Karlsruhe-Es-geht-nicht-so-geordnet-zu-wie-es-sollte;art6066,1481005> (last accessed 1/8/2020).
- 7 <https://www.bild.de/regional/stuttgart/kritik-an-stuttgart-wegen-unterbringung-von-36872940.bild.html> (last accessed 1/8/2020).
- 8 See: <http://www.ka-news.de/region/karlsruhe/asyl-karlsruhe./Karlsruher-Fluechtlings-situation-Es-ist-eine-Katastrophe-was-gerade-ablaeuft;art6066,1452907> (last accessed 1/8/2020).
- 9 See: <https://www.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemittteilung/pid/land-organisiert-erstaufnahme-von-fluechtlingen-neu/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

and events in Ellwangen, such as internal meetings of LEA staff, public information events organized by the local authority, and a seminar for prospective volunteers at the LEA.

The following investigation into the contested solidarities that emerged in Ellwangen around the long summer of migration is structured in two parts. First, I analyse the march ‘Ellwangen Shows its Colours’ that took place in January 2015, when hundreds of residents took on the streets in support of the soon to be inaugurated LEA. Second, I scrutinize how the notion of a ‘welcome culture’ became translated into more structured and ongoing practices of refugee support: governmental actors and social welfare organizations mobilized local residents ‘to help’ as volunteers at the new initial reception facility. Both cases illustrate how the notion of a ‘welcome culture’ instilled a *moral imperative to act*, a perception that mobilized immediate practices of refugee support revolving around a humanitarian imaginary. These practices and discourses depicted the reception of asylum seekers in morally charged tones and generated feelings of compassion for those ‘in need’. And yet, they were not devoid of political and antipolitical meanings, something I will illustrate in the course of this chapter.

## 2.2. Humanitarian Dissent: The Solidarity March ‘Ellwangen Shows its Colours’

When the state government announced its plan to establish a new initial reception centre at the abandoned military barracks in Ellwangen in late 2014, right-wing groups were quick to stir up hostile attitudes among local residents. By the end of 2014, the newly founded Facebook group “No Asylum Seeker Accommodation at Reinhardt Barracks” (“Kein Asylheim in der Reinhardtskaserne”) boasted several thousand members. And even before the first asylum seeker had moved into the LEA, right-wing groups were organizing a demonstration that would signal their opposition to the decision to open a reception facility in the town.

In this tense atmosphere, two initiatives joined forces in order to counteract the rise of hostile attitudes in the town, arranging a “solidarity march” (“Solidaritätszug”) under the banner “Ellwangen Shows Its Colours” (“Ellwangen zeigt Flagge”). On a cold winter’s day in January 2015, more than 1,000 people marched through the streets of Ellwangen in order to signal their support for the reception of asylum seekers and the development of a local ‘wel-