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Ambivalent meanings of the past: state critique and memory politics in 1980s (pro-)Refugee struggles in the Federal Republic of Germany

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the largely forgotten early period of (pro-)Refugee activism in the 1980s West-Germany and the role of memory politics therein, this article explores the ambiguity in critiquing the nation-state. Drawing on original data collected in seven social movement archives in Germany, different ways in which German Nazism and the Holocaust are invoked to frame and critique the present (West-)German nation-state and its migration and asylum regime are scrutinised. Three ways in which Nazism and the Holocaust were invoked and discussed by Refugee activists and their supporters are differentiated: the past as 'reminder and warning for the present', the past as 'discrediting and incriminating the present', and explicit attempts not to draw analogies between the past and the present. Overall, the article makes two key contributions. First, the article makes a historical and empirical contribution as the focus on the 1980s sheds light on a period that has so far been largely ignored when it comes to the study of (pro-)Refugee activism. By tracing different ways in which memory politics has informed and been integral to Refugee activism and support, the article makes, second, an innovative contribution to studying the nexus of (forced) migration, national identity, and memory politics.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the complex – and oftentimes conflictual – relations between 'national identity', migration and memory have received considerable academic attention both with regards to Europe (Diner 1998; Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013; Jansen 2015; Merrill 2018; Stone 2018) and other regional contexts (Altan-Olcay 2012; Kleist 2013; Kleist 2017; Cho 2018; Kaya 2018). Particularly in the German context, the question of who does and should remember the legacy of German Nazism and particularly the Holocaust in which ways and for what purpose has led to many political tensions (Canefe 1998; Arnold and König 2018; Klävers 2021; Schäfer 2021; Brumlik 2022). The experience of the past decades which have seen a proliferation of Holocaust memory in different

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contexts world-wide has led Rothberg to argue that memory is crucially 'multidirectional', that is, 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' (Rothberg 2009, 3). This can be seen in how different actors make use of the 'widespread Holocaust consciousness as a platform' to emphasise the relevance of experiences of suffering not directly related to the legacy of fascism and Nazism (Rothberg 2009, 3). While both the 'migration and memory nexus' (Glynn and Kleist 2014) and the 'movement-memory nexus' (Daphi and Zamponi 2019) have received some attention over the past years, there is still a lack of engagement with their (combined) significance for (pro-)Refugee activism.[1] This is particularly striking in the German context: Despite the fact that there is an abundance of studies on memory politics particularly regarding Nazism and the Holocaust (Maier 1997; Diner 2000; Engert 2014), there is only a small number of studies that engage with the role of Holocaust memory in (pro-)migrant politics (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011; Rothberg 2014). What is more, existing studies of (pro-)Refugee activism in the German context are limited to examples that occurred after German unification and the amendment of the constitutional right of asylum in 1993 (Wilcke and Lambert 2015; Jakob 2016), primarily focusing on contemporary cases around the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (Ünsal 2015; Georgi 2016; Hess et al. 2016; Tsianos 2016). However, such a limited temporal focus also brings about analytical limitations. Not only does it convey the false impression that (pro-)Refugee struggles are only a more recent phenomenon, but it also evades those historical periods that are especially well-suited to explore the relation between migration and memory politics. 1980s West Germany is of particular interest in this regard as this decade saw both heated public debates around and popular interest in Holocaust memory (Wüstenberg 2017) and the emergence of a pro-Refugee movement.

The main purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the underexplored history of (pro-)Refugee activism in the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) post-war period. Focusing on its emergence from the late 1970s to the amendment of the constitutional right of asylum in 1993, this paper this paper examines to what extent and in which ways (pro-)Refugee actors problematised the German nation-state and its contemporary asylum regime through the lens of memory politics. First, I introduce the underlying perspective of the paper focusing on the nexus between (pro-)migrant and Refugee activism and memory through the concept of multidirectional memory. Second, I provide a context analysis of the emergence of (pro-)Refugee struggles by looking at the changing pattern of dominant public discourse about the nexus between memory and migration in post-war (West) Germany. Third, I examine the different ways in which pro-Refugee actors invoked and framed the Nazi legacy to voice dissent against the FRG's migration and asylum regime throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

Migration, movements, and (multidirectional) memory

Social movements around issues of immigration and asylum have gained increased public and academic attention in the past two decades. This has led to a rich body of literature situated in the overlapping contexts of Critical Citizenship Studies (Nyers 2006; Isin and Turner 2007; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Nyers and Rygiel 2012), the Autonomy of Migration paradigm (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Scheel 2013; De Genova 2017; Mezzadra 2020) as well as social movement studies (Nicholls 2013; Della Porta 2018;

Nicholls, Uitermark, and van Haperen 2020). While the initial impulse of these contributions to the 'mobility turn' (Faist 2013) has been to emphasize the significance of the political figure of 'the migrant' or 'the Refugee', there is a growing number of studies that engage more explicitly with the complexities, difficulties and dilemmas which migrants and Refugees experience during their attempts to critically intervene into the institutional framework and public sphere of a nation-state order from which they are simultaneously excluded (Rancière 2004; Schaap 2011; Squire 2011; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Gündogdu 2015; Atac, Rygiel, and Stierl 2017; Stierl 2018; Steinhilper 2021). These approaches demonstrate how the embeddedness of Refugees in what Malkki calls the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995) due to their existence as 'border subjects' (Schulze Wessel 2015) turns the politics of Refugee and migrant activism into a precarious endeavour: These actors are confronted with the challenge of fighting for rights and recognition within a nation-state order from a marginalised and excluded position within that order, which makes it highly difficult to carry out such a fight in the first place (Stierl 2018; Steinhilper 2021). Various authors argue that the political identities, critiques, and strategies developed by these actors are crucially affected by this problematic. For instance, McNevin suggests that a the centre of such struggles is the problem of 'ambivalence' which denotes 'the gap between the language of citizenship and the limits of the possible, as well as the productive energy that lies within that gap' (McNevin 2013, 199). In other words, there is a tendency that those actors who seek to put into question the existing citizenship regime still need to formulate this critique in terms of citizenship to make rights claims. In a recent history of the immigrants' rights movement in the United States, Nicholls demonstrates that this 'pressing dilemma' (Nicholls 2019, 37) is primarily a result of the complicated process of 'moving into' (Nicholls 2019, 13) the mainstream political field: 'Increasing positioning in the field requires the accumulation of important resources and the use of resonant frames. But, by following these rules, the movement ends up further locked into national citizenship's iron cage' (Nicholls 2019, 37). Similarly, Tyler and Marciniak argue that 'in order to effect material changes, protestors are compelled to make their demands in the idiom of the regime of citizenship they are contesting' (Tyler and Marciniak 2013, 146).

This 'idiom' of a nation-state's regime of citizenship is tightly connected to framings of 'national identity' (Arendt 1973; Brubaker 2004). It has been widely argued, therefore, that struggles around issues of migration are always simultaneously struggles around the nation-state and its dominant self-identity (Triandafyllidou 1998; Kofman 2005; Wodak et al. 2009; Anderson and Hughes 2015). One key lens through which this relationship between national identity and Refugee and migrant struggles can be examined are the politics of memory. While the specific framings of national identity vary, they always tend to entail the construction of a shared history or mythology as well as the enactment of this imagined past through practices of commemoration (Huyssen 1995; Corney and Zamponi 2003). Thus, central to this construction of a collective identity is a certain 'temporal depth' (Grosby 2005, 8) of the nation, which is invoked as 'the prepolitical community of shared memory and history' (Yack 2012, 34). Following Glynn and Kleist, there are at least three ways in which memory becomes a relevant reference point for political debates and struggles around migration: 'by determining belonging and the ensuing relationship between migrants and their receiving society, by influencing

policies of migration, and by structuring the political debate about belonging and migration' (Glynn and Kleist 2014, 10).

While the existing research on the 'memory and migration nexus' (Glynn and Kleist 2014) has largely been limited to hegemonic and official politics, recent years have seen the emergence of a small body of literature that considers its significance for (pro-)migrant and (pro-)Refugee action (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013; Kaya 2018). A fruitful example is Rothberg's and Yildiz' study of the 'neighbourhood mothers' project in Berlin – a self-organised local community project consisting of both migrant and non-migrant women that has established spaces of discussion about and remembrance of Germany's legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust – where they find attempts of enacting 'memory citizenship' through 'unexpected configurations of heterogeneous pasts and a mobile present' (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011, 38; see also: Rothberg 2014). To describe such configurations, Rothberg coined the term 'multidirectional memory' (Rothberg 2009). Questioning notions of collective memory as nationally contained practices that operate in terms of a 'zero-sum struggle over scarce resources' (Rothberg 2009, 3), the author argues that many types of collective memory are instead based on 'dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance' (Rothberg 2009, 11). The concept of multidirectional memory therefore offers a valuable lens through which the ambivalence of Refugee and migrant struggles can be scrutinised as it puts into focus how (pro-)Refugee actors might not simply oppose and dismiss dominant modes of memory politics but rather seek to engage with these in order to enter the dominant public sphere that otherwise tends to be non-responsive to their political claims. This conceptual approach thus points to the idea that dominant modes of memory politics structure 'the symbolic environment in which mobilization takes place' (Daphi and Zamponi 2019, 406) and functions as 'an object movements can appropriate in order to foster their legitimacy, or to gain visibility recalling the relevance of an historical precedent' (Daphi and Zamponi 2019, 406). In this sense, multidirectional memory speaks to what other authors have referred to as the 'movement-memory nexus' (Daphi and Zamponi 2019; see also: Kubal and Becerra 2014; Eyerman 2015; Reading and Katriel 2015; Merrill, Keightley, and Daphi 2020; Berger, Scalmer, and Wicke 2021). The focus on multidirectional memory, then, can offer new insights into the complex relationship between (pro-)migrant movements and the dominant political culture against which they (seek to) position themselves. For this purpose, however, further analytic differentiation is needed. While Rothberg discusses a wide range of historical and contemporary examples, he remains primarily interested in the question whether the mnemonic practice in question can be considered multidirectional or competitive. Even though he offers some topological distinctions between different 'scales' (e.g. local, national, transnational) and 'layers' (different cultural contexts) of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2014, 127–134), both he and most other scholars working with the concept (cf. Van Ooijen and Raaijmakers 2012; Jurgens 2013; Hollis-Touré 2016; Kennedy and Graefenstein 2019; Hansen 2020; Branach-Kallas 2022) tend to lose sight of the conflictual potential within the terrain of multidirectional memory itself. To examine the complexity of practices of multidirectional memory as well as their ambivalent embeddedness within the nation-state order and its dominant political culture in the context of (pro-)Refugee struggles, I suggest an analytical framework that draws on the rich traditions of Critical Discourse Analysis

(Fairclough 2013; Wodak 2013) with its focus on context sensitivity and Frame Analysis (Benford and Snow 2000; Lindekilde 2014; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018; Dodd 2020) with its attentiveness for semantic micro-structures. Against this background, I mobilise multidirectional memory as a set of discursive strategies (Wodak 2007, 195) that intervene into public discourses about memory by drawing on the mechanism of 'frame articulation', that is, 'the connection, or splicing together, and coordination of issues, events, experiences, and cultural items, including strands of one or more ideologies, so that they hang together in a relatively integrated and meaningful fashion' (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018, 397). In this sense, multidirectional memory works through connecting various frames about past and present that are usually considered different and thus discussed separately. For the purpose of this article, this examining both the way in which official public memory shaped the context of emerging (pro-)Refugee struggles in the FRG and how political memory – focusing on the legacy of German Nazism – was used by (pro-)Refugee actors to make claims in the public sphere. The analysis proceeds in three steps: First, I give an overview of the wider discursive and socio-political context in which (pro-)Refugee struggles emerged in West Germany, with a particular focus on the 1980s and early 1990s. This includes a contextual qualitative analysis of two 'fields of action', that is, specific 'segments of the respective societal "reality", which contribute to constituting and shaping the "frame" of discourse' (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 36): first, mainstream discourse about the nexus between national identity, asylum, and memory; and second, the changing patterns of the FRG's asylum regime. Second, I identify three main mnemonic frames articulated by the (pro-)Refugee actors that each mobilise Holocaust memory and centre around different 'diagnostic', 'prognostic', and 'motivational' framings (Benford and Snow 2000). Third, the relation between these framing practices and the broader discursive context is examined to shed light on the strategic positionality of the different (pro-)Refugee actors vis-à-vis the nation-state.

The empirical analysis presented in this paper is based on material collected in several months of archival research carried out in 2018 in seven on-site archives based in Germany.[2] The material used for analysis in this paper was originally published in German. All quotes used are therefore translated by the author. However, some terms lose key aspects of their meaning in the process of translation relevant to the points made here. In these cases, I also provide the original word used in brackets.

The 'memory and migration nexus' in the Federal Republic of Germany

To understand the various ways in which memories of the German Nazi past were constructed and invoked in early (pro-)Refugee struggles, some contextual elaboration on the changing pattern of hegemonic public discourse about national identity, (forced) migration, and memory in post-war (West) Germany is needed. All three were closely connected from the FRG's founding onwards. However, the ways in which they related to each other shifted in the context of increased asylum immigration from the late 1970s onwards.

After the Second World War, the West-German state was founded and 're-invented' (Schuster 2003, 182) as a liberal-democratic 'Rechtsstaat' (Gibney 2008, 87) in 1949.

One central aspect of the FRG's founding lay in the attempt to dissociate it both substantially and symbolically from the preceding Nazi state and those constitutional elements of the Weimar Republic that had made it possible. The core tenets of its legal-political system and national identity were formulated in the Basic Law which has since served as the (West) German constitution. Early on, the comparatively comprehensive right of asylum included in the Basic Law gained specific symbolic relevance as many have interpreted this right as 'the historical answer to the experience of Nazism' so that any discussions around the change of that right in the subsequent post-war decades 'always also had an important historic-political dimension with regard to the self-conception of the Germans' (Bade 1994, 94 transl. by the author). Simultaneously, it also helped to substantiate the myth of a 'zero hour' – a clear-cut break with the past – which had emerged as an influential element of mainstream public debates especially in the 1950s and 1960s (Fischer and Lorenz 2015). The public discourse about national identity in the first three post-war decades was thus organised around a frame that depicted the FRG as a liberal-democratic nation that had learned from its Nazi legacy and therefore valued the right to asylum as a safeguard against similar catastrophes in the future. The actual application of the right of asylum, however, had early on been shaped by the geopolitical context of the Cold War in which the FRG positioned itself as a *Western European* nation. The admission of persons 'fleeing Communism' was therefore seen as a symbolic triumph in the struggle against the Eastern bloc and trumped an otherwise rejectionist attitude towards (Refugee) immigration. The right of asylum accordingly served to put the FRG at a distance not only to its Nazi predecessor but also to the Eastern Bloc in general and the German Democratic Republic in particular (Marrus 2002; Poutrus 2016, 879).

In the context of increased asylum applications by non-Europeans in the early 1980s (Poutrus 2016), this interpretation led to a double standard across the mainstream political spectrum: while Eastern European Refugees were regarded as refugees *par excellence,* non-European asylum-seekers – whose legal recognition as refugees remained low –were largely depicted as asylum 'abusers' (Schuster 2003, 197; Herbert 2014; Alexopoulou 2020).[3] This only changed with the late 1980s and the end of the Cold War when the notion of 'abuse' was increasingly applied to all persons seeking asylum (Herbert 2001, 274). This derogatory and racist framing of non-European and later Eastern European asylum-seekers were also fuelled by the orthodox construction of 'German identity' in 'ethnocultural' terms (Brubaker 1992, 1; Yack 1996). This understanding of 'Germanness' was affirmed in the official notion that 'Germany is not a country of immigration' which was often coupled with conservative warnings about so-called 'Überfremdung' – i.e. the imagined dilution of the 'German culture' through the presence of 'too many foreigners' (Münch 1992, 204). This frame crucially disregarded the lived reality of migration-related diversity which had gained momentum in the context of the recruitment of labour migrants especially from Turkey, Morocco, Southern and South-Eastern Europe between the 1950s and 1970s (Herbert 2001; Karakayalı 2008). It is important to remark that the 'immigration' problematised here was crucially a racialised one insofar as it only referred to those immigrants that were imagined as being essentially 'non-German' and particularly 'non-Western' (Brubaker 1992; Joppke 1999, 201).

The public debate around asylum and the anti-immigration hostility that had largely shaped all of the 1980s reached a peak in the wider context of German unification[4] which was accompanied by a massive increase in racist and xenophobic violent attacks throughout Germany in the early 1990s – a development which Schuster characterises as 'a nightmarish orgy of racism and violence' (Schuster 2003, 206). Put differently, the renegotiated sense of nationhood in the context of German unification relied heavily on the 'ethno-cultural codes of belonging' that had already been utilised throughout the 1980s – particularly centre-right and right-wing political currents (Schmidtke 2017, 504). The context of the German unification thus functioned as a catalyst that deepened already existing polarizations that had developed throughout the 1980s in the FRG. Politically, the 'asylum debate' (Blanke 1993; Beckstein 2014; Kannankulam 2014) culminated in the de facto abolition of the constitutional right of asylum in the wake of the so-called 'asylum compromise' in 1992/93, the core idea of which was to restrict the constitutional right to asylum by rejecting the applications of asylum-seekers who were either from a 'safe country of origin' or travelled through a 'safe third country' (Luft and Schimany 2014). The politicisation of immigration and asylum from the late 1970s onwards went hand in hand with a shift in memory politics as well: under the slogan of a 'spiritual-moral turn', the post-1982 conservative government of chancellor Kohl put a strong emphasis on re-establishing a positive national identity that would not be burdened by the moral weight of the Nazi legacy (Fischer and Lorenz 2015, 246). However, the conservative turn away from questions of collective guilt and historical responsibility did not devalue the symbolic relevance of the Nazi legacy in discussions around asylum but rather changed the orthodox meaning of that legacy. In other words, the conservative right drew on the mechanism of 'frame transformation' (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018, 400 f.). In 1986, for example, Chancellor Helmut Kohl frequently emphasised that the constitutional right of asylum had 'its historical reason' in the 'bitter experience of Nazi barbarism' and that it could not be the philosophy of his government to 'restrict the right to asylum in principle' (cited in: Der Spiegel 1986; see also: Herbert 2001). The claim was, rather, that the only way to do justice to the constitutional right of asylum was to secure its practicability: to do so, however, it had to be limited. At the same time, the 1980s also saw an unprecedent engagement in memory politics by civil society in the form of both mainstream public interventions and local initiatives to establish 'memorial sites and history movements' (Wüstenberg 2017, 182). As Poutrus observes, even in the early 1990s there were still many political actors for whom 'an open refugee and asylum politics represented a guarantee that the FRG had fundamentally turned away from a racist past, particularly Nazism' (Poutrus 2016, 893 – transl. by the author). In this context, questions of collective guilt were increasingly renegotiated, and a stronger focus was set on the Jewish and non-German victims of the Holocaust.

Overall, then, the dominant public debates about immigration and asylum in the 1980s and early 1990s were inseparably linked to questions of national identity and collective memory in light of the Nazi legacy. Against the background of this central role of the Nazi legacy in the FRG's political culture, it is unsurprising that evocations of this legacy proved to be one of the main ways through which (pro-)Refugee actors voiced their dissent.

Evoking the past to understand the present? Germany's Nazi legacy in (pro-)Refugee struggles

The problematisation of asylum and immigration in public discourse as well as subsequent policy changes were increasingly countered by a minority of civil society actors from the late 1970s onwards. The emerging pro-Refugee movement 'field' was characterised by a very broad variety of actors both in terms of political orientation and institutionalisation. On the one hand, the 1980s saw a set of new actors focused specifically on issues around asylum, Refugee protection and care. These included first and foremost asylum-seekers who came together in often short-lived alliances to protest, for example, through hunger strikes in detention centres, demonstrations, and occupations, as well as initiatives focusing on specific solidarity actions. Simultaneously, we can also find a long-term institutionalisation of groups and non-governmental organisations. Most actors involved in pro-Refugee struggles throughout the decade, on the other hand, were part of already established groups and organisations such as established immigrant groups, human rights organisations, and (radical) left groups.

What all of these actors had in common was that they formulated their critique of contemporary asylum politics through references to the German Nazi legacy, that is, they established 'intertextual or interdiscursive references' (Wodak et al. 2009, 10) between the two. What made such references to the past multidirectional was their attempts to challenge the notion of post-Nazi and post-Holocaust memory as an enclosed 'German' endeavour, and to put the historical experience of German Nazism into a broader context of political persecution, displacement, and refuge on a global scale. However, looking at the specific ways in which this connection between the German state's present and past was imagined, there were also significant differences that point not only to the ambivalent relationship between (pro-)Refugee struggles and the nation-state order, but also to the inner differences and tensions it can create.

The past as reminder and warning: the FRG as a post-Nazi democracy

Throughout the 1980s, the majority of (pro-)Refugee activists formulated a critique of the FRG's migration and asylum control regime by drawing on diagnostic frames that used as their normative point of reference the dominant self-image of the FRG as a liberal-democratic nation-state that had – or should have – 'come to terms with its past' and thus broken with the political-ideological tradition of its Nazi predecessor. In line with the orthodox public discourse in the first post-war decades, the constitutional right of asylum played a central role in this regard as it was seen to embody 'tolerance and hope as a conscious reaction to the barbarism of German fascism' (Frankfurter Rechtshilfekomitee für Ausländer, Initiativausschuss ‚Ausländische Mitbüger in Hessen', and Interessengemeinschaft der mit Ausländern verheirateten deutschen Frauen e.V. 1981, 5).

In the context of the 'spiritual moral turn' under the Kohl-government which included a growing influence of ethnonationalist positions with regards to immigration and asylum, however, these actors saw this 'lesson learnt' to be in danger as they diagnosed a national political culture that had forgotten some of the defining values it had given itself during its 'founding moment'. Thus, what they sought to achieve was to preserve

and defend those norms and values associated with the Basic Law and its right of asylum against restrictions:

> None of the fundamental rights of our Constitution is as directly linked to the experiences of fascism as the right to asylum. We object to the planned erosion of this fundamental right. The aim of our work is to ensure that Article 16 of the Basic Law 'Politically persecuted persons enjoy asylum' becomes fully effective again in its original sense. (Hamburger Arbeitskreis ASYL 1983)

Here, memory politics served as a medium of articulating an immanent critique that evaluated the FRG's contemporary migration and asylum system in terms of the liberal-democratic underpinnings of its 'founding moment' (and found it wanting). The strategic positionality of those actors who formulated such an immanent critique was ambivalent insofar as they put themselves in a 'centrifugal' (Lie 2014) position towards the ethno-nationalist and racist political tendencies in the 1980s and early 1990s, but their overall self-understanding was that of a 'centripetal' force oriented towards a liberal-democratic type of German national identity encapsulated in the Basic Law. This critique was formulated in two ways.

First, various actors primarily drew on the strategy of *reminding* the FRG of its legal, political, and moral obligations resulting from its own legacy of persecution and displacement. Such an invocation of the *past as a reminder* can be exemplified by looking at the protest activity of staging 'public hearings' and 'court cases' against the FRG. During these events, the diagnostic framing of the FRG's treatment of Refugees took the form of a legal charge, that is, the accusation of a criminal offense in terms of the Basic Law. In January 1984, for instance, the *Refugee Council Berlin* organised a 'hearing on the practice of asylum in Berlin' (taz, 23.01.1984) which evaluated the latter in terms of its adherence to legal guarantees codified in the Basic Law and international human rights conventions (Hofmann, Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, and Flüchtlingsrat Berlin 1984, 179). By emphasising that such minimal standards for asylum-seekers ought to be taken for granted in a 'democratic community' (Hofmann, Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, and Flüchtlingsrat Berlin 1984, 185) and in a 'constitutional state like the FRG' (Hofmann, Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, and Flüchtlingsrat Berlin 1984, 189), the authors sought to re-establish and 'the "spirit" of the FRG's right to asylum' (Hofmann, Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, and Flüchtlingsrat Berlin 1984, 189) as a 'lesson learnt' from the past that should inform contemporary migration and asylum politics. Some actors also attempted to add moral weight through performative acts of testimony. During a protest event against the detention and extradition of Cemal Kemal Altun in 1983, for instance, a group of people formerly persecuted by the Nazi regime reminded the public audience of past persecution to stress similarities:

> We are a group of people who have themselves been persecuted, have suffered, and whose political persecution was not believed. The Nazis too, tried to achieve our extradition by claiming we had committed criminal offences. Many politically persecuted people were therefore rejected and extradited by countries where they thought to have found safety. (cited in: Kantemir and Boehncke 1983, 40; see also: Seibert 2008)

Thus, these actors spoke not only as public supporters of Refugees but also as people who themselves had experienced the deadly consequences of restrictive asylum policies.

However, while parallels were drawn here to the Nazi past, the German authorities were not directly compared to the Nazi regime but rather to other nation-states who failed to protect people persecuted by the Nazi regime. In this sense, these actors clearly aligned with the dominant frame about the FRG as a liberal-democratic nation-state that has broken with its Nazi legacy: references to the former primarily figured as a reminder why the right to asylum became an important constitutional cornerstone of the latter. Overall, these actors expressed concern about the concrete suffering of Refugees, but also about the potential erosion of the liberal-democratic values of the FRG. Thus, the main lesson the FRG was supposed to draw from its historical legacy was to adopt an exemplary role in the protection of people confronted by a fate similar to those who had fled Nazi persecution. Thus, the underlying motivational framing was to appeal to the liberal-democratic self-understanding of German citizens.

Second, various actors went a step further and formulated an explicit *warning* that the German authorities' treatment of Refugees signalled the *potential return* of state practices reminiscent of the Nazi regime by focusing on concrete state practices such as detention, deportation, and bureaucratic control. One major context in which such warnings figured prominently was the anti-voucher campaign in the early to mid-1980s. It was launched by a broad coalition of citizens and non-citizens active in religious organisations, trade unions, and (extra-)parliamentary political contexts (Asyl-AG/Ausländerbereich der Alternativen Liste Berlin 1984) to oppose a federal policy reform from 1980 which denied asylum-seekers social support in monetary form and led to the introduction of a voucher and identity card system in most federal states.

A recurrent element of the critique expressed in the anti-voucher campaign was to allude to Nazi techniques of registering and stigmatising Jews and other persecuted minorities. In November 1983, for example, a Protestant church congregation in Berlin that had been exchanging asylum-seekers' vouchers for cash attracted public attention when they justified their activities in their congregation magazine. Under the heading 'Not yet a Jewish badge' (taz, 21.11.1983), the congregation implied at least a resemblance between the current voucher system and the enforced wearing of a Star of David for Jews in Nazi Germany. Similarly, in a public call for a demonstration in 1984, a Berlin-based charitable association claimed that the vouchers were 'reminiscent of the mixed-breed identity cards [Mischlingsmarken] in the Third Reich' and that they would 'have exactly that meaning for the asylum-seekers they are given to' ("Asyl" in der Gemeinde "Zum hlg Kreuz" and Ausländerselbsthilfe e.V. 1984). The voucher system was thus put in the context of 'Hitler-fascism' (Asyl e.V. (Berlin) 1984, 15) by drawing a parallel between past and present state practices: 'For Jews, too, special money and yellow stars were introduced as identifying marks … !!!' (Asyl e.V. (Berlin) 1984, 15). Like the above-described usage of the past as a reminder, the strategy of warning continued to stress the discontinuity between the FRG and the Nazi regime. However, the asylum policies and measures of the 1980s were interpreted and scandalised as the first sign of an erosion of the FRG's liberal-democratic foundation which might pave the way for the resurgence of fascist state practices in the near future. The line drawn between the Nazi past and the FRG present was thus blurrier which put these actors more explicitly in a 'centrifugal' position within the broader public discourse about post-Nazi memory.

The past as a source of revelation: continuities between the FRG and its Nazi legacy

Not all actors understood the past as an historical contrast to the present. It was especially – but not exclusively – radical left-wing activists who developed a form of multidirectional memory that operated with the most immediate type of frame articulation: directly blending the past into the present. In these cases, the existence of a repressive migration and asylum regime was interpreted as an indication of the fact that the FRG had never actually overcome its totalitarian legacy. Compared to the strategies of *reminding* of the break with the past and *warning* about the resurgence of the past, then, the strategy of evoking a continuity between past and present provided a much more fundamental critique of the FRG's normative foundations. This diagnostic framing was part of a denunciatory critique suggesting that both the post-war myth about the 'zero hour' and the conservative 'spiritual-moral turn' of the 1980s were political attempts to conceal the FRG's 'hidden truth': its continuation of fascist practices in the area of migration and asylum politics. This problem diagnosis was accompanied by prognostic and motivational framings that called for a more fundamental social, economic, and political transformation within, against, and beyond the nation-state as the main condition for overcoming the present suffering of Refugees. These actors also distanced themselves from those (pro-)Refugee actors who primarily appealed to the 'spirit of the Basic Law'. The ways in which these actors invoked the past to *reveal* the 'hidden truth' of the present took two major forms.

First, various actors of the radical left considered *equating* the FRG with the Nazi regime as the most effective framing to underpin their strategy of *discrediting* the former's legitimacy and making a case for the futility of any reform-oriented perspective. In contrast to problem diagnoses in which the past was used as *reminder* and *warning*, this framing consisted of claims *equating* past and present which referred specifically to the Holocaust by referencing the concentration camp system, thereby emphasising unbroken continuities of extreme violence and death. For example, in late November 1981, the *International Communist Party* organised a demonstration in Berlin-Kreuzberg to show solidarity with Berlin-based Kurdish and Turkish asylum-seekers who had gone on hunger strike. In their call for the demonstration, the hunger strike was portrayed as an act of resistance against 'animal-like treatment in "residential homes" [Wohnheime] and "camps" [Sammellager] similar to concentration camps [Konzentrationslager]' (Internationale Kommunistische Partei 1981). At times, such references to genocide became even more explicit as exemplified in a leaflet by a radical left-wing group that was headed 'The state plans the final solution of the question of asylum-seekers [Endlösung der Asylantenfrage]: the imperative for a radical answer by the proletariat' (Agentur für die Selbstaufhebung des Proletariats 1983).

A key precondition for this discursive strategy of equation was its rearticulation in terms of an anti-imperialist world view: both the Nazi regime and the FRG were interpreted as different historical examples of a longstanding and ongoing 'imperialist offensive' (Koordinationskreis Rhein/Ruhr autonomer Flüchtlingsgruppen 1986) carried out by the capitalist elites of the global north against the global proletariat. In this diagnostic framing, both past and present were subsumed under a generalised system of Western capitalist exploitation whose migration and asylum regimes served the purpose of controlling and regulating the exploitation of the global workforce:

'imperialism – independent of the specific guise of domination – always uses foreign labour as a market-oriented factor of regulation' (Koordinationskreis Rhein/Ruhr autonomer Flüchtlingsgruppen 1986). Within this anti-imperialist frame, state violence against Refugees was interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it was interpreted as a technique of subjecting them to an excessive regime of exploitation within the nation-state's territory. In a leaflet by a communist group, for instance, it was claimed that:

> The interest which showed itself cynically openly during Nazi fascism when Jews and communists in the concentration camps were exploited as cheap labour for the German industry until they were blue in the face, only to then utilise their physical components as raw material, is the same interest which causes the expulsion of unemployed foreigners today. (Internationale Kommunisten (West-Berlin) 1981)

On the other hand, it was interpreted as a form of violence against workers whose exploitation was deemed unprofitable: 'there are too many labourers, too much human flesh. Without any doubt, different measures can be taken to get rid of this sort of superfluity of which some, as history shows, are very brutal' (Agentur für die Selbstaufhebung des Proletariats 1983). In these statements, Nazi concentration and extermination camps were primarily understood as spaces of forced labour characteristic of a brutal capitalist-imperialist regime so that any potential qualitative differences between manifestations of state violence became strongly blurred. In this way, any specificity either of the past or the present largely got lost in the equation. In prognostic and motivational terms, this framing allowed these (pro-)Refugee actors to see themselves as part of a global liberation movement against the evils of capitalism and imperialism. What is more, these actors explicitly accused those (pro-)Refugee actors discussed in the previous section as being complicit in the reproduction of the suffering of Refugees as they had nothing to offer but 'impotent moral appeals' (Internationale Kommunistische Partei 1981). Putting it into the context of the dominant public discourses in the 1980s, however, it becomes more ambivalent. For, even though this strategy was an attempt to radically put into question any notion of a 'break' with the Nazi past, it ironically reproduced to some degree the notion of the FRG as a 'normal nation' that figured prominently among the political right. For the subsumption of German history and politics under a broader system of Western imperialism (often seen as lead by the USA and Israel) made it possible to avoid questions about the specificity of German state violence and political persecution both in the past and present. In so doing, any discussion of responsibility Germany might (and should) have (both in the past and present) was thus silenced.[5]

Second, some (pro-)Refugee actors emphasised the continuities between the German past and present not to fully discredit the FRG but rather to *incriminate* it, thereby leaving space open for changes that could and should be made by the state in the present. The clearest examples for this framing were put forward in various protest campaigns by and in support of Roma Refugees who were in danger of being deported to Eastern Europe. In 1989, for example, Roma activists and supporters occupied the premises of the former concentration camp Neuengamme near Hamburg (Herold 2009), thereby emphasising both explicitly and implicitly a continuity of injustice:

> Very few survived the Holocaust. The genocide of Roma and Sinti is a fact that must not be repressed. Even after 1945, materials from Nazi times denouncing Roma and Sinti were used

> for decades. […] Today, many are still fighting for their recognition as victims of the Nazi reign and for compensation. People often say that the crimes of the Nazi regime 'cannot be remedied'. This is true. However, such words are cynical if help is denied even where something can be done so that the often-quoted sentence rather has the meaning of 'not wanting to remedy'. (Hamburger Initiative ‚Bleiberecht für Roma' 1989)

A similar occupation campaign started in May 1993 on the site of the former concentration camp Dachau near Munich. On the cover of a brochure documenting the first month of the occupation, a photo shows several protestors holding a banner reading 'Gassed in the past – deported today' [Früher vergast – Heute abgeschoben] ("Roma-Fluchtburg in Dachau: Eine Dokumentation Der Ersten 30 Tage" 1993). One way in which this continuity between past and present state violence was articulated was by characterising the latter as a 'modernised', technically advanced, and refined version of the former:

> The injustice perpetrated by Nazi Germany on Roma people, is today perpetuated by the Federal German government in a different, 'modern' way: Roma are hunted down with infrared cameras at the Eastern border by special units of the border troops, imprisoned in camps and deported on a massive scale. ("Roma-Fluchtburg in Dachau: Eine Dokumentation Der Ersten 30 Tage" 1993, 17)

In contrast to the above examples in which the claim to continuity between past and present was based on a specific focus on capitalist exploitation, the continuity was based on shared experience of political persecution of a particular minority group. In so doing, the memory of Nazism was not only used as an allegory for present suffering but was itself an *object* in these protests insofar as both the 'right to stay' of current Roma and the inscription of the suffering of Sinti and Roma during the Holocaust into public memory were simultaneously at stake. For these activists, then, the key challenge was to raise public attention to both their past and present experiences of discrimination, deportation, and death.

Compared to the above-discussed radical left-wing actors, however, their critique was motivated less by a discrediting than an *incriminating* impetus: they explicitly addressed the state and appealed to its historical responsibility to overcome and make up for its centuries-old tradition of antiziganism that cut across both its totalitarian past and democratic present. While these actors strongly attacked the dominant notion of the FRG as a democratic society that had broken with and learned from its Nazi past, they nonetheless articulated direct demands 'to the government of the FRG' ("Roma-Fluchtburg in Dachau: Eine Dokumentation Der Ersten 30 Tage" 1993, 3), thereby accepting the state as a political addressee whose legitimacy in the present depended on how it dealt with and compensated for its past wrongdoings. Claiming that 'the souls of the Roma murdered by the Nazis in Dachau will only find peace when their descendants find their right to live here in Germany' ("Roma-Fluchtburg in Dachau: Eine Dokumentation Der Ersten 30 Tage" 1993), they reframed the right of asylum as – in Souter's words – a 'form of reparation for past injustice' (Souter 2014, 326).

The past as a source of obfuscation? Changing analogies between the FRG and its Nazi past

Most of the claims made throughout the 1980s were centred around a critique of the West German *state* apparatus, particularly its immigration regime. In contrast, the

German *public* primarily served as an addressee appealed to for support and solidarity based on 'shared' experiences of suffering and victimhood given the 'thousands of Germans who were wandering around in the world as political refugees due to Hitler-fascism!' (Koordinationsbüro "Frankfurter Appell" 1984). This critique – focused on state and elites – also figured prominently among radical left-wing actors for whom the main addressee was not the German population as such, but rather its proletarian segments. To a certain degree, however, this resulted in the same tendency to exonerate the broader population while the critique of racism remained limited to the state and its political elite. As was stated during an anti-fascist conference in the late 1980s, racism was seen as being 'introduced into the population through legal measures and organised agitation' (Erste bayerische Aktionskonferenz gegen Rassismus, Faschismus und Sexismus in Nürnberg 1989). Accordingly, the accompanying evocations of the Nazi past – though differing both in content and intention – predominantly focused on Nazi state politics and practices.

Faced with a massive growth of anti-Refugee resentments in the mainstream public sphere from the late 1980s onwards as well as a wave of racist violence directed against Refugees and anyone depicted as 'foreign' in in the context of the German unification (Herbert 2014; Kooroshy and Mecheril 2019), this state-centred diagnostic framing was increasingly questioned, particularly by (radical) left-wing actors. In 1987, for instance, an anti-fascist group interpreted the hostile anti-asylum discourse as an indication that the 'democratic consciousness of many German citizens is frighteningly fragile. Hidden behind the façade are xenophobia, racism and even the willingness to violence, to terror against strangers' (Antifaschister Arbeitskreis Duisburg et al. 1987, 5). This shift towards a more society-centred critique also had implications for the role memory politics played in these struggles, with some authors explicitly putting into question the validity and appropriateness of historical analogies with Nazism, particularly with regards to the anti-imperialist framing discussed in the previous section. One main assumption was that comparisons and equations with the Nazi regime might *obfuscate* rather than illuminate the distinct problems of racism in the anti-asylum discourse in the present. According to this diagnostic framing, the specific social and political conditions which underpinned racism in the present could not be grasped by antifascist and anti-imperialist perspectives that remained entrenched in the past and reduced racism to a top-down phenomenon. In 1991, for example, the *Alternative List* argued that such a focus

> misjudges the comprehensiveness of the threat through wrong analogies to the German past. At the most, racism is understood as a specifically German lack of modernity. […] The explanation of the particularly bad "German" as such […] obscures both cause and causer. The reference to racism and neofascism as the remaining legacy of the unresolved German past misconstrues the topics central to radical right-wing identities today. (Alternative Liste 1991)

What was criticised here was an externalisation of the problem of racism as an 'archaic' remnant of the past that could be overcome by 'modernising' Germany's political culture. Such a critical intervention should still be understood as a type of memory politics. The main difference to those diagnostic framings discussed in the previous two sections lay in the assumption that such historical comparisons might not necessarily help to get a better

understanding of the *specificities* of both past and present. Other actors still made a case for the use of historical analogies but suggested refining and differentiating them. In 1990, for example, a radical left-wing group in Bremen remarked that, while being 'aware of the problem of historical comparisons' (das Referat 1990, 1), the tradition of German nationalism should be regarded as a line of continuity that linked the FRG with its Nazi predecessor:

> The racism of the German class is embedded in the model of the national community [Volksgemeinschaft]. This has already been the case for the Nazis who implemented a social system that produced social betterment of the autochthonous population [Einheimischen] on the one hand and on the other disadvantages and over-exploitation of the others. (das Referat 1990, 11)

Such a focus on the broader tradition of German nationalism, it was further argued, could also help to extend the problem of racism from a state project 'from above' to a societal problem 'from below' (das Referat 1990, 1). Such a focus on more differentiated invocations of Holocaust memory became more influential in the context of the experiences of large-scale racist violence in in the wake of the German unification. It was also expressed in – often more indirectly – evocations of the Nazi past that rather focused on German society than Nazi state politics. In 1991, for instance, the *Anti-Racist Initiative (ARI)* in Berlin criticised how dominant public discourse tended to reduce racism to a 'youth problem', thereby ignoring 'the broad support among the population' (Antirassistische Initiative e.V. and Antifa-Infotelefon 1991, 1). Furthermore, they put this attitude of ignorance in a context of post-Nazi defensiveness, invoking the popular phrase 'we knew nothing about this' (Antirassistische Initiative e.V. and Antifa-Infotelefon 1991, 1). A year later, a group of Refugees and supporters occupying parts of the Technical University Berlin in 1992 stated:

> Through the 'asylum debate', politicians in this country added fuel to the already burning fire of racism. This is one of the reasons why racist attacks are turning more brutal and more numerous. […] We Refugees are the weakest members of this society. We are nonetheless convinced that we have a right to be treated as equals. In future, the treatment of Refugees and minorities will prove whether this society has learnt from its past or not. (Antirassistisches Zentrum (AStA TU Berlin) 1992, 31–32)

In contrast to appealing to the empathy of the German population based on their past suffering, this framing primarily appealed to their responsibility for both past and present injustices perpetrated in the name of Germany which could not be reduced to the state and its government. Historical comparisons still played an important role here, but they were introduced at a different point and in a different way: For these actors, the most important lesson from the past was that the broader population had been indifferent towards or actively participated in political persecution. While the political injustice in question had significantly changed since the defeat of the Nazi regime, this problem of popular indifference and complicity was regarded as remaining the same. Here, the invocation of the past did not only serve to criticise state institutions and asylum politics but was also directed against the framing of the German nation in ethno-cultural terms that dominated the time of the unification and its aftermath. Overall, then, these debates about the appropriateness of historical equations in the

late 1980s and early 1990s added another layer of complexity and controversy to the emerging field of (pro-)Refugee struggles.

Conclusions

The memory of Nazism and the Holocaust has often been used as a 'platform' (Rothberg 2009, 3) to emphasise, discuss, and scandalise injustices in the present. As was demonstrated throughout this paper, this practice of evoking the past also figured prominently in early (pro-)Refugee struggles in the FRG, thereby echoing and responding to the broader significance of the 'memory and migration nexus' in dominant discussions around German 'national identity'. A closer look at the 'long 1980s' demonstrated how Refugee activists and their supporters drew upon the German Nazi past to interpret and frame the FRG's increasingly restrictive asylum politics. While some formulated their claims against the assumption of a break between the Nazi past and the FRG present, others stressed continuities between the two. A third framing put the appropriateness of historical comparisons altogether into question for understanding the specificity of anti-Refugee hostility and racism in the present. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the different problem diagnoses and their articulations through references to the Nazi past thus became a key subject of internal debate and conflict, echoing broader concerns about the ambivalent positionality of (pro-)Refugee activists within the nation-state order. These different evocations illustrate how the past is not only *used* to formulate claims about present injustices but also *interpreted and retold* in different ways.

Overall, the paper sought to contribute to the intersecting debates on migration, movements, and memory in the following ways: First, it challenged the common depiction of (pro-)Refugee activism as a very recent phenomenon in (West) German history. To counter this notion, the paper focused on (pro-)Refugee activism in the decade before the constitutional amendment which has largely been ignored in current debates. Second, through the lens of multidirectional memory, it aimed to demonstrate how (pro-)Refugee struggles can serve as a key terrain on which Holocaust memory has been (and is) practiced and rearticulated. Third, it tried to provide a systematic analysis of a crucial issue which has remained largely unaddressed in the existing literature on activist engagements with multidirectional memory: By tracing varying invocations of memory in different framings, multidirectional memory was examined as a (potential) site of conflict. Further historical-sociological research could help to shed light on this complex reservoir of (pro-)migrant and (pro-)Refugee engagements with Nazism and Holocaust memory as well as their interlinkages with other histories of violence.

Notes

1. I use the term 'Refugee' not in a legal sense but extend it to any people who experience forced migration and/or are affected by asylum-related detention and deportation practices. To mark this distinction, I write the term with a capital 'R'. Furthermore, I use the term '(pro-)Refugee' as a shorthand for referring to both Refugee activists and support activists.
2. The APO Archive which is incorporated in the archive of Berlin's Freie Universität, the Dokumentationszentrum und Museum über die Migration in Deutschland (DOMiD) in Cologne, the Archiv für alternatives Schrifttum (afas) in Duisburg, the Papiertiger and the Collective Library and Poster Archive in Berlin as well as the archive of the

Informationszentrum 3. Welt (iz3w) in Freiburg. Most data gathered consists of grey literature produced by protest actors for public consumption such as leaflets or demonstration announcements as well as newspaper articles.

3. An important exception in this regard were so-called 'boatpeople' from Vietnam who were granted asylum in the FRG from 1978/79 until the early 1980s (Kleinschmidt 2013; Bösch 2017; Berlinghoff 2021; Merziger 2016). However, their case was exceptional insofar as they were granted asylum through a quota regulation. They did not apply for asylum on German territory but arrived there already having been recognised as refugees beforehand. In contrast, the accusation of asylum 'abuse' was directed towards those non-European Refugees seeking asylum through the regular asylum procedure on German territory (Bade 1994; Joppke 1997; Bosswick 2000).
4. The focus of this paper lies on (pro-)Refugee struggles taking place in West Germany before and after unification. Hence, I do not further elaborate on the East German context as this would require an extensive analysis of the legal and political context of the GDR which is not possible within the scope of this paper. For an analysis of the role of political asylum in the GDR, see: (Poutrus 2016; Poutrus 2019; Priemel 2011; Karcı 2020).
5. As Benicke shows, this problematic relation to Holocaust memory had already been present in earlier phases of German radical left-wing activism between the late 1960s and late 1970s (Benicke 2010).

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