

AIRBORNE ASYLUM: MIGRATION BY AIRPLANE IN (WEST) GERMANY, 1945-1980S

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I. Refugees don't fly, do they?

“Why not fly to freedom?”¹, or: “Ever wondered why refugees don't take the plane?”² Since 2015, these and similar questions have frequently appeared on the websites of NGOs and pro-migration networks in Germany and Europe. Amid the 2015 European migrant crisis, activists sought to explain why media abounded with images of the strenuous journeys of migrants traveling via the Balkan route or boarding shaky boats to cross the Mediterranean, running the risk of drowning, while we saw hardly any images of refugees arriving by airplane, even though flying would be safer, faster, and much cheaper. In their answers, the activists cited a directive passed by the Council of the European Union in 2001. According to this so-called Carrier Sanction Directive (2001/51/EC), airlines are to be held financially accountable for any passenger that turns out to be an asylum seeker who is not eligible for protection and thus is rejected at the border. Anxious to avoid any risk, airline agents often refuse to sell flight tickets to potential asylum seekers and customers who lack proper documents and visas – even though, according to the UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is not required to have papers in order to seek protection. Indirectly outsourcing migration control to private companies, this strategy is intended to reduce the number of refugees and migrants that can arrive at airports in the EU.³

As a historian looking at this highly topical, normative debate and the migration policies around which it revolves, I am interested in its deeper historical roots. The trend towards outsourcing immigration control and limiting air access to Western Europe was not a genuine invention of the Council of the European Union, nor did it originate in 2001. This article, which draws on my broader comparative research on the subject, traces the historical development of airborne refugee migration⁴ and its control. In the case of West Germany, which is at the center of this article, the idea of including airlines in a scheme for migration control goes back to the 1980s and the amendments to the Asylum Procedure Act made at that

- 1 Berliner Ratschlag für Demokratie, Warum kommen die Flüchtlinge nicht einfach mit dem Flugzeug?, September 2015, <https://www.berlinerratschlagfuerdemokratie.de/2015/09/flucht-per-flugzeug/> (last accessed January 9, 2021).
- 2 Jascha Galaski, LibertiesEU, Ever Wondered Why Refugees Don't Take the Plane?, December 10, 2018, <https://www.liberties.eu/en/news/why-refugees-do-not-take-the-plane/16529> (last accessed January 9, 2021).
- 3 The “measure is among the general provisions aimed at curbing migratory flows and combating illegal immigration.” Council directive 2001/51/EC, June 28, 2001.
- 4 In this article, I use the term “migrant” in a generic sense to denote different groups (Jewish displaced persons, German refugees from the GDR, German resettlers from the Soviet Union, and asylum seekers) who relocated under conditions that – despite wide differences between those groups – can be regarded as precarious and at least partly involuntary. When I use the term “refugee” to describe asylum seekers, this does not necessarily imply that those persons' refugee status was legally confirmed, but that the migrants themselves asked for asylum and protection.

time. This policy emerged in a specific historical context, namely in the context of rising numbers of South-North migrants since the late 1970s and the ensuing “asylum debate” in West Germany in the 1980s. West Germany was not alone in adopting such a policy. Denmark introduced similar legal provisions against carriers in 1986, Belgium in 1987, the UK in the same year, and other European countries followed. Even before the introduction of carriers’ liabilities, there were attempts to curb airborne migration by introducing new visa requirements or, on site at the airport, by rejecting refugees who allegedly failed to clearly articulate their claim to asylum at the airport or who had transited through a country that was considered “safe” by the German authorities.

The legal background and the general history of German asylum policies are well documented.⁵ The details of their close connection to airborne migration and particularly to the local dynamics at airports, however, have largely escaped the attention of historians.⁶ One of the few scholarly works on the topic was written by sociologist Boris Nieswand, whose article analyzes the current border regime at Frankfurt airport resulting from the 1993 Airport Asylum Procedure (*Flughafenverfahren*).⁷ By concentrating on the period before 1993, my aim in this article is to draw on archival records to reveal deeper historical trajectories while using Frankfurt airport, (West) Germany’s largest transit hub, as a magnifying lens that allows me to trace these trajectories in connection with local dynamics and actors, including border guards, the airport operator, social workers and activists, and the migrants themselves. To put it in a slightly oversimplified way, I seek to historicize the questions posed by pro-migration activists cited at the outset of this article. Historicizing these questions means not only that my answer entails a longer historical background than the answers usually given in public debates or the social sciences. It also means that the human rights activism behind these questions is part of the historicization, since the history of humanitarianism and pro-migration activism at and about the airport becomes part of the trajectories that I outline here.

Admittedly, the title of this introductory section is somewhat rhetorical: Of course, some refugees travel by plane. This was the case before the implementation of new restrictions to air access in the 1980s and it is still so today, as some refugees travel with valid visas, while others manage to evade controls, for instance, with the help of false documents or by choosing less monitored routes.

5 Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (München, 2017); Patrice G. Poutrus, *Umkämpftes Asyl. Vom Nachkriegsdeutschland bis in die Gegenwart* (Berlin, 2019).

6 There are a few historical studies on other countries, e.g. Bret Edwards, “Governing Global Aeromobility. Canada and Airport Refugee Claimants in the 1980s,” *Transfers* 6/3 (2016): 22-40.

7 Boris Nieswand, “Die Transitzone und die Fiktion der Nichteinreise. Das Flughafenasylverfahren im Zwielficht von Normalität und Ausnahme,” in *Migrationsregime vor Ort und lokales Aushandeln von Migration*, ed. Jochen Oltmer (Wiesbaden, 2018), 345-376.

Certain groups of refugees are also included in EU resettlement schemes and relocation flights, enabling them to get airlifted to Germany, as was the case not long ago, in September 2020, when over a hundred children and vulnerable persons were flown in from the burned-out refugee camp on Lesbos. Data on asylum seekers' means of travel, first collected in 2017 by Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, suggest that almost one third of all migrants *may* have arrived in Germany by air.⁸ The scope and reality of migrants' experiences with air travel is underrepresented both in the general media and in activist-civic education about policies against air migration. In the public mind, there is also the widespread stereotype that refugees cannot afford airline tickets. This discourse is also reflected on the political far right. When statistics about refugees traveling by plane spread in 2018, members of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) did not hide the fact that they perceived migration by air as downright obscene. "They don't flee, they fly,"⁹ wrote a member of the AfD's parliamentary group in a widely shared social media post – as if being a "real refugee" and boarding an airplane were mutually exclusive.

Observing that the phenomenon of air migration to Germany is simultaneously understated, underrepresented in both research and public, and politically highly contested, I hope that my article might contribute to a normalization of the phenomenon by revealing its hidden long existence in (West) German history. If the first aim of this article is to historicize the control of air migration through the lens of Frankfurt airport, its second aim is to situate this historicization within a general account of refugee migration by air since the late 1940s and the resumption of civil aviation after the Second World War. This article is divided into chronological phases, from the 1940s to the 1980s, which correlate with the different groups of refugees that landed at Frankfurt airport over time: Jewish displaced persons (DPs) in the late 1940s, refugees from the Soviet occupation zone of postwar Germany in the 1950s, German resettlers (*Aussiedler*) from the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, and foreign asylum seekers, especially in the 1980s. These different groups do not have much in common except for, first, using airplanes and, second, being migrants under different, precarious, and at least partly involuntary conditions. Bringing them together in this article allows me to track changing patterns of airborne migration and with it the changes in their perception, acceptance, and management on the policy level and on site at the airport.

8 The numbers must be treated with caution, as interviewees could have been aware that air routes are theoretically the only way to legally apply for asylum in Germany since the Dublin Regulation rules that a refugee must apply for asylum in the country where s/he first sets foot on EU territory. Also, refugees might have taken a flight within the EU.

9 "Sie fliehen nicht, sie fliegen." post on Facebook and Twitter, AfD Bundestagsfraktion, March 6, 2018, <https://twitter.com/afdimbundestag/status/971059035863740416> (last accessed January 3, 2021).

For the general historiography on migration, the transportation modes of migrants are not mere side aspects and merit more attention. Following political scientist William Walters, who made a similar point,¹⁰ it seems important to take into analytical account that different routes – like traveling on a boat via the Mediterranean versus arriving via plane in an airport transit zone – lead to different migrant experiences. Different routes also involve different mechanisms of migration management and political control, and imply differing opportunities and agency for all actors involved, including migrants, border police, policy makers, smugglers, NGOs, and activists. By highlighting the peculiarities of airborne migration, a third aim of this article is to emphasize the potential of a focus on transportation and transit within migration history.

II. From camps to runways: humanitarian airlifts in the postwar 1940s

During the Second World War, few people in Europe experienced aircraft as a means of humanitarian relief and rescue. Instead, for most civilians, including refugees and individuals persecuted under Nazi rule, aviation was largely synonymous with destruction and deadly air power. Memories of the bombing attacks continue to shape collective memories in Germany up to the present day.¹¹ Yet, airplanes – often the very same airplanes that had been used in the air war – also took on a fresh and positive image during the postwar years of reconstruction. Amid rising Cold War tensions, from June 1948 to May 1949, American and British planes dropped over two million tons of supplies for the population in West Berlin after the Soviet government had blocked land access to the city. The use of air transportation for humanitarian ends was not a post-1945 invention; already in the interwar decades, airplanes were used for dropping relief supplies, for instance, to victims of natural disasters. The scope of the Berlin Airlift (*Luftbrücke*), however, was unprecedented and turned out to be a political and a propaganda success for the western Allies. The famous nickname “raisin bombers” (*Rosinenbomber*), as the planes were dubbed by parts of the Berlin population, mirrors the shift from the image of Allied airplanes as fatal weapons to a heroic story of airborne relief. Both the air war and the mythologized Berlin Airlift became aviation-related *lieux de mémoire* in German commemorative culture.¹²

One story linked to the Berlin Airlift did not become part of heroization and public commemoration, though: the *Luftbrücke* was not only a cargo

10 William Walters, “Migration, Vehicles, and Politics. Three theses on viapolitics,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 18/4 (2015): 469–488.

11 They figure in family stories, local commemorative culture, and, since the early 2000s, increasingly in popular film and media, contributing to a narrative of victimhood, which contrasts with the national politics of memory and its focus on the Shoah. Malte Thießen, “Der ‘Feuersturm’ im kommunikativen Gedächtnis. Tradierung und Transformation des Luftkriegs als Lebens- und Familiengeschichte,” in *Luftkrieg. Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa*, eds. Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, Malte Thießen (Göttingen, 2009), 312–331.

12 Martina Metzger, “Luftkrieg und Luftbrücke. West-Berliner Erfahrungen und Wahrnehmungen,” in *Die Berliner Luftbrücke. Erinnerungsort des Kalten Krieges*, ed. Corine Defrance (Berlin, 2018), 141–157.

lift, but also one of the first refugee airlifts in history. On their return flights from Berlin, the planes carried over 5,700 Jewish refugees out of displaced persons camps in the American and British zones of Berlin and flew them to Frankfurt airport, from where they were transferred to DP camps in the American, British, and French occupation zones of Germany.¹³ As the city was blockaded and supplies had to be flown in, the Allied authorities thought “that it might be more practical to bring the DPs to food, rather than food to DPs in Berlin,”¹⁴ as a member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), one of the largest Jewish refugee organizations, noted. Moreover, the U.S. administration, who ran most DP camps in Berlin, struggled with a constant lack of space as more Jews, fleeing from antisemitic violence in Poland, arrived in Berlin while others did not leave, since they refused to be repatriated and instead waited in the camps until they obtained permission to move to Palestine, the United States, or other countries. When they were offered the chance to leave Berlin by air, after initial hesitation and objections, most DPs accepted. Among other reasons, many people wanted to escape the feeling of being trapped in the city.¹⁵

Although the Berlin Airlift became such a publicly celebrated and famous event, the DP’s part in the undertaking remained widely neglected – even in Jewish memory cultures. This is not surprising; although many refugees took a plane for the first time in their lives, the airlift was not their final passage to emigration, but just another transit leg within their circuitous itineraries. After their flight from Tempelhof to Frankfurt, most people arrived at yet another DP camp in Southern Germany still awaiting emigration.¹⁶ What is striking about the human airlift, besides its curious absence from official memories, is the fact that it demonstrates the large humanitarian potential of air transport. This potential was not so much due to its quantitative capacities, but to its ability of flying over otherwise blockaded territories and borders.

13 Angelika Königseder, “Die Evakuierung jüdischer displaced persons über die Luftbrücke aus Berlin,” *Zeitschrift für*

Geschichtswissenschaft 46/6 (1998): 505-511; Robert A. Slayton, “The Most Precious Cargo,” *Commentary*, September

2009, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/robert-slayton/the-most-precious-cargo/> (last accessed January 3, 2021).

14 Memorandum, December 10, 1948, American Joint Distribution Committee Archives [henceforward AJDCA], Item 695400 http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Count/NY_AR45-54_00059/NY_AR45-54_00059_00060.pdf?search= (January 16, 2021).

15 Königseder, “Evakuierung,” 509.

16 *Ibid.*, 510.



Figure 1: Iconic image of the Berlin Airlift, July 1948. Most photographs of the event capture the perspective of either German spectators and children in Berlin or the Allied pilots and cargo packers. The Jewish Refugees are as absent from the visual commemoration of the airlift as they are from its narrative. © bpk-Bildagentur.

Air transportation also meant that even long-distance destinations could be reached faster than by train or ship (in the 1940s still with stopovers for refueling though). This also had humanitarian potential in terms of speeding up resettlement and making the transit for refugees as comfortable and short as possible. Several relief organizations in postwar Germany began to realize and use this potential. In 1947, more than 175,000 Jewish survivors and refugees still lived in Germany – many of them uprooted, stuck, in transit. Numerous parallel or overlapping attempts by states and humanitarian organizations to resettle or repatriate larger groups of Jewish DPs concurred with individual efforts to depart from Germany. This situation of pending transits and departures of refugees coincided with significant progress in civil aviation. The end of the war had led to a liberation of European airspace; technological innovations during the war and a large pool of army-trained pilots and technical experts were factors that boosted the postwar expansion of commercial aviation.¹⁷ In West Germany, seven airports resumed civil operations immediately after the war, including Hamburg and Frankfurt, which from the outset offered more long-distance routes than other German airports. The literature on the history of civil aviation tells us that flying in the 1940s and 1950s was for wealthy travelers and businessmen. Some flight tickets, however, were also booked by displaced persons and NGOs to support their efforts to solve the refugee crises in Germany (and other countries).

Since 1947, different aid organizations increasingly used opportunities to include air transport in their rescue schemes; some bought tickets, others chartered entire airplanes. Thus, starting in September 1947, the British Jewish Refugees Committee booked seats for DPs on commercial flights from Berlin to London.¹⁸ Likewise, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) ran and financed a regular passenger air service between Munich and Lod airport, near Tel Aviv, since September 1948, which comprised about twenty flights per month and brought several hundred emigrants to the newly founded state of Israel.¹⁹ Another important humanitarian player, the United Nations Organization's International Refugee Organization (IRO, the successor to UNRRA) also decided, in early 1948, that, in addition to the many ship passages they booked, "the possibilities of this means of transportation [aircraft] will be still further explored."²⁰ In the case of Venezuela, the IRO reported by the end of 1948 that the "initiation of air movements to this country has already resulted in the transportation of large numbers of

17 Peter Lyth, Hans-Liudger Diemel, "Introduction," in *Flying the Flag. European Commercial Air Transport since 1945*, eds. Hans-Liudger Diemel, Peter Lyth (New York, 1998), 3-4.

18 Jewish Refugees Committee London to Jewish Relief Unit B.A.O.R., September 19, 1947, The Wiener Library HA11-I/3a8, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5107608405/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=0dcdb965&pg=1> (last accessed January 16, 2021).

19 Memorandum, December 10, 1948, AJDCA, Item 695400 http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Count/NY_AR45-54_00059/NY_AR45-54_00059_00060.pdf#search= (last accessed January 16, 2021).

20 Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, press release, June 22, 1948, The Wiener Library HAS-5/2, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5107635712/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=c3be1a1d&pg=1> (last accessed January 16, 2021).

immigrants. Six hundred, for instance, are expected to be moved during the month of July and nine hundred during August in one of the biggest civilian air lifts ever undertaken.”²¹ Other air routes booked by the IRO led from Italy and Western Germany to Brazil, Canada, and New York. In October 1950, more than one thousand DPs were airlifted from Germany to Australia. Overall, the IRO relocated substantially more people by ocean passages than by air, however, even if in some months they booked more planes than ships. In the second half of June 1949, for instance, twelve ships with over 11,000 Jewish emigrants from Europe reached destinations in the Americas, whereas twenty planes carried 993 persons over the Atlantic.²²



Figure 2: “Men and women, some holding little children, board plane destined for Israel,” Munich 1949. Often it was children and families, that is, DPs who were considered particularly vulnerable, who were transported by air to their new countries. © Joint Distribution Committee Archives.

Why, if capacities were significantly lower (and prices per passenger in most cases higher), did refugee organizations like the JDC and the IRO include air transportation in their relief schemes? For one, air movements were not a substitution, but a supplement to ship transport thus adding to a general increase of transport capacities. Sometimes the organizations also wanted to speed up the resettlement of those refugees who were already permitted to immigrate to an overseas country but were unable to book a ship passage anytime soon.²³ Another, perhaps more interesting answer to the question is that certain groups were perceived as particularly vulnerable, so that the organization chose a fast and comparatively less strenuous mode of transportation. In 1949, for example, the IRO organized eight flights to transport 500 pregnant or nursing mothers and their families from Naples to Brazil; a similar number of unaccompanied children was airlifted from Germany to the United States and Australia. The majority of flights from Germany to New York listed by the IRO in summer 1949 was organized by Youth Argosy,

²³ Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, monthly digest, August 1948, p. 29, 1947, The Wiener Library

HAS-5/2, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/>

SC5107635712/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=c3be1a1d&pg=1 (last accessed January 16, 2021).

²¹ Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, monthly digest, August 1948, p. 29, 1947, The Wiener Library HAS-5/2, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5107635712/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=c3be1a1d&pg=1> (last accessed January 16, 2021).

²² IRO Information Bulletin 19, July 1, 1949, pp. 8-9, The Wiener Library HAS-5/2, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5107635712/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=c3be1a1d&pg=1> (last accessed January 20, 2021).

a new, private organization in the U.S. that provided affordable air travel opportunities for young people.²⁴ Here, once again, a special humanitarian potential of airplanes comes to the fore, as they were considered the preferred long-distance means of travel for vulnerable refugee groups, especially children. Their other humanitarian potential, namely the ability to cross otherwise blockaded borders via air, gained importance twice in German postwar history: for the DPs during the Berlin Blockade and then, as the next section will show, a few years later, for a different group of refugees stuck in Berlin.

III. Changing patterns of migration and refugee relief at Frankfurt airport, 1950s-1980s

Besides emigration from Germany and the resettlement of Jewish refugees, the postwar years also saw immigration to West Germany and the Federal Republic. The main immigrant groups were ethnic German resettlers (*Heimatvertriebene*, *Aussiedler*) from the Eastern bloc as well as inner-German refugees escaping from Soviet-controlled East Germany and, after 1949, the German Democratic Republic (so-called *Zonenflüchtlinge*) to the West. Considered German, they could immigrate to West Germany as recognized citizens of the Federal Republic. Seen as a whole, travel by air played a very marginal role in these movements. Seen from the micro-perspective of Frankfurt airport, however, the fact that some refugee groups did arrive by airplane had important consequences on the ground as it sparked the development of local refugee management in and around the airport.

It was during the incipient mass exodus from the GDR that Frankfurt airport first became a transit point in the East-West migration during the Cold War. After the GDR had shut down its external borders in 1952, significantly more people than before escaped by crossing the inner-city border between East Berlin and the city's western sectors.²⁵ From reception centers and refugee camps in West Berlin such as Marienfelde, the refugees often traveled with Pan Am or other Allied airlines to the western parts of the FRG. In February 1953, two refugee flights a day reached the Rhine-Main-Airport from Berlin Tempelhof. Upon landing in Frankfurt, the migrants were brought to Frankfurt's central train station to continue their journey by train to transit camps and destinations mainly in southern Germany.²⁶ From mid-February to the end of March 1953 alone, the travelers'

24 Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, monthly digest, March 1949, p. 6; IRO Information Bulletin 19-21 (July 1949), The Wiener Library HAS-5/2, database Post-War Europe: Refugees, Exile and Resettlement 1945-1950, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5107635712/GDSC?u=weberst&sid=GDSC&xid=c3be1a1d&pg=1> (last accessed January 20, 2021).

25 Presse- und Informationssamt des Landes Berlin, *Die Mauer und ihr Fall* (Berlin, 6th ed., 1996).

26 Welfare office Frankfurt, note, February 12, 1953, Archiv Caritasverband Frankfurt/Main [henceforward AArchF] 5113 1953.

aid office at Frankfurt central train station (*Bahnhofsmision*) counted more than 10,300 refugees in transit whom they supplied with basic provisions.²⁷ For the often tired refugees, among them many elderly people and families, provisioning came rather late, considering that their transfer from the terminal to the train station took quite long, since airports and train stations were not yet connected by regular transport in those days.²⁸ The fact that most of the flights arrived in the evening made direct transit even more difficult.²⁹ Back then, the airport also did not yet resemble the recreational place it became in later years, when waiting times could be comfortably bridged by visiting cafés and restaurants. The travelers' aid office at the train station, run jointly by the Catholic care organization *Caritas* and the Protestant *Innere Mission*, therefore created an on-call service at the airport. Learning about the imminent arrival of refugees, they headed to the airport and provided their services on site.³⁰ These were the early beginnings of a refugee relief organization at Frankfurt airport, even though it was not yet permanently institutionalized.

Another wave of migrants came in the 1960s, when the air route became the most frequently used migration route for *Aussiedler* from Romania. In March 1962, the Romanian government made these potential resettlers purchase tickets from the state-owned airline Tarom if they wanted to leave the country.³¹ The political leaders in Romania generally did not make it easy for emigrants to leave the country and tried to obtain economic compensation. This way, they were able to capitalize on air emigration. At Frankfurt airport, the sudden influx of migrants posed a logistical challenge for the local authorities. Migrants often arrived without cash and orientation. Those who had neither relatives or friends in Germany who could pick them up at the airport nor a clear destination and



Figure 3: Refugees are transported to West Germany from Berlin's Tempelhof Airport (1953).
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27 Travelers' aid office Frankfurt, list, March 27, 1953; Travelers' aid office Frankfurt to welfare office Frankfurt, March 11, 1953, CArchF 5113 1953.

28 Transport interconnectivity in Frankfurt only came into existence in 1972 when the airport opened its own train station. Hans-Liudger Diemel, "Foreword," in *Unconnected Transport Networks. European Intermodal Traffic Junctions 1800-2000*, ed. Hans-Liudger Diemel (Frankfurt/Main, New York, 2004), 7.

29 Welfare office Frankfurt, note, February 12, 1953; magistrate Frankfurt to the ministry of interior and the office for refugees Hesse, March 4, 1953, CArchF 5113 1953.

30 Travelers' aid office Frankfurt to welfare office Frankfurt, March 27, 1953, CArchF 5113 1953.

31 Minister for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims to Minister of Interior Hesse, March

15, 1962, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv [henceforward HHStAW] 508 4199.

residence permit were in particular need of support. They had to be guided by local helpers to a transfer bus to Frankfurt central train station and then travel to the transit camp for *Aussiedler* in Piding, on the Austrian-German border (which was where *Aussiedler* used to arrive when they traveled overland). Again, the airport's weak public transportation links, combined with many delayed flights, made transit difficult. As was the case for the GDR refugees, a social service was therefore set up directly at the airport. Initially, the German Red Cross took charge; a few months later, local Hessian welfare authorities took over. The social workers provided the resettlers with drinks, snacks, money, as well as train tickets to Nuremberg and organized the transfer to the train station.³² Meanwhile, the number of resettlers rose, with Tarom increasingly using special flights. In September 1970 alone, 1,118 people landed at the airport. By the end of 1976, several hundred *Aussiedler* arrived almost daily.³³ In order to make their journey less strenuous, migrants occasionally stayed overnight a few kilometers away from the airport at the Hesse refugee accommodation in the town of Langen or in a room at the travelers' aid office at Frankfurt main station.³⁴

It is interesting to note that there was no provision yet for any sort of refugee accommodation on site at the airport. Instead, in the case of both the GDR refugees and the *Aussiedler*, every effort was made to help the migrants leave the airport and proceed with their immigration as quickly as possible. To further expedite their entry into West Germany, the airport administration and the border police agreed to escort the resettlers from the plane to special passport counters and waived customs controls.³⁵ This proactive approach to migration management at the airport differs starkly from the local migration regime that developed in the decades to come in order to enhance the airport's function as a border against supposed illegal immigration. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, German refugees and resettlers from the GDR and the Eastern bloc were the only larger groups of migrants that arrived at the airport in need of humanitarian assistance. For them, the airport was essentially not a border, but a transit point through which they could smoothly enter the country. Their border crossing was accepted and legitimized in advance because they were already considered ethnic Germans and future citizens of the FRG. Furthermore, their departure from the communist bloc pleased the anti-communist government of West Germany.³⁶ For refugees from the Middle East and the Global South, who arrived at Frankfurt airport in increasing numbers since the

32 German Red Cross Frankfurt to Ministry of Interior Hesse, March 19, 1962, HHStAW 508 4199.

33 Lists with numbers of resettlers, HHStAW 508 4200.

34 Ministry of Social Affairs Hesse, report, January 15, 1967; internal letter, January 13, 1971, HHStAW 508 4199.

35 German Red Cross to Minister for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims, January 17, 1967, HHStAW 508 4199.

36 Klaus J. Bade, *Migration in European History* (Bodmin, 2003), 266.

late 1970s, the situation was different. For them the airport was not simply a transit point but rather a border and a barrier where they were stopped and possibly turned away.

The changing pattern of migration at Frankfurt Airport was part of a broader structural shift of refugee immigration to West Germany and Western Europe. Whereas most refugees in the 1950s and 1960s had arrived from the Eastern bloc, the 1970s and especially the 1980s saw a growing South-North trend.³⁷ One contributory factor behind this shift was the advent of new, globalized access to air travel. The 1970s marked a watershed in this regard. It was a decade of accelerated change in commercial air transport. Technical innovations such as the introduction of jumbo jets, the expansion of consumer societies, and the liberalization of aviation markets first in the United States and then in Europe leveraged the rising age of mass aviation.³⁸ The result was a pluralization of passenger milieus. New customers from the (lower) middle classes benefitted from the democratization of flying, and so did migrants and asylum seekers.

Observing the changing social composition of air passengers, *Caritas* and its protestant counterpart *Diakonie* established permanent social services at Frankfurt Airport. “Air travel is no longer only for the wealthy [...] ill travelers, the elderly, disabled, helpless foreigners, people who are stuck, have been deported or have not yet been able to enter the country”³⁹ also arrive at the airport, the *Diakonie Hessen* explained. The Airport Social Services (*Flughafensozialdienst*, FSD) was founded in 1975 and consisted of an ecumenical team of social workers. The airport operator – pleased that they could resolve an unprofitable, yet indispensable task at the airport – provided the FSD with offices and access to most areas of the airport. Refugees were not yet a major client group when the FSD started. Its social workers did assist the German Red Cross and the local welfare authorities of Hesse from time to time when German migrants from Eastern bloc countries arrived at the airport and they also looked after asylum seekers. Their main task, however, was regular passenger aid. In the 1980s, with the numbers of asylum seekers landing in Frankfurt rising, refugee work was suddenly propelled to the top of the agenda.⁴⁰

One reason for the increase of refugee numbers at Frankfurt Airport was the closure of another transit route in the late summer of 1986. Up until then, many asylum seekers aiming to reach West Germany or one of its neighboring countries but lacking the necessary

37 Ibid., 267.

38 For a cultural history of the transformations in aviation, see Alastair Gordon, *Naked Airport. A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure* (Chicago, 2008).

39 Newsletter of the Diakonisches Werk Hessen und Nassau, 1974, Zentralarchiv der Evangelischen Kirche in Hessen und Nassau [henceforward EKHNArch] 155 3409.

40 FSD annual report 1975; church services at the airport, minutes, March 3, 1976, EKHN-Arch 155 3409.

documents and visas to book direct flights had instead traveled to Schönefeld airport in East Berlin. From there they took the metro or city train to West Berlin.⁴¹ Only in 1986 did the government in Bonn succeed in concluding an agreement with the GDR according to which potential refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia who wanted to cross the border from East to West Berlin had to present GDR authorities with a valid visa issued by West Germany. For many refugees, the so-called “hole in the Berlin Wall” (*Berliner Loch*) had been a transit opportunity that suddenly closed.⁴²

With one transit opportunity closing, another one gained in importance: at Frankfurt airport, the numbers of asylum seekers skyrocketed. According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, 88 percent of all people asking for asylum at West German borders between mid-January and June 1987 did so in Frankfurt. Nationwide (i.e. not only at the borders), the airport accounted for approximately 17 percent of all applications.⁴³ Until 1989, “the airport remained the most vital point of entry,”⁴⁴ the Ministry of Transport in Bonn declared. Many of the arriving migrants came from the Global South, frequently from Ghana, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. The majority, though, were Turkish citizens – often Kurdish, Yezidi, or Christian minorities from southeast Anatolia. A general visa requirement for Turks had been introduced by the federal government in West Germany in 1980 to curb the growing asylum immigration from Turkey that followed the ban on work permits for *Gastarbeiter* in 1973. Circumnavigating this new restriction, many migrants from Turkey started to purchase plane tickets from Istanbul to places like Barcelona or Lisbon for which Turks needed no visa. During the regular stopover in Frankfurt, they could enter the airport building, because the so-called transit privilege allowed them to enter the airport transit area without any visa. They could then ask the local German border officials for asylum.⁴⁵ Migrants from other countries took advantage of transit privileges as well. For others, seeking asylum in transit became a spontaneous compromise rather than a planned strategy. This was the case with migrants who had hired smugglers to take them to destinations like Canada or Scandinavia, but then ended up in Frankfurt, being left by their agents during stopover, without papers or money.⁴⁶

41 Ministry of Interior, internal report, December 27, 1983, Bundesarchiv Koblenz [henceforward BArch] B 106 90204.

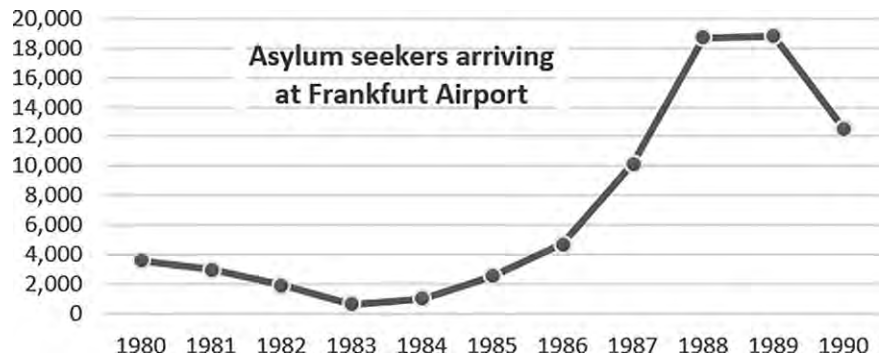
42 Herbert, *Ausländerpolitik*, 270.

43 Ministry of Interior, internal briefing, June 1, 1987, BArch B 106 207414.

44 Ministry of Traffic, notes on meeting, November 20, 1989, BArch B 108 9879.

45 Minister of Social Affairs Hesse to the Minister-President of Hesse, September 24, 1987, HHStAW 505 6008.

46 Fluchtpunkt Flughafen Frankfurt, Sozialdienst Jahresbericht 1986, p. 7, CArchF 5120-01.



In view of the growing asylum numbers in the transit zone, in 1980 the government of Hesse considered creating refugee accommodations within the airport area. The airport operator was not fond of the idea, proposing instead to set up emergency accommodations outside the fenced airport territory.⁴⁷ As no plan met with approval, the refugees continued to stay in the public transit area after their arrival. The Federal Border Guard (*Bundesgrenzschutz*, BGS) struggled to keep pace; the preliminary examination of each asylum petition, i.e. the interview with the individual asylum seeker and paperwork, took time. Even refugees who had already undergone the procedure were often forced to wait in the transit zone until they were brought to the Hessian refugee reception center in Schwalbach. In 1982, the FSD complained about backlogs and “inacceptable conditions”⁴⁸ in the transit area. Most persons could leave the transit zone after one to ten days, but in some extreme cases they stayed for weeks.⁴⁹ The airport operator installed a small room with 35 emergency beds within the transit zone. After being reduced in size in 1983, when refugee numbers had seemed to trend downwards, the 24m² room with ten bunk beds soon became overcrowded. An additional waiting area for refugees created in the transit zone in 1987 also failed to offer enough beds to keep asylum seekers from spending the nights on seats and floors. During their time in transit, the refugees were, as the FSD reported, “completely dependent on the FSD, since they were not allowed to leave the transit area and, for example, relatives of the newly arrived were not allowed to enter the transit area.”⁵⁰ The social workers provided primary care in the form of blankets, food, clothing and shoe donations, hygiene products, toys, etc. If need be, they also escorted refugees from the transit area to the airport clinic. And they helped retrieve lost luggage, since many items – unlike their owners who had quit their journey in transit – traveled on to the destination airport.

Figure 4: Numbers based on lists prepared by Airport Social Services. From 1983 to 1988, while asylum application numbers in the whole Bonn Republic quintupled, cases at Frankfurt Airport rose by thirty times. Graph by the author.

47 “Wenig Chancen für Lager auf Rhein-Main,” *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, July 9, 1980; “Sammel-lager am Flughafen nicht mehr aktuell?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 14, 1980, ISF S3/V 22.970.

48 FSD annual report 1982, p. 2, CArchF 5120-01.

49 In 1987, the average length of stay of applicants amounted to four days according to the BGS. Ministry of Interior, internal letter, June 2, 1987, BArch B 106 207414.

50 FSD annual report 1987, p. 34, Evangelischer Regionalverband Frankfurt und Offenbach Archiv [henceforward ERFOArch], Berichte Flughafensozialdienst.

Sooner or later, most of the asylum seekers received permission to enter the country. The transit zone did not yet have the quality it acquired in 1993, when the whole asylum procedure had to be completed while the applicant stayed in the transit zone (*Flughafenverfahren*). However, for asylum seekers in the 1980s, the transit zone was not a mere waiting room or way station. Rather, it was a closed border zone in which their status was undecided and they faced the real possibility of being turned away. This frontier character of the airport was enforced by the BGS and secured by the transit zone's spatial enclosure. Over the course of the 1980s, as the next section goes on to show, asylum seekers faced increasingly sophisticated bureaucratic procedures and tightening control while in transit. In other words, the transit zone became a local migration regime, a changing "field of action for institutional actors" and a space in which these actors, border guards and government authorities, regulated access and "categorized the (potential) migrants"⁵¹ into admissible or rejectable migrants.

IV. From transit to camp: the emergence of an airport migration regime in the 1980s

Much to the chagrin of the Ministry of the Interior in Bonn and the state government of Hesse, the attempt to close the "Berlin hole" had increased the number of asylum cases through the "transit hole" at Frankfurt Airport. The migrants' strategy of disembarking during transit might appear as a clever trick or a legal loophole, but it was in fact their international right. According to the 1951 UN Refugees Convention, no signatory state should reject asylum seekers on the grounds that they lacked visas or other documents. Although asking for asylum in transit was legal, the Bonn government did not consider the use of airport transit zones a legitimate access path to the basic right to asylum. "Manipulated routing,"⁵² as they saw it, was an abuse that had to be stopped.

Their objection was based on the argument that too many applicants for asylum were not "real" refugees. Especially asylum seekers from Turkey fell under suspicion of seeking to immigrate "with no reasons eligible for asylum."⁵³ This was a key argument in the so-called asylum debate (*Asyldebatte*) that grew ever more heated and polemical in the West German public since the mid-1980s. Not only conservatives or right-wingers but people from all sides

51 Jochen Oltmer, "Einführung," in *Migrationsregime vor Ort und lokales Aushandeln von Migration*, ed. Jochen Oltmer (Wiesbaden, 2018), 6.

52 Ministry of Interior, internal letter, January 31, 1985, BArch B 106 90204.

53 Minister of Social Affairs Hesse to the Minister-President of Hesse, September 24, 1987, HHStAW 505 6008.

of the political spectrum held the view that Article 16 of the West German Constitution, which granted everybody the right to ask for asylum in the FRG, and the protection clauses of the Geneva Refugee Convention were being abused by “economic refugees” who were not fleeing from persecution, but aspiring to better life opportunities in Europe’s rich welfare states.⁵⁴ Pejorative terms like *Scheinasylant*⁵⁵ (“bogus asylum-seeker”) or *Asylmissbrauch* (“asylum abuse”) became widespread and put asylum seekers under general suspicion.⁵⁶ Politicians and popular media fed a widespread “asylum angst” by invoking threatening images of a “flood of asylum seekers.”⁵⁷ “Asylantenschwemme auf Rhein-Main,”⁵⁸ a headline in the tabloid *BILD* warned with regard to asylum seekers at the airport. Negative feelings towards refugees also surfaced at the airport. Sometimes the social workers of the FSD met with pejorative remarks from airport personnel or travelers who felt repelled by the image of food leftovers, piles of blankets, and “the hardly decorative human caravan”⁵⁹ moving down the corridors, as one FSD member put it. “Our prestige at the airport has suffered due to our unpopular commitment to the refugees,”⁶⁰ the board of the FSD noted regretfully in 1985. The FSD also frequently complained about some of the border police staff acting hostile. In 1984, for instance, the FSD had addressed the Federal Ministry of the Interior through the representative of UNHCR Germany: A poster of UNHCR with the slogan “Refugee go home – he would if he could” hanging in the BGS office had been scribbled over by some officers and changed into “he (never) would (even) if he could.”⁶¹

The airport and airborne migration in general became key targets in the effort to contain asylum migration. New transit visa requirements were introduced in 1987. Chancellor Helmut Kohl, in order to stress his government’s decisive stance against alleged asylum abuse, explained that the new regulations targeted passengers from “certain problem states,”⁶² among them Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iran, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka. Two years later, his government also lifted the transit privilege for Turkish citizens. Political decision makers also increased pressure on airlines. The minister of finance in Hesse, Manfred Kanther, asked the airport operator whether airlines could not be “packed from an economic angle” by exposing them to “delays, controls, and costs as a result of the transportation of asylum seekers.”⁶³ The airport operator, who had

54 This was a generalization that did not take into account that the motives of migrants were often multifaceted, blurring the border between being a refugee or an immigrant. After the FRG had stopped labor immigration in 1973, many people, e.g. the relatives of “guest workers” in Germany indeed used the asylum system a back door to immigration. See, Bade, *Migration*, 268.

55 Quote from Carl-Dieter Spranger, member of the CDU/CSU fraction in parliament: German Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 8/228, July 2, 1980, 18548.

56 On the “asylum debate” in general see, Herbert, *Ausländerpolitik*, 265–273.

57 Again, quote by Carl-Dieter Spranger, German Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 8/228, July 2, 1980, 18548.

58 “Asylantenschwemme auf Rhein-Main”, *BILD*, January 30, 1989, ISF S3/V 22.970.

59 FSD annual report 1987, pp. 1, 7, ERFOArch Berichte Flughafensozialdienst.

60 Board meeting of the church services at the airport, March 18, 1985, ERFOArch ERV01/17.

61 UNHCR Germany to the Ministry of Interior, October 4, 1984; Ministry of Interior, internal report, November 30, 1984, BArch B 106 207414.

62 *CDU-Informationsdienst Union in Deutschland* 25/86, Sonderbeilage Nordrhein-Westfalen, September 4, 1986, 6.

63 Manfred Kanther, personal letter to Manfred Schölch, December 21, 1987, Fra-port Archiv VG05-1910.

demanding political action on the “Asylantenproblematik”⁶⁴ in the first place, hesitated; to punish airlines through generic controls at Frankfurt (and thus through delays) contradicted international regulations. Eventually, the FRG government embarked on the strategy of holding airlines financially and practically responsible for returning rejected persons to their country of origin. All these measures combined aimed at limiting air access to the asylum system without formally withdrawing from the Refugee Convention and violating the constitutional right to asylum. What was portrayed as a strategy aimed at individuals using the asylum system as a backdoor to immigration was purposely designed to affect everyone without a visa, including potentially persecuted persons.

This prevention strategy was one element of the air migration regime that took shape in the 1980s. As asylum seekers continued to arrive at the airport, another element was the local control of asylum seekers arriving in the transit zone. Not everyone who applied for asylum at the airport was allowed to enter the country in order to wait for a decision on his or her asylum procedure. Since the airport was a state border, asylum seekers could be rejected directly, either for having failed, in the eyes of the border guards, to articulate their request for asylum and the claim that they were persecuted, or because they came from a country that was excluded from the right to asylum. An amendment to the Asylum Procedure Act of 1987 made it easier for the BGS and the Federal Ministry of the Interior to reject asylum seekers on these grounds. Up until then, rejections had only been legal if the asylum seeker was proven to have already been granted protection elsewhere. The new law ruled more generally that a refugee could be denied entry if he or she had been safe from political persecution elsewhere.⁶⁵ This allowed the Ministry of the Interior to declare certain countries as safe and thus to exclude whole groups from the right to asylum, such as Afghans who had traveled to Germany from Pakistan or India, or Ethiopians who came from Sudan.

64 Board member Airport Rhine/Main AG to Manfred Kanther, January 5, 1988, Fraport Archiv VG05-1910.

65 *Bundesgesetzblatt* Teil I, Nr. 3 1987, 89.

66 Oltmer, *Migrationsregime*, 4.

The BGS and the Ministry of the Interior were not the only actors shaping migration control on the ground. Using migration historian Jochen Oltmer’s terminology, one could say that they were the leading actors of the local migration regime, while others, in particular the airport social services, influenced or even subverted the regime.⁶⁶ Offering its services on behalf of the churches, the FSD

remained independent of the state even though the Hessian Ministry of Social Affairs began reimbursing the FSD for its basic expenses for refugees in April 1985.⁶⁷ This independent position gave the FSD room for maneuver that reached beyond its social work. During the 1980s many church members and leftist groups opposed the government's restrictive asylum policy.⁶⁸ The FSD explicitly used "its presence in transit" to assume "a controlling role vis-à-vis the federal border guard."⁶⁹ Its members developed a set of strategies in order to proactively facilitate refugees' admission. They handed out information sheets in different languages that informed the refugees about the asylum procedures.⁷⁰ In 1984, the BGS observed that members of the FSD frequently used their access pass to the transit area to approach passengers who looked like potential asylum seekers and gave them advice. On a regular basis, the FSD called in lawyers whom they could bring into the transit area with their staff passes. Sometimes lawyers would even issue powers of attorney that enabled the social workers to present the asylum application on behalf of the refugee.⁷¹ When more refugees were rejected at the airport in 1987, based on the amended Asylum Procedure Act, the FSD documented these cases and brought them to public attention.⁷² In all this, the FSD was not acting alone, but as part of a network of pro-immigration and human rights groups.

The two leading figures behind the foundation of PRO ASYL in Frankfurt in 1986, which to this day remains one of Germany's most influential pro-refugee organizations, were members in the Catholic and Protestant churches of Hesse. One of them, Herbert Leuninger, was the spokesperson on migration within the Catholic Diocese of Limburg which held one of the chairs on the board supervising the FSD. The head of the FSD, Birgit Plank, was a member of Amnesty International and in contact with the head of UNHCR Germany who, on some occasions, such as the poster incident, supported the FSD by exerting pressure on the German government.⁷³

Whereas the BGS and the Ministry of the Interior appreciated the FSD's social work, its systematic interventionism generated conflicts. Police officers complained about the "aggressiveness of the socially engaged persons" and about being under the "impression of complete surveillance"⁷⁴ by the FSD and its lawyers. In the eyes of the BGS, the FSD was "constantly making broad-brush, unfounded, unqualified and emotionally charged accusations against the border guard service."⁷⁵ Several airlines also united in protest against

67 Chaplain Gerhard Hoffmann, template for board meeting, January 25, 1989, ERFOArch ERV01/17.

68 Herbert, *Ausländerpolitik*, 267.

69 Gundula Schmidt, "Der Frankfurter Flughafen Sozialdienst. Ein Erfahrungsbericht," *Theologia Practica* 24/2 (1989): 85-88.

70 FSD annual report 1986, pp. 7-9, 18, CArchF 5120-01; FSD annual report 1987, p. 11, ERFOArch Berichte Flughafensozialdienst.

71 BGS airport office to BGS directorate Koblenz, November 28, 1984. BArch B 106 207414.

72 BGS Frankfurt to BGS directorate Koblenz, June 10, 1987. BArch B 106 207414.

73 FSD annual report 1982, pp. 2, 5, CArchF 5120-01; FSD Annual Report 1987, p. 38, ERFOArch Berichte Flughafensozialdienst

74 BGS airport office to BGS directorate Koblenz, November 28, 1984. BArch B 106 207414.

75 BGS airport office to Ministry of Interior, October 29, 1984, BArch B 106 207414.



the FSD after its members had entered some of their aircraft, a practice that not only disrupted their customer operations, but also brought them into potential trouble if an insufficiently documented person was on board. They opposed the “commitment of the local church social service,” arguing that it went “far beyond the usual” and was one reason why “Frankfurt has become an El Dorado for asylum seekers.”⁷⁶

A leftist German college student who had learned about the FSD’s support for refugees “through reports in the press, television and specialist literature” decided in 1988 to apply for an internship with the FSD. He believed that it was the right place to fight growing anti-asylum sentiments and the asylum policy of the government in Bonn: “The FSD, I assumed, is at the outermost frontline in the fight for the right of asylum anchored in the German constitution.”⁷⁷ Indeed, all actors involved saw the airport as a front line of the “asylum debate.” However, they considered themselves to be on very different fronts. The FSD and its supporters fought against what they saw as the subversion of the constitutional right to asylum. In a radio interview, Herbert Leuninger and Birgit Plank explained that the basic right to asylum was in acute danger at the airport border.⁷⁸ The BGS and the federal ministry of interior, on the other hand, led a “fight against illegal entry by air.”⁷⁹ At some point, the BGS even accused the FSD of “increasingly acting in the lead-up to organized illegal entry” by “making massive efforts to enable the entry of alleged asylum seekers.”⁸⁰

76 Airline Operators Committee Frankfurt Airport to Airport Rhine/Main AG, January 21, 1985, BArch B 106 207414.

77 FSD Annual Report 1988, p. 7, CArchF 5120-01.

78 Transcript from radio talk show, February 16, 1987, BArch B 106 207414.

79 BGS airport office to Minister of Interior, October 29, 1984, BArch B 106 207414.

80 BGS airport office to Minister of Interior, October 22, 1984; BGS airport office to BGS directorate Koblenz, November 28, 1984, BArch B 106 207414.

The officers were deeply bothered by the situation in the transit zone because it was a border that they could not control completely and in which the refugees could move freely and interact with the FSD and its helpers. As the BGS complained in 1986/87, there existed neither patrol controls in the transit area nor surveillance of the asylum seekers' accommodations. Therefore, the exchange of advice and information among asylum seekers and with the FSD went widely unchallenged. Worse still, from the BGS's standpoint, the asylum seekers were able to secretly dispose of their tickets and passports in transit and wait several hours before presenting themselves to the BGS. This strategy made it difficult for the BGS to identify the asylum seekers' country of origin and the flight they had boarded. These were crucial items of information needed for a possible rejection and for forcing the airlines to return the passenger. The fear that human smuggling could flourish in the transit zone also troubled the BGS. Indeed, transit was not only an opportunity for refugees and migrants but also for human smugglers. The BGS had caught several prospective asylum seekers using the letter box in the transit zone to send their false or manipulated travel documents and return tickets to their agents, who could then use them for another client. On several occasions, smugglers even accompanied their clients to Frankfurt. They then separated in the transit zone, where the client asked for asylum and the helper took back the documents and left.⁸¹ As the director of the Federal Border Guard (BGS) in Koblenz explained to the Ministry of the Interior, "the transit zone itself [...] would remain an insecure factor even if it were to be patrolled sporadically, because transit travelers can abuse a certain freedom of movement at any time during their stopover."⁸² When in 1988 the transit room was so overcrowded that the authorities again considered moving all refugees to a separate building, the BGS was relieved since "the mixing of applicants for asylum and passengers made their work more difficult."⁸³

In the late 1980s, asylum applications at Frankfurt airport rose drastically from 4,723 in 1986 to 18,731 in 1988. The consequence was a serious backlog of asylum seekers in the transit area, where more people than usual had to sleep on the floors and benches in the passenger areas and existing sanitary facilities did not suffice. German government officials, the BGS, the airport operator as well as the churches and the FSD all spoke of an "unbearable situation for everybody involved."⁸⁴ The press reported on "chaos in the transit area," the transit area "is intended to serve the stay of air travelers and not asy-

Figure 5: Images from press coverage of the refugee management in the transit zone: the FSD distributing food to refugees from Sri Lanka, while travelers in the back line up for boarding (A); the FSD transit office (B); refugee children in the transit bedroom (C). Source: *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, April 29, 1986; *Sonntag* 40, 1987. Photos: KNA.

81 BGS Frankfurt to BGS directorate Koblenz, December 23, 1986, BArch B 106 207414.

82 BGS directorate Koblenz to Minister of Interior, November 28, 1986, BArch B 106 207414.

83 "Eigenes Gebäude für Asylbewerber," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 28, 1988, ISF S3/V 22.970.

84 Press release, November 3, 1988, Fraport Archiv Pressemitteilungen 1979-1988; Chaplain Gerhard Hoffmann, template for board meeting, January 25, 1989, ERFOArch ERV01/17.

lum seekers,” explained a politician from the Liberal Party (FDP) in a newspaper article.⁸⁵ Beginning in November 1988, all arriving asylum seekers were moved from the general transit zone to a separate transit building, C 183, a converted warehouse on the edge of the airfield housing a large dormitory and offices of the border police.

Whether the new building really facilitated a “more humane treatment” and a “shortened stay at the airport,”⁸⁶ as the airport operator claimed, seems questionable after reading the FSD’s reports about the conditions in Transit C 183. For the BGS and the Ministry of Interior, the new space was not a temporary solution. On the contrary, they appreciated the arrangement as it allowed for enhanced control and modifications of the procedure. The entrances and exits of the building were tightly controlled. The building could only be entered through a kind of double-door system that separated newly arriving asylum seekers from the already registered refugees; the BGS aimed to prevent any exchange of information between the two groups. Refugees were cut off from the public transit zone and other parts of the airport. They had to stay in the building until their status had been decided. This exceptional, almost detention-like facility remained in place even after refugee numbers began to fall significantly in 1990.

85 “Unerträgliche Zustände,” *FAZ*, April 14, 1988; “Chaos im Transitbereich. FDP kritisiert die Asylbewerber-Praxis auf dem Flughafen,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 15, 1988, ISF S3/V 22.970.

86 Board member of Airport Rhine/Main AG to Manfred Kanther, January 5, 1988, Fraport Archiv VG05-1910.

87 FSD annual report 1987, p. 7, ERFOArch Berichte Flughafensozialdienst.

88 Chaplain Gerhard Hoffmann, template for board meeting, January 25, 1989, ERFOArch ERV01/17.

89 FSD annual report 1986, pp. 7-9, 18, CArchF 5120-01.

The FSD, which constantly feared that its refugee work could be terminated due to the constant tensions with the BGS and the government, faced a dilemma. If they wanted to continue their “protective function”⁸⁷ for the refugees, they had to get permanent access to the new building, and the only way to achieve this was to continue providing primary care for the refugees.⁸⁸ By doing so, however, the FSD members felt their organization would change from a largely external (and oppositional), ambulant service into an integral part of the institutionalized, separated migration regime at the airport. As one member of the FSD noted, it meant the end of “outreach street work” in the transit zone and the beginning of “welfare work in a closed institution.”⁸⁹

To policy makers this closed institution seemed so convenient that they even suggested holding not only the initial hearing, but the whole asylum procedure in the building, so that unsuccessful asylum seekers would never get to enter the country in the first place. To this end, Federal Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble, in cooperation with the minister of transport, the Federal Office for

Migration and Refugees (BAFl), the BGS, and authorities in Hesse aimed at setting up a branch office of the BAFl at the airport. This way, the government officials reasoned, the “flood of asylum seekers through the airport” could be “prefiltered” and “many futile applications could be swiftly decided.”⁹⁰ In June 1989 – years before the introduction of the 1993 Airport Asylum Procedure – the Interior Ministers’ Conference decided to test such an in-situ-procedure for Turkish asylum seekers arriving at Frankfurt airport; the implementation of the test run failed only because the airport operator, who was not fond of the plan, insisted that the BAFl would have to pay rent for the offices.⁹¹ Federal and state authorities kept pressing for an agreement with the airport operator and hoped to push through their plan. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and declining numbers of asylum cases at the airport, the project lost its urgency. This changed in fall 1992, however, when, under the impact of the nationwide asylum campaign and strong pressure from the Hessian state government, the introduction of a special asylum procedure at the airport was put back onto the agenda and eventually became a reality.⁹²

V. Conclusion

Every decade in postwar German migration history witnessed airborne migration. This also means that already in its early second phase after the Second World War, the history of civil aviation was connected to refugee history.⁹³ Involving groups as disparate as Jewish displaced persons, German refugees, resettlers from the Eastern bloc, and asylum seekers from the Global South and the Middle East, migration by airplane took place against the background of changing migration policies and engendered very different experiences. Since the sections in this article have focused on the different groups as they first appeared at airports in Germany over the decades, the development described here might seem like a linear process, which in fact it was not: German resettlers continued to transit via the airport at a time when asylum seekers were held back in the transit zone, and refugees today keep being airlifted to Germany as part of humanitarian resettlement schemes faintly reminiscent of the schemes used for Jewish DPs in the late 1940s. Nevertheless, we can identify certain trends and turning points.

One significant trend was the discovery and use of the humanitarian potential of airplanes by relief organizations and political administrations in the 1940s. The capacity of airplanes to provide

90 Ministry of Traffic, minutes on meeting with other federal and Hesse ministries and the BGS, November 20, 1989, BArch B 108 98793.

91 Ministry of Interior to other federal and Hesse ministers, December 1, 1989, BArch B 108 98793.

92 Ministry of Social Affairs Hesse, internal note, October 13, 1992, HHStAW 505 6013.

93 A growing number of historians have recently begun to take fresh looks at the history of aviation. Going beyond technical developments and narratives of progress, some historians focused on social history to question the general view that civil aviation, until the 1970s, remained an exclusive means of travel for elites, businesspeople, and middle to upper classes. See Max Hirsh, *Airport Urbanism. Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia* (London, 2016); Anke Ortlepp, *Jim Crow Terminals. The Desegregation of American Airports* (Georgia, 2017).

rapid relocation, especially of vulnerable groups, and to fly over otherwise obstructed borders was used by organizers of airlifts. From the late 1940s to 1960s, generally speaking, the perspective on airborne migration and its management in West Germany was more about support and relief than matters of control and restriction, mainly because the refugee groups were either emigrants or already accepted as legal immigrants prior to their arrival. As regards the individual migration of asylum seekers, one might also identify a specific humanitarian potential of air routes: taking the plane allowed undocumented refugees to avoid multiple border and document checks and to land directly in a country that adhered to the Refugee Convention and might accept them without a visa or passport. In the 1980s, however, this potential was increasingly sidelined by the government's strategies to curb air access to asylum. Another trend, which the article has traced over time, was the steady development of a humanitarian infrastructure at the airport. This humanitarianism evolved from mere care work into an oppositional force that defended airborne asylum migration against the tightening migration regime.

The 1980s were a turning point. Frankfurt's Rhine-Main Airport was perceived as a frontline in the struggle against climbing asylum numbers and "asylum abuse." Not only quantitatively but also in terms of quality, the airport seemed like a frontline. Delineating a direct border with the world in the middle of Germany, the airport transit zone seemed much more closely connected to the Global South or the Middle East than, say, Germany's land borders with France or Italy. Tightened policies on air migration were accompanied by increasingly strict management on the ground, including more frequent rejections and the building of a closed facility for asylum seekers in 1988 – a crucial step towards the introduction of the Airport Asylum Procedure. As this article has sought to demonstrate, the 1993 Airport Asylum Procedure was not a top-down innovation. Rather, it arose from earlier experiences with airborne migration and local conflicts at Frankfurt airport.

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