

# Berlin-Tegel refugee camp: Inhuman conditions, a climate of fear—and huge profits for the operators

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The cruel treatment of refugees housed at the former Berlin-Tegel airport throws a spotlight on the alleged concern for people in war zones. The billions of euros in taxpayers' money do not benefit the refugees, but fill the coffers of the companies involved. And that is the intention.

Around 5,000 people are currently living in Germany's largest refugee camp under devastating conditions. If Berlin's Senate (the state executive is a coalition of Christian Democrats [CDU] and Social Democrats [SPD]) has its way, there will soon be up to 8,000 people there.

In public, Berlin's Senator (state minister) for Social Affairs, Cansel Kiziltepe (SPD), expresses regret about the miserable conditions, with which she is very familiar. However, the Senate has no intention of improving anything; instead, it has decided to continue operating the refugee camp until the end of 2025.

With the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the wave of refugees that soon followed, Tegel was set up as the "Ukraine Arrival Centre TXL" for refugees from Ukraine. The arrival of the refugees from Ukraine was exploited in the media to justify the warmongering against Russia and support for the right-wing extremist Zelensky regime.

At that time, the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens still formed the state government in Berlin. "We have to make room. Every shelter we provide is a condemnation of Putin's war," declared Katja Kipping (Left Party). As Senator for Social Affairs, she was directly responsible for setting up this temporary arrangement made of tents and parts of the terminal building, which for the refugees is more of a detention centre and prison than a place to live.

The plan was to distribute Ukrainians fleeing war and poverty to proper accommodation throughout Germany after a short stay and once the necessary administrative formalities had been completed. It quickly became clear that the reality was completely different: the hopelessly overburdened and outdated infrastructure in Berlin means, among other things, that the average stay is 200 days, and for many it is even more than a year.

It usually takes months to get an appointment to see the appropriate Berlin authority, such as the immigration office or the job centre, but these are prerequisites for obtaining a residence or work permit and receiving the welfare payments to which every refugee is actually entitled immediately. Refugees often face a tough fight at the social welfare offices, because before they pay any benefits, officials demand numerous documents that many did not have or could not take with them when they fled from dire conditions, including war.

"We have already collected so many complaints, but it does not help. They want things from people who cannot provide them," *Der Spiegel* cites one Ukrainian refugee in a detailed report about the devastating conditions in the Tegel refugee shelter.

Most Ukrainian refugees are traumatised, families have been torn apart. The men, threatened with death and injury at the front, some forcibly conscripted into the army, are no longer allowed to leave Ukraine due to the general mobilisation for war if they are over 16 years old. Many women have come to Germany with their children, hoping to give them a life without war. Here they are struggling to survive, to find decent accommodation, to find work and to find a school for their children.

Meanwhile, Tegel has become perceived as something of a terminal station, where refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are now also being housed. For most of them, nothing is moving forward—many live here isolated, under constant surveillance and in fear of harassment by security guards. They must wear a QR code around their neck to authorise access, which is scanned when entering and leaving the tents. Many also report random bag searches, attendance checks, bed searches and assaults by security personnel.

The conditions in the large tents are unbearably cramped, with 380 people crammed into each. In the sleeping areas, 14 people have to huddle together—randomly assembled. Single women, mothers with children and babies, the elderly and the sick—including people with mental illnesses—and single men live here together without blankets or doors, without privacy or space for personal belongings. The corridors between the bunk

beds are so narrow that two people can hardly pass each other.

Sleep is almost unthinkable under such conditions, because someone always has to get out of bed or is coughing, a child cries or a phone rings. In addition, there is dirt, along with mice and vermin, in the tents, which are a breeding ground for infections. There have already been outbreaks of highly contagious diseases such as chickenpox and measles, and, of course, COVID can also spread unhindered here.

Dirty showers, clogged toilets smeared with fecal matter, a large proportion of which are usually out of order, are part of everyday life. Like so many other things, the residents are not allowed to clean the facilities themselves.

There is no possibility to do their own cooking or even just to warm something up, and so the residents have to survive on cheap mass-produced food handed out in a dining tent. Many complain about inedible meals. Plates and cutlery are made of plastic and the tables and benches are dirty. Of course, no consideration is given to dietary plans for medical reasons, such as diabetes.

## Huge profits

However, it is not just inhumanity, but above all the prospect of huge profits that was the focus when the refugee camp was set up and that makes life a daily hell for the refugees.

Although the conditions for the people living here are miserable, the operation of the camp devours almost half a billion euros of taxpayers' money every year—about €250 a day for each of the 5,000 refugees!

The Berlin State Office for Refugee Affairs (LAF), which is responsible for the accommodation of refugees in Berlin, awarded the contracts for the operation of the camp in 2022. However, the LAF refuses to provide any information about exactly where the funds for the refugee camp go—it is a “trade secret,” according to the answer to a request from *Der Spiegel* magazine.

The German Red Cross (DRK), which received the contract to operate the camp from the LAF in 2022 without a call for tenders, is making a lot of money from it. According to *Spiegel*, the Berlin 2024 budget includes payments of €216 million for the DRK.

In the foreword to the 2022/2023 yearbook of the Berlin Red Cross, it says: “The ‘Ukraine Arrival Centre TXL’ quickly became a model facility for the professional and empathetic reception of refugees.” What a mockery! This was signed by the president of DRK Berlin, Mario Czaja of the CDU, who was Senator for Social Affairs in Berlin until 2016.

Messe Berlin GmbH, among the world's 10 largest trade fair companies operating their own exhibition grounds, is 100 percent owned by the state of Berlin. It also makes huge profits

by renting out tents and organising security at Tegel. Compared to 2019, when Messe Berlin made a half-million-euro loss, it turned a €7.5-million-profit in 2023.

The main reason for this was the increase in “other” sales revenues, which did not come from the trade fair's core business and which increased more than tenfold from €12 million in 2019 to €143 million in 2023. The 2023 annual report also states that the turnover “was significantly influenced by the revenues from the accommodation and care of refugees at the former Tegel Airport.”

As Senator for Social Affairs of the state of Berlin, Czaja was also head of the Office for Refugee Affairs, which later awarded the contract to the DRK, of which he is now president. Messe Berlin, in turn, awards contracts to Apleona Security Services (formerly Gegenbauer), where Czaja held a senior position for many years.

## Defend refugees and democratic rights

The inhuman treatment of war refugees, the tightening of asylum laws and the increasing agitation against refugees by all the establishment politicians and their lackeys in the media must be rejected decisively and with contempt. They are an expression of the extreme shift to the right and the fascist danger emanating from ruling circles in big business and the so-called “democratic” parties, which are in reality implementing the demands of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The worldwide attacks on the entire working class—the jobs massacre, wage cuts and abolition of social achievements and democratic rights—are the other side of this shift to the right. The unprecedented social cuts, which are leading to poverty and misery worldwide, while billions are spent on armaments and the danger of a third world war must be stopped. This fight must begin with the defence of the weakest in society, the refugees and asylum seekers.



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