

Inhumane conditions in Tegel arrival centre, Germany's largest refugee camp

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Conditions in Berlin's so-called "Ukraine Arrival Centre TXL" (UA TXL) are intolerable. They show the extent to which the government's policy of sealing off Europe's external borders is also being continued inside the country. It is the flip side of the pro-war policy, militarisation and division of society.

Initially, politicians and the media overflowed with welcoming words for refugees with Ukrainian passports. Images of trains full of Ukrainians fleeing to Germany were seen as an excellent way to exploit the warmongering against Russia and justify the political and military support for the far-right Zelensky government. But the effusive media welcome for Ukrainians has long since given way to a reality of right-wing agitation, garrisoning and deliberate exclusion.

The so-called "arrival centre" on the former Berlin-Tegel airport site (TXL) shows particularly clearly what all state governments, regardless of their political colouring, now support and implement: an extreme right-wing, racist immigration policy that is intended to deter and divide.

The camp was opened in Berlin two years ago as a hub for people who had fled the war in Ukraine. They were to be housed here temporarily, registered, and then distributed throughout Germany. Around 10,000 people have passed through the camp in the past two years.

Katja Kipping (Left Party), the senator (Berlin state minister) responsible for social affairs until April 2023, justified the 2022 announcement that a tent city would be set up on the site by citing a lack of housing options in the existing accommodation. In view of the new influx of refugees, she claimed, "We have to create space. Every shelter we give is a condemnation of Putin's war."

In fact, Germany's largest refugee camp, with around 5,000 places in 40 lightweight halls, has turned out to be a detention centre for refugees of all ages and health conditions. It deprives people of all their rights and denies free access to critical journalists, lawyers, and independent aid organisations.

What was originally designed as accommodation for a few days or weeks has become a trap for many people, some of whom have been unable to escape for over a year. In March 2024, there were more than 4,500 people crammed into a very small area.

Strictly separated from the Ukrainians, asylum seekers from Turkey, Syria, Moldova, Georgia, and Afghanistan have also been housed here indefinitely. The Refugee Council found that "from October 2022 to the end of January 2023 and since October 2023," asylum seekers have been "parked" in the Tegel camp for long periods of time without any entitlement to social benefits, cash, medical care, or registration of their asylum application.

In an incendiary letter in September 2023 to Kipping's successor,

Social Affairs Senator Cansel Kiziltepe (Social Democrat, SPD), around 130 Ukrainian women denounced the "insults, harassment, arbitrary treatment and violence—including against children" by the security staff in charge. In December 2023, the intolerable camp conditions burst into public view once again, as mass brawls with the abusive and sometimes racist security staff led to police investigations and the immediate suspension of 55 security staff.

In the camp, 14 to 16 people have to share a dorm. Although the camp is not currently at full capacity, the free areas are not being used to alleviate the unbearably cramped conditions. According to press calculations, this occupancy rate results in 2.63 square metres per person in a very small space, including the corridors. The planned minimum standards for shared accommodation of six to nine square metres per person are being dramatically undercut in Tegel.

"Five bunk beds per dorm, the plastic walls just two metres high, curtains instead of doors" prevent any privacy, reported a carer in an interview with *Neues Deutschland* (nd). There is no separation of the sexes. People in wheelchairs are crammed in here, as are minors and people with open war injuries and mental health problems.

Camp residents have reported that families and partners are separated. Single women, women with babies or even pregnant women have to share compartments with men they do not know. These and similar reports have been confirmed by the Berlin Refugee Council. Emily Barnickel from the Refugee Council explained: "There is also the extreme case of mothers with their three-day-old babies being placed in mixed compartments with six other men."

The obligation to wear a smart card around their neck at all times in order to have personal names and data scanned by a machine reinforces the feeling of having no rights and being locked up. Luggage and personal belongings can be and are checked and searched at any time.

In the winter, the heating in the lightweight halls repeatedly breaks down. Catastrophic hygiene conditions led to mass outbreaks of highly contagious diseases, such as the chickenpox outbreak last year and the measles outbreak this year. The risk of contracting COVID-19 is permanently high.

But as the Berlin Refugee Council alarmingly pointed out, the camp no longer has a quarantine centre. The camp doctor and paediatrician do not issue prescriptions or referrals, but only treat sick people from existing stocks of medication, supported by paramedics from the German Red Cross (DRK). Adequate medical care—including for people with chronic illnesses or pregnant women—is virtually non-existent." For non-Ukrainian refugees, access to the camp's rudimentary medical care is even more limited.

There is no regular cleaning service in the dining areas, and refugees

who want to clean themselves are given neither cleaning materials nor money to do so, according to an employee of the camp operator. In the toilets, there is “rarely soap, no dry wipes and no disinfectant.” Defective toilets and showers are not repaired. In an interview with *nd*, the employee says that “only three women’s showers” were working in the tent area she was in charge of and that “half of the 40 toilets were blocked.”

“If you weren’t already traumatised, you will be traumatised there,” employees on site told *nd*. This also applies to the staff themselves. “It’s a very toxic place for us employees.” “The camp should actually be closed.” “It’s a disaster, from top to bottom,” and the management bears the main responsibility for this they said.

In the Berlin Senate (state executive), responsibility lies with the SPD Senator for Social Affairs, Cansel Kiziltepe, and the President of the State Office for Refugee Affairs (LAF), Mark Seibert. In view of the police investigations and reports from those affected, the latter himself had to admit in December 2023 that it was not a place “that anyone would want here.” The German Red Cross (DRK) is responsible for looking after the camp and has rejected the allegations as “inaccurate” or merely temporary grievances. The DRK is supported by the aid agencies Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), the Johanniter-Unfall-Hilfe and the Malteser Hilfsdienst.

For minors, the garrisoning is also intolerable in terms of their right to education and free development. In the camp, they were denied adequate schooling or access to public schools until mid-February. Containers equipped with computers were made available only to the approximately 560 Ukrainian schoolchildren in November, where they could “independently participate in online home-schooling with their teachers in the UKR [Ukrainian Republic],” according to the Berlin Refugee Council in its report on the conditions in the TXL detention centre.

In mid-February 2024, Education Senator Katharina Günther-Wünsch (Christian Democrat, CDU) boasted about the opening of the “Welcome School TXL,” where around 130 underage Ukrainians were learning German and receiving specialised lessons. A further 300 places were to be created in March 2024 and up to 700 such school places in the future.

In fact, the camp school “Willkommensschule TXL” epitomises the deeply racist character of the immigration policy of the state government—a coalition of the CDU and SPD.

Ibrahim Kalanan, former State Secretary for Justice, makes clear on the *verfassungsblog.de* website that the separate schools in emergency and collective accommodation centres were pursuing a “new segregation strategy” with the aim of using “parallel” educational institutions to exclude the “equal enjoyment of rights” by schoolchildren with a refugee background, to which non-refugee schoolchildren would be entitled. This strategy is reminiscent of the US doctrine: separate but equal, the racially motivated schooling of black and white pupils in separate schools until 1954.

Instead of expanding the capacity of public schools, funding long overdue refurbishments and new school buildings as well as affordable housing for all, the state government is pouring millions into funding temp-homes, mass accommodation and “camp schools.”

The “segregation strategy” of the CDU Education Senator and the garrisoning policy of the SPD Social Affairs Senator in Berlin are completely in line with the federal policy of hermetically sealing off the EU’s external borders.

The mass accommodation centre hit the headlines again at the beginning of March 2024: A major fire on the site once again raised

awareness of the inhumane conditions refugees confront in the heart of the German capital. One of the 1,000 square metre tent halls caught fire. According to the operator, there was no serious damage to health, but the 300 or so residents from Ukraine lost their few personal belongings.

The case inevitably brings back memories of the infamous Moria mass accommodation centre on the Greek island of Lesbos. The fact that there was no catastrophe comparable to that in Moria in 2020 was partly due to the fact that the fire broke out during the day, but above all because the camp’s capacity is currently underutilised.

Tareq Alaow, refugee policy spokesperson for Pro Asyl, emphasised: “We have repeatedly warned in the past that cramming so many people together in precarious accommodation is extremely dangerous.” Neither the Left Party (when it was in government) nor the SPD and CDU are influenced by the concerns and warnings of aid organisations and doctors.

Mayor Kai Wegner (CDU), who heads the CDU-SPD Berlin state administration, immediately announced the construction of a new large tent on the site of the burnt-down tent hall. Furthermore, at the end of March—less than two weeks after the major fire—the state government decided to expand the camp’s capacity to 7,100 places and to extend its operation up to and including 2025. The construction of further temporary accommodation and container villages is also being planned.

Mass accommodation in Germany and barbed wire, pushbacks and detention centres at Europe’s external borders—this is the far-right asylum policy of the SPD-led federal government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which is supported by all the state governments.

Angela Niklaus is standing as a candidate for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) in the European Parliament elections. Share the SGP’s election statement and support our election campaign.



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