

connects to an apt observation by Tyler (2013: 12f, emphasis in original), who writes: “It is often not events of protest [...] but rather the *storying* of revolts [...] which *matters* most”. Building on Tyler, I argue that the storying of migrant protests is of crucial importance not only to develop a more nuanced picture of how asylum seekers recast the terms of their reception but also to illustrate how humanitarian action might become a site of political possibilities. As I will illustrate in the following sections, the responses mediating the political agency of asylum seekers in the area of my field research ranged from *depoliticizing* to *politicizing* storyings; storyings that were contested among different actors. They either circumscribed the asylum seekers’ scope of agency and stripped their protests of political content or they translated them into meaningful political action. In the following sections, I investigate how different actors in Bad Waldsee (Section 3) and Offenburg (Section 4) made sense of and responded to moments when asylum seekers raised their own voice and made claims.

### 5.3. (De)politicizing the Meanings of Food: The Intermediation of Migrant Protest in Bad Waldsee

Food took on important political meanings during the protest in the small southern German town of Bad Waldsee. As part of their protests, the asylum seekers not only staged a march in the town centre and demanded to speak to local governmental representatives, they also engaged in a subsequent “hunger strike”. Almost all of the 170 inhabitants of the emergency reception centre collectively refused their food, which was supplied by an external service provider three times per day, in order to draw attention to the reasons for their protest. The collective refusal of food appeared to be a central means for asylum seekers in the area of my field research to voice discontent and to call attention to their problems. Many of the instances of protest in the first half of 2016 involved similar ‘hunger strikes’, although some of my interlocutors claimed that they were not ‘real’ hunger strikes since the asylum seekers continued eating food from elsewhere. In what follows, I provide insights into the storying of the protests in Bad Waldsee via different actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. I show how the refusal of food provided at their reception facility served as a means for asylum seekers to demonstrate political agency. Actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers, however, used it as a means to *depoliticize* the protests and to reduce them

to mere dissatisfaction with the food provided. To begin with, I outline how the asylum seekers took a public stand as claims-making subjects by submitting a written appeal, albeit their requests were largely ignored in the wake of the protests.

### 5.3.1. The Unheard Requests of the Protesting Asylum Seekers

“Here is our request: we are the refugees here in the city hall in Bad Waldsee and we want you to look after these requests and to help us if you can do this and to solve our problems and reveal us from our suffering and we ask you for mercy and humanity as a human with consciousness. We thank you very much with our love and our respect. And at the end we write our complaint which we want to explain and this complaint is against the officers, that are responsible directly for the refugees in this city hall and their names are Simone Fischer, Michael König, Annette Braun<sup>1</sup> and other names ... By the way, these officers which have their names written, they give us no help, they do not do their duties and they spend the time smoking, drinking café and tea, they make private phone calls during the job time and by the way, when we ask them about anything, they give us no answers and they answer us with unclear answers and they don't help us and they say to us, they are busy and say we don't really know. And maybe they would say we are not responsible about this or that and that they cannot help us and they give us false excuses and if we ask them about anything, their answer would be: they don't know. And they treat us badly and they do not care or take our needs seriously. We are always looking for somebody to hear us, to solve our problems, but unfortunately, we found nobody. They treat us in a bad way, as if we are prisoners and when they ask us to do something, they do it impolite and they just give us orders to do or not to do and they say to us bad words and unrespectable words that hurt our feelings.” (Appeal by protesting asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee: March 2016; English original)

My interlocutor Malik Hamdan read the above from a small, hand-written sheet of paper. It was the appeal protesting asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee handed over to local governmental representatives in the hope they would address their reasons for protesting. I interviewed Malik Hamdan and two other protesting asylum seekers in March 2016, shortly after they had staged

---

1 The names mentioned in the appeal have been changed.

their protests in the town. Clearly, they were unwilling to accept the conditions of their reception and instead sought to alter them by making various complaints. The primary reason for the asylum seekers to protest appeared to be a discontent with the management staff at the emergency reception centre. They were thoroughly unhappy with the behaviour of those they considered “responsible directly” for their reception, namely the management staff employed by the social welfare organization Die Johanniter. As was often the case, the district council, which was officially in charge of the facility, had outsourced its management to a social welfare organization. The asylum seekers accused these employees of not doing their job properly, of not caring and of not taking the asylum seekers’ needs seriously. Instead of solving the problems of the asylum seekers, they refused “to help” and spent their time procrastinating.

This appeal, I would argue, illustrates how the asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee cast themselves as suffering victims and recipients of humanitarian help in the course of their protests. This is most obvious in the following phrase at the beginning of their appeal: “We want you to look after these requests and to help us if you can do this and to solve our problems and reveal us from our suffering and we ask you for mercy and humanity as a human with consciousness”. They thus ask the reader for “help”, while emphasizing their “suffering” and identifying themselves as subjects of care and compassion. Ticktin (2011) argues that an emphasis on the suffering body relegates asylum seekers to a non-political space. She puts this as follows:

“When *sans-papiers* [undocumented migrants in France] make claims based on their suffering bodies, they appeal not to a nation-state but to an understanding of humanity as a biological species, where suffering finds its universal measure in medical science.” (Ticktin 2011: 12)

This self-identification as suffering bodies is echoed by the appeal of the protesters in Bad Waldsee, asking for “humanity” and calling on the reader’s “consciousness”. The repeated expressions of gratitude in the appeal further reproduced the asylum seekers’ subjectivity as suffering victims and recipients of help. This also came across in my interview with three of the protesting asylum seekers, who recalled how they had adorned the banners they carried at the march to the town hall with printed photographs of Angela Merkel and expressions of gratitude. They explained this as follows:

LF: And what was on the posters? What did you write there?

Mohammed Gabri: Vielen Dank for Deutsch people (Ismail Abbas: for the Deutsche Regierung) and Vielen Dank for Gastfreundschaft.

LF: So you printed the picture of Angela Merkel in the library?

Mohammed Gabri: Yes, three. Two big and one small and we write 'Vielen Dank'.

Ismail Abbas: Ja.

LF: And why did you do this, write Vielen Dank?

Mohammed Gabri: It is Vielen Dank for the people here in Bad Waldsee, in Deutschland, for keeping us safe and Vielen Dank for being in Deutschland [giggles].

Ismail Abbas: To show the world that it is a peaceful protest, not protest with violence, not with bad things ... (Interview with Ismail Abbas, Mohammed Gabri and Malik Hamdan: 5/3/2016, English original)

My interlocutors thus felt a need to say “thank you” to German citizens and to the German government in order to demonstrate that it was a “peaceful protest”. This echoes something works on humanitarianism have often outlined, namely that the ostensible beneficiaries of humanitarian action are expected to show gratitude in return for the help (see for instance Barnett 2016).

With their storying of the protests, the asylum seekers thus reproduced the humanitarian imaginary that characterized the discourses and practices of solidarity that emerged around the long summer of migration (see Chapter 2). Scholars have argued that such a humanitarian imaginary relegates asylum seekers to a space of exclusion and marginalization, reinforces dominant inequalities and power asymmetries and is thus complicit in the governance of migration (Ticktin 2006, 2011; Fassin 2012). As a result, refugees are said to become passive beneficiaries of humanitarian practices, ‘bare life’ that is stripped of political rights, and thus consigned to the non-political realm (cf. Schindel 2016).

A humanitarian imaginary, however, might also offer its beneficiaries potentials for making political claims and voicing discontent. As Vandevordt (2020) observed in the city of Brussels: ‘bare life’ can also present a political subject category, one that can be resisted and challenged. This connects to Jabri’s (2006) thoughts on agency in relationships of protection. She argues that “the dissenting voice, in other words, is only meaningful in terms of the grammar against which that voice is aimed” (ibid.: 145). The asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee also embedded their protest in a humanitarian grammar and

(re)defined themselves as suffering victims and recipients of help in order to voice their requests. Their acts of protest, I would suggest, should therefore be read as interventions in the practices of solidarity that emerged around the long summer of migration and an attempt to recast the terms and conditions of their humanitarian reception.

With their appeal, the asylum seekers not only voiced demands from the position of suffering victims, they also constituted themselves as ‘clients’ of service providers. They framed their appeal as a complaint against management staff at the facility, who were not doing their “duties” properly and instead spent their work time drinking coffee or making private phone calls. Rather than as rights-bearing subjects within the nation-state in which they reside, they cast themselves as recipients of services from the social welfare organization responsible for the management of the facility. Since these services were not being carried out to the satisfaction of the ‘clients’, asylum seekers complained to a higher authority. This connects to something outlined elsewhere in this book: social welfare organizations played an important role in the reception of asylum seekers in the course of the long summer of migration (see Chapter 2). Around this time, governmental actors outsourced various duties to social welfare organizations, which appeared to act as service providers for the government (see also Muehlebach 2012). These organizations increasingly fulfilled pivotal tasks in the reception and management of asylum seekers. It is this important role, I would argue, that became apparent in the asylum seekers’ complaints about the managing staff at their reception centre.

The asylum seekers’ requests and complaints, however, went virtually unheard in the wake of their protests. Although the protesters handed their appeal over to both local governmental actors and management staff at their reception centre, their reasons for protesting were lost amidst the various responses from actors involved in their reception. I will examine these depoliticizing responses to the asylum seekers’ protests in more detail in the following section.

### 5.3.2. Depoliticizing Responses to the Protests

The actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee responded in manifold ways to the protests, thereby intermediating the protesters’ scope of political agency. Despite expressions of seeming understanding, many stripped the protests of political meanings and relegated the

asylum seekers to a non-political space with limited agency. In consequence, the asylum seekers were recast as suffering victims in need of help while their concrete requests remained unaddressed, their protest eventually being reduced to mere dissatisfaction with the food served at the reception centre's canteen.

I interviewed Regina Bayer, a senior official on the town council, two weeks after the asylum seekers' protests in Bad Waldsee. As head of social services, it was she who assumed responsibility for dealing with and responding to the group of 60 asylum seekers protesting at the town hall and demanding to speak with a governmental representative. When I asked her for her view of these protests, she replied: "These are justifiable questions or worries. I always say, we need to put ourselves in their shoes. Maybe we would react in a similar way"<sup>2</sup> (Interview with Regina Bayer: 2/3/2016). In the course of our interview, she repeatedly expressed her sympathy for the protesting asylum seekers and voiced compassion regarding their discontent. She admitted the tough conditions at the emergency reception centre, where the asylum seekers struggled with a lack of privacy and an unknown future, and depicted them as understandable reasons for such discontent. My interlocutor thus ascribed the protests to the various struggles the asylum seekers faced at the reception facility. This sympathetic view was also reflected in her legal assessment of the protest march as a lawful "spontaneous assembly". She explained this as follows:

LF: What conclusions did you reach from the city council's perspective? Was the gathering lawful or unlawful? Did anything happen that was not by the book?

RB: Yes, a spontaneous assembly is permissible, it's permissible according to the Basic Law. Usually, assemblies need to be registered at least 48 hours beforehand ... that wasn't the case here and wouldn't have been possible. Like I said, because it arose spontaneously, as the name says, so at short notice, and because they just said "Hey, we are going to march up there", that's why, for me, it was a lawful form of assembly, one that initially caused a bit of turmoil, let's say, on the council, because you cannot plan for this. [...]

LF: And so the same law applies as to German citizens? Are the refugees allowed to assemble spontaneously and protest just as German citizens are?

---

2 Translation by LF. German original: "Das sind ja auch berechtigte Fragen oder Sorgen. Ich sag immer, wir müssen uns mal in die Lage von denjenigen versetzen. Wir würden ja vielleicht gleich reagieren."

RB: For me, it was first and foremost an assembly. My thought process is not: “What kind of people are they?” For me, it is about the thing itself; it is a spontaneous assembly and that is fundamentally permissible.”<sup>3</sup>

(Interview with Regina Bayer: 2/3/2016)

Citing Germany’s constitution or Basic Law, my interlocutor did not call the protest’s legitimacy into question. She claimed that she judged protests not primarily by considering the actors responsible for the protest but rather the act of protesting itself. Works on migrant activism, however, have often argued that governmental actors regard protesting non-citizens as threats to sovereign power and therefore criminalize and illegalize their activities (Nyers 2010a; Johnson 2014). Rigby and Schlembach (2013), for instance, argue that protests by non-status migrants present *de jure* “impossible” forms of protests. By contrast, however, my interlocutor in Bad Waldsee seemingly recognized the protesting asylum seekers as legitimate rights-bearing subjects within the nation-state.

Despite these expressions of sympathy and empathy, however, governmental actors stripped the protests of political meanings and circumscribed the protesters’ political agency. Although my interlocutor Regina Bayer asserted that it was important to listen to the demands of the protesters and to take them seriously, she admitted that the protests had not translated into concrete outcomes or solutions. She explained this by claiming that the asylum seekers had not been able to communicate their specific requests clearly

---

3 Translation by LF. German original: “LF: Und zu welchem Schluss sind Sie denn dann gekommen von städtischer Seite, also war die Spontanversammlung rechtens oder ist da irgendwas nicht ganz ordnungsgemäß verlaufen? RB: Ja, eine Spontanversammlung ist ja zulässig. Das ist ja grundgesetzrechtlich zulässig. Normalerweise müssen die Versammlungen ja rechtzeitig vorher, also 48 Stunden sind das vorher, angemeldet werden ähm ... war hier nicht der Fall, auch nicht möglich, wie gesagt, weil es denke ich mal spontan, wie der Name schon sagt, kurzfristig entstanden ist und die gesagt haben ‚Mensch, jetzt laufen wir halt mal da vor‘. Deshalb ist das auch für mich eine zulässige Versammlungsart gewesen, die sag ich jetzt mal kurzfristig erst einmal ein wenig Hektik in der Verwaltung verursacht, wenn man das nicht planen kann [...] LF: Und da gilt dann gleiches Recht, wie für deutsche Bürger dann. Also die Flüchtlinge dürfen sich genau so spontan versammeln und demonstrieren, wie auch deutsche Staatsbürger? RB: Erst mal ist es für mich eine Versammlung gewesen. Also ich argumentiere jetzt nicht: was für eine Art von Person ist das, sondern für mich ist es die Sache, es ist eine spontane Versammlung und die ist grundsätzlich zulässig.”

and that they had voiced their discontent to the wrong governmental authority. Since it was the district council that was legally responsible for the emergency reception centre, the protesters' requests lay outside of her "sphere of responsibility". Therefore, she told me, she had passed on their appeal to those responsible at the district council. In the course of my field research on similar instances of protest across southern Germany, I repeatedly encountered such a shifting of blame and responsibility among governmental representatives. A town council would transfer responsibility to the relevant district council, while the district council would, in turn, put the blame on the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees or other authorities. Through such responses, local governmental actors deferred the responsibility for addressing the protesters' requests and thus limited their political agency to affect the conditions of reception.

Yet, when the asylum seekers organized a 'hunger strike' in order to call attention to the reasons for their protest, the district council eventually felt the need to respond to their actions. It staged what it called a "food test" at the emergency reception centre: several high-ranking representatives, including the district's chief administrative officer, visited the facility and had lunch together with the asylum seekers in order to "test" the food provided. The district council also invited representatives of the local press and several photographers, turning it into a publicity-generating event that would bring the council's conciliatory approach to a wider audience. The local newspaper *Schwäbische Zeitung*, for instance, published an article on the "food test" and concluded that all concerned found the food served at the facility to be tasty and varied (Schwäbische Zeitung: 18/2/2016)<sup>4</sup>.

Through this 'food test', I would argue, the asylum seekers' collective refusal of the food served in the canteen was reduced to mere dissatisfaction with its taste. It is thus a striking illustration of how the district council *depoliticized* the asylum seekers' demands and limited their agency to affect the conditions of their reception. Instead of considering the asylum seekers' requests, it stripped their protests of political content, refusing to acknowledge the governmental handling of asylum seekers as the cause of the protests and instead reducing them to a matter of differing cultural tastes in food. This was even more apparent in the solution with which the district council sought to

---

4 See: [http://www.schwaebische.de/region\\_artikel,-Nach-Demo-SZ-testet-Essen-in-Not-unterkunft-\\_arid,10395682\\_toid,86.html](http://www.schwaebische.de/region_artikel,-Nach-Demo-SZ-testet-Essen-in-Not-unterkunft-_arid,10395682_toid,86.html) (last accessed 1/8/2020).

reconcile the protesters: members of staff provided additional spices considered typical of Arabic cuisine. During my interview with the three protesters, however, they repeatedly emphasized that their protests did not have anything to do with the taste of the food. Instead, the collective refusal of food functioned as a means to pressure governmental actors into responding to their problems and requests. It is no surprise, then, that my interlocutors appeared seemingly upset by this staged ‘food test’ since neither the local press nor the representatives of the district council took the time to talk to them about their “real” reasons for protesting. Through such means, I would argue, the protesters were recast as bare life, becoming stripped of political rights and reduced to basic biological needs such as food and shelter (Agamben 1998). This clearly shows how food took on political meanings in the course of the protests in Bad Waldsee, serving, on the one hand, as a means for asylum seekers to demonstrate their political agency and, on the other, as a means for governmental actors to depoliticize their protests.

Local residents who volunteered with refugees in Bad Waldsee often embedded the reasons for protesting in a more nuanced and contextualized account. And yet, by pathologizing their insubordinate behaviour, they likewise depoliticized the asylum seekers’ protests. This became particularly clear when I talked to a group of volunteers involved in the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees in Bad Waldsee. They recalled how they had struggled with the fact that the asylum seekers had, as part of their protest, also boycotted the daily language classes they offered. After joint discussions, however, they had arrived at the conclusion that they had sympathy for the protesting asylum seekers. The asylum seekers were “traumatized” due to their displacement and would thus need time to adapt to their new surroundings, they noted.

Through such a storying, I would argue, the volunteers pathologized the asylum seekers’ acts of protest. Instead of recognizing the protests as legitimate instances of political claims-making, they reduced them to the asylum seekers’ ostensibly traumatized condition. This connects strikingly to Malkki’s (1995) writings on the condition of the refugee. She outlines how displacement is commonly understood as an “anomaly in life” that results in a vulnerable psychological condition for those who are displaced. Refugees, in consequence, are often portrayed as suffering from disorders, mental illnesses and trauma, which relegates them to a vulnerable place (*ibid.*: 510). Similarly, the volunteers in Bad Waldsee stripped the asylum seekers’ protests of political

content and reduced them to symptoms of their traumatized psychological condition.

The storings of events by volunteers also substantially limited the agency of asylum seekers by recasting the protesters as *mute* victims and *passive* recipients of help and support. This is encapsulated by an article published in the regional newspaper *Schwäbische Zeitung* entitled “The residents of the reception centre are frustrated”. It included a short interview with Gerd Wagner, the official spokesperson of the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees. When asked for his assessment of the protests, he responded as follows:

“And now they have publicly expressed their frustration for the first time. It’s something that has been germinating for a while. And you can understand it all the more if you know their stories and experiences. Every day, on the internet or in the media, they read how their home towns are still being bombed to bits and hope that their families are okay.”<sup>5</sup> (*Schwäbische Zeitung*: 18/2/2016)

The article thus depicted the protesters as suffering victims of atrocities in their home countries, while their reasons to protest remained hazy, with not a single reference to their specific requests; instead, it talked merely of a vague “frustration” leading the asylum seekers to protest. Elsewhere in the interview, Gerd Wagner also blamed human traffickers for the protests in Bad Waldsee; they had “raised false expectations among the asylum seekers, promising them money, cars and a house in Germany” (*Schwäbische Zeitung*: 18/2/2016). These expectations then collided with the “reality” of the reception centre in Bad Waldsee, which eventually led to their protests, Gerd Wagner explained. In this storings, thus, the protests were simply due to ‘false expectations’.

Through such depoliticizing responses, both governmental actors and volunteers relegated the asylum seekers to the role of passive and mute recipients in relationships of solidarity. In doing so, they substantially limited the asylum seekers’ agency to affect the conditions and terms of their own reception. And yet, I would argue, the asylum seekers’ insubordinate acts were not

---

5 Translation by LF. German original: “Und nun haben sie ihren Ärger erstmals öffentlich geäußert, das keimt schon eine Weile in ihnen. Und man kann es umso mehr nachvollziehen, wenn man deren Geschichten und Erlebnisse kennt. Täglich verfolgen sie im Internet und über die Medien, wie ihre Heimatstädte weiter zerbombt werden und hoffen, dass es ihren Familien gut geht.”

without impact. In what follows, I illustrate how they opened up discussions on the terms of refugee support and the ‘proper’ conduct in relationships of solidarity.

### 5.3.3. Recasting Relationships of Solidarity

The asylum seekers’ protests in Bad Waldsee contested the relationships of solidarity that had been forged between newcomers and established residents during the long summer of migration. The storyings of the protests brought to light different perspectives on the ‘proper’ way to support refugees and to receive support in return.

During my research stay in Bad Waldsee in March 2016, I scheduled an interview with one of the volunteers in the small town, Jana Brühl, a leading member of the local citizens’ initiative. We talked at length about her view of the protests that had occurred some days previously. In this context, she problematized the behaviour of certain volunteers who reacted “over-emotionally” and thus stirred discontent among the asylum seekers at the emergency reception centre, something she described as follows:

“I always think that whenever you have such groups of helpers, you get people who react, let’s say, *over-emotionally* and who think they have to do everything for *their* refugees and to remove every obstacle from their path. It’s just the way it is and it is difficult, this situation with 150 people in too little space. And then we have some in our initiative who believe that they need to pursue everything. So there was one time when a woman went all the way to a higher authority and complained that people were not being cared for properly. But it turned out that she was just ill-informed [...] She didn’t know anything but just wanted to rough up the situation”<sup>6</sup> (Interview with Jana Brühl: 5/3/2016; emphasis added)

6 Translation by LF. German original: “Ich glaube immer, dass wenn man solche Helferkreise hat, dass da so Leute sind, die sagen wir mal überemotional reagieren und die dann immer glauben, sie müssen alles für ihre Flüchtlinge tun und ihnen alle Steine aus dem Weg zu räumen. Es ist nun einfach mal so, es ist schwierig, eine Situation mit 150 Leuten auf so engem Raum. Und dann haben wir natürlich in unserem Helferkreis auch Leute, die glauben sie müssen allem hinterherrennen. Also da gab es auch eine Geschichte, da ist eine wirklich an höhere Stellen geklettert und hat sich beschwert, man würde sich nicht richtig um die Leute kümmern und da war sie dann aber einfach schlecht informiert. [...] Also das wusste sie dann gar nicht, aber sie mischt ordentlich auf”.

My interlocutor thus partly blamed ‘improper’ relationships of solidarity for the protests. She accused fellow volunteers for trying to “remove every obstacle from the asylum seekers’ path” and to “rough up” the situation, generating false expectations among them. This reflects a storying that I encountered repeatedly in the course of my field research, with volunteers ascribing the ostensibly insubordinate behaviour of certain asylum seekers to a pathological “recipient mentality” (literally “Nehmer-Mentalität”). They claimed that such exploitative behaviour would develop among asylum seekers, when volunteers responded unconditionally to their requests and wishes. As the interview progressed, my interlocutor took her argument even further, surmising that the asylum seekers could not have acted independently, but were probably instigated to protest by volunteers. As she put it:

“At this demonstration, there were printed posters that could not practically have been produced by the people at the reception centre. So there was a suspicion that somebody in the background must have spurred them on [...] So, they probably didn’t organize it themselves, it bears the stamp, I would say, of somebody else being involved.”<sup>7</sup> (Interview with Jana Brühl: 5/3/2016)

In the eyes of the volunteer Jana Brühl, the asylum seekers at the emergency reception centre were incapable of organizing such a protest on their own, which meant someone “in the background” had “spurred them on”. With this explanation, she portrayed the protesting asylum seekers not as self-determined actors capable of acting on their own behalf but as passive victims who were instrumentalized by trouble-making volunteers. Yet, when I asked the three protesters I interviewed if they had any outside support in organizing the protest and printing the pictures, they insisted that they were the sole initiators and organizers of the protests. In my interlocutors’ storying of events, both asylum seekers and volunteers might instrumentalize relationships of solidarity for their own ends.

The Volunteer Coordinator at the emergency reception centre likewise problematized relationships of solidarity when I talked to her about the

---

7 Translation by LF. German original: “Auch bei dieser Demonstration, die es gab, gab es einfach ausgedruckte Plakate, die praktisch von Leuten aus der Stadthalle so gar nicht hergestellt werden können. Deshalb war auch schon der Verdacht, dass es jemanden aus dem Hintergrund gibt, der die Leute da losgeschickt hat [...] Also das haben die garantiert nicht von alleine, also die Handschrift, würde ich mal sagen, dass da jemand mit dabei war.”

protests. She told me that she and her colleagues, employees of the social welfare organization Die Johanniter, advised volunteers not to form overly personal relationships with the asylum seekers. Still, some would get “too involved on an affective level”. Strong emotional ties, the Volunteer Coordinator claimed, would enable asylum seekers to exert “moral pressure” on the volunteers and to thus gain control over relationships of solidarity. My interlocutor further suggested that some volunteers “don’t know what’s good for the refugees” and that they “fuel negative sentiments instead of quelling them”. Thus, she also blamed volunteers who were ‘too involved’ for fuelling the asylum seekers’ protests. What such a reading implicitly asserts, I would argue, is that the ‘proper’ relationship between supporters and their beneficiaries would be one that irons out discontent rather than responding to it.

Furthermore, the storying of the protests in Bad Waldsee recast the volunteers as a necessary mouthpiece that enables asylum seekers’ problems to be heard. This became apparent when I talked to Regina Bayer, the local council’s head of social services. During our interview, I asked her if and how she usually communicated with asylum seekers about their problems. She replied as follows:

“We communicate a lot via the helpers. The helpers bring us the problems because they are there on the ground almost every day. They pass problems on to us and then we have to see how we can deal with this or that problem.”<sup>8</sup>

(Interview with Regina Bayer: 2/3/2016)

My interlocutor thus recast the volunteers as crucial mediating agents in relationships of solidarity. A similar tendency is apparent in the newspaper articles on the protests in Bad Waldsee, none of which directly quoted the asylum seekers in order to inform readers about their reasons for protesting. This was particularly well illustrated by an account of the incidents in the local newspaper *Schwäbische Zeitung* (17/2/2016)<sup>9</sup>. Instead of quoting the protesters themselves, the article drew on a conversation with Simone Fischer, the head of the management staff at the emergency reception centre, who problematized the

8 Translation by LF. German original: “Wir kommunizieren sehr viel über die Helfer. Die Helfer bringen die Probleme, weil die sind ja bei denen vor Ort, die tragen die Probleme weiter zu uns her und dann müssen wir gucken, wie wir da das ein oder andere Problem abarbeiten.”

9 See: [http://www.schwaebische.de/region\\_artikel,-Fluechtlinge-demonstrieren-vor-dem-Rathaus-\\_arid,10395021\\_toid,86.html](http://www.schwaebische.de/region_artikel,-Fluechtlinge-demonstrieren-vor-dem-Rathaus-_arid,10395021_toid,86.html) (last accessed 1/8/2020).

asylum seekers' insubordinate behaviour. Yet, the report neglected to mention that Fischer and her colleagues at the facility were the primary focus of the asylum seekers' complaints, as their appeal clearly illustrated. Accompanying the article was an interview with Gerd Wagner, the spokesperson of the local citizens' initiative. In it, the volunteer, who is described as "very close" to the asylum seekers and "in daily contact" with them, is asked for his views on the protests. The newspaper depicted the volunteer as a trustworthy person to explain the protests while not consulting any of the asylum seekers themselves. In a study on refugee protests in Turkey, Erensu (2016: 672) identifies a similar pattern, arguing that civil society groups became necessary partners who "speak on behalf" of refugees. From this perspective, it is the volunteer who determines how a situation is interpreted and whether the asylum seekers' protests are recast as legitimate political action or not.

Moreover, in response to the protests, the 'proper' conduct of asylum seekers in relationships of solidarity was recast as one that silently accepts the conditions and terms of the support offered. This was clearly evident in various angry comments under the online version of the article reporting on the protests in *Schwäbische Zeitung*. For instance, one reader posted the following:

"The refugees protest and don't know why? What's that about? Are they hoping that, if they demonstrate, another German idiot will blow even more smoke up their backsides? This is just arbitrary and an exploitation of German democracy. Simply intolerable behaviour by our guests. I don't like to say it, but it makes you lose the will to help."<sup>10</sup> (*Schwäbische Zeitung*: 17/2/2016)

The commenter thus regarded the incidents as grounds for ending any relationships of solidarity with the protesters. He or she presented their actions as "arbitrary", "exploitation" and "intolerable", while those who continued offering their help to the protesters were "idiots". The asylum seekers, on the other hand, were constituted as "guests" who should uncritically accept the terms and conditions of their reception. Other posts in the online comments

---

10 Translation by LF. German original: "Die Flüchtlinge demonstrieren und wissen nicht warum? Was soll den (sic) das? Besteht die Hoffnung, dass wenn man demonstriert irgend ein deutscher Idiot denen noch zusätzlich Zucker in den Hintern bläst? Das ist doch wirklich Willkür und das Ausnutzen der deutschen Demokratie. Echt eine Unverschämtheit von unseren Gästen. Ich sage es ungern: Da verliert man die Lust am Helfen."

section even called for the protesting asylum seekers to be deported because of their insubordinate acts. This connects to what Topak (2016: 10) describes as “conditional hospitality”: “the other, the newcomer or the guest is obliged to follow some specific routes to enter and remain in the host state; otherwise his existence would be deemed illegal and she would be treated as criminal” (ibid.). In this storying the protesting asylum seekers are recast not as legitimate claims-making subjects but as mute and thankful recipients.

Nevertheless, the protests in Bad Waldsee also triggered politicizing responses that opened up possibilities for the asylum seekers to make political claims and to effect changes in the conditions of their reception – although they remained comparatively marginalized. Such responses recast relationships of solidarities as, what Johnson (2014: 202) calls, “transgressive solidarities”. According to Johnson, such forms of solidarity imply not “a legitimate voice speaking for an illegitimate/vulnerable/less out-spoken one, but a multitude of voices speaking together in the same message, demand or refusal” (ibid.: 197). This came out clearly in my conversations with the volunteer Jana Brühl. During our preliminary phone call, my interlocutor told me that a “friend” of hers was there to answer my questions first-hand. That friend turned out to be Malik Hamdan, a member of the group of protesting asylum seekers. Soon after we had started our conversation, she handed the phone to the asylum seeker, letting him speak while occasionally complementing his accounts of the protests with her own views. The volunteer thus clearly chose not to speak on behalf of the asylum seekers but instead empowered Malik Hamdan to put forward his own storying of the protests.

To sum up, in this section, I analysed the multiple storyings of the protests at an emergency reception centre in Bad Waldsee. I outlined how various actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers responded to these protests by *depoliticizing* the asylum seekers’ scope for political agency. As a result, the protesting asylum seekers were predominantly recast as mute victims and passive recipients in relationships of solidarity. In what follows, I will turn to another striking example of protest I came across in Offenburg, a medium-sized town in southern Germany. The storying of events I found, however, turned out to be highly contested among different actors involved in the asylum seekers’ reception, while opening up possibilities for politicizing relationships of solidarity.