



On the Right Side of History: How Memories of World War Two Nourish Subversive Humanitarianism

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ABSTRACT

Studies on citizen-led support for migrants in Europe have paid increased attention to history and temporality. This article analyses Norwegian citizen humanitarians as agents of history who use the past to intervene in the present and extend themselves into the future. The analysis relies on long-term fieldwork, interviews and digital observations of ‘citizen humanitarians’ involved in informal aid and solidarity practices with illegalised migrants in Europe. We demonstrate how collective memories and family histories from World War II provide meaning and legitimacy to their humanitarian actions, including unlawful acts. The citizen humanitarians mobilise ‘post-holocaust morality’ to draw symbolic parallels between the persecution of Jews and present-day treatment of migrants in Europe and define good and evil in their time. Historical comparisons and identifications with rescuers and resistance movements further enable citizen humanitarians to position themselves on ‘the right side of history’. The article argues that our informants, who are ‘ordinary’ Norwegian citizens, partake in symbolic narrations of contemporary European border policies as a potential new cultural trauma. While highlighting some risks and limitations, we show that collective memories of war and rescue can nourish political critique and subversive humanitarianism. We also demonstrate the analytical value of attending to humanitarian actors’ historical consciousness and engagements with the past and future.

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INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian assistance is often analysed as a ‘presentist’ mode of action preoccupied with immediate needs and emergencies (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2021). Moreover, humanitarian actors are typically portrayed as rootless cosmopolitans without historical attachments and biographies (Malkki 2015; Mogstad 2023). However, recent scholarship has shown how an analytical focus on time and temporality can ‘unlock new and critical perspectives of humanitarianism’ (Bendixsen & Sandberg 2021: 14). For instance, some scholars have traced humanitarian trajectories, including political empowerment (Mogstad & Rabe 2023) and future-oriented imaginations (Brun 2016) and strategies (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2021). Migration scholars have also looked to the past to identify connections between past and present struggles for movement (Stierl 2020; Tazzioli 2021). Nevertheless, how humanitarian actors themselves mobilise historical narratives and memories has received limited attention. Furthermore, questions of how historical consciousness and future imaginations influence humanitarian acts and identities remain largely unexplored.

This article addresses these research gaps and questions by analysing ‘citizen humanitarians’ as agents of history who mobilise the past to act in the present and extend themselves into the future. More specifically, we show that our informants mobilise collective and familial memories from World War II (WWII) to make sense of and justify their efforts to support illegalised migrants today. Moreover, comparisons with WWII and the rescuers of the Holocaust enable them to criticise the state and position themselves on ‘the right side of history’.

Notably, our research was conducted years before the war on Gaza in 2023, which reinvigorated new debates regarding the political implications and uses of the Holocaust (Roth-Rowland 2023). Moreover, historical narratives and memory culture were not the focus of our research projects. Because of this, the humanitarian and political uses (and misuses) of WWII and the Holocaust were not topics in our interviews and conversations. However, during conversations in interviews and when analysing our data, we noticed that our informants made frequent parallels and references to WWII, and this triggered our interest.

The analysis draws on long-term fieldwork, interviews and digital ethnography with Norwegian solidarity actors and volunteers. The fieldwork was conducted with Norwegian citizens who engaged in supporting migrants in Norway, Greece and Spain. The informants, described as ‘citizen humanitarians’ (Jumbert & Pascucci 2021),¹ became engaged in informal aid and solidarity practices with migrants² during or after the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’. In addition to providing aid and caregiving, many supported migrants by facilitating unauthorised stays and border crossings within the Schengen area. These acts are illegal according to the EU Facilitation Directive and the Norwegian Immigration Act (Rabe & Haddeland 2021). While motivated primarily by humanitarian ideals, most developed critical political views and oppositional relationships with the state and contemporary border policies.

¹ Scholars have coined different terms to describe citizen-led support to migrants after 2015. We use the term ‘citizen humanitarianism’ (Jumbert & Pascucci 2021) to emphasise that our informants act outside formal humanitarian organisations and view their efforts as acts of citizenship.

² We use ‘migrant’ as an umbrella term to describe everyone who has left their residence, irrespective of reason (Carling 2017). We sometimes use ‘asylum seekers’, which we consider a sub-category of migrant.

Social historians and memory scholars have long focused on how people appropriate and reconstruct collective memories to respond to present concerns (Fine & Beim 2007; Halbwachs 1992). Feminist and postcolonial scholars have also increasingly attended to the affective and embodied power of the past and showed how memories of slavery, colonialism and war are registered corporeally (McCully & Barton 2018). This article focuses specifically on Norwegian volunteers and solidarity workers' mobilisation of memories and references from WWII, including the Holocaust and efforts to assist or rescue persecuted Jews. Although our informants made connections and comparisons with other historical narratives and events,³ WWII was the most common and emotionally salient reference point. This is neither rare nor unexpected. Memories of WWII and the Holocaust have strong normative powers in contemporary Europe and saturated our consciousness and rights culture (Rothberg 2009). At the time when we conducted this research, several humanitarian and political actors also made references to WWII and the Holocaust in public narratives and interviews. In particular, the infamous refugee camps on the Greek islands were frequently described by public figures such as Pope Francis and the mayor of Lesbos as 'concentration camps' (Mogstad 2023). Commentators suggested that Syrian or Muslim refugees arriving in Europe and the United States have become 'the new Jews', referring to the historical parallels of the failure to protect Jews during WWII (Weesjes, November & Shulman 2016).

The influence of WWII and the Holocaust on the moral and political reasoning of civil society actors is well documented (Alexander 2002). However, this has received limited attention in scholarship on humanitarianism. A minor but notable exception is Jensen & Kirchner's (2020) study of humanitarian volunteers in Germany and Denmark. When analysing volunteers' dissatisfaction with the political establishment, they note that their informants referenced WWII and their respective countries' actions and reputations. They also mention volunteers' concerns with 'what will be told in the future about this point in history and what "we" did or did not do' (Jensen & Kirchner 2020: 31). Jensen and Kirchner do not elaborate on this; however, their observations illustrate how citizen humanitarians engage with history and collective memory. While intervening in the present, they are not 'stuck' in this mode of action (Brun 2016). Instead, they are centrally concerned with the past and the future, including the judgement of history (Scott 2020).

In this article, we provide a deeper analysis of how such temporal concerns influence citizen humanitarians' actions and motivations. Our analysis incorporates aspects of history and temporality into analyses of migration and humanitarianism. We draw on studies that show how WWII and the Holocaust shape moral and political discourses and norms in contemporary civil society (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015; Levy & Sznajder 2002, 2007; Rothberg 2009). Aspects of Alexander's work on the Holocaust as a 'cultural trauma' and a cultural 'binary code' between evil and good in Western societies, specifically Europe and North America, are especially central to the analysis (Alexander 2002, 2004, 2006). Drawing eclectically on these theories, we argue that our informants mobilise a 'post-Holocaust morality' (Alexander 2002) to define what is good and evil in contemporary Europe. By doing so, they partake in a discursive construction of the present-day treatment of illegalised migrants as a potential new

³ For instance, several informants referred to Norway's earlier humanitarian efforts to assist refugees from Vietnam and the Balkans. Many also referred to European emigration to America in the 19th and 20th centuries.

cultural trauma. We also show how collective memories of war and rescue can foster political critique and ‘subversive humanitarianism’ (Vandevoordt 2019).⁴

The article proceeds by first elaborating on the theoretical framework. Thereafter, we discuss our methodology and sample. The empirical analysis is divided into two parts. The first part examines how our informants appropriated collective and familial memories of WWII to explain and legitimise their disobedient humanitarian acts. The second part considers how informants compared and identified with WWII events and actors to criticise state policies and construct honourable legacies. In our discussion, we reflect on the theoretical and political implications of our findings. We conclude by highlighting the importance of including analyses of temporal concerns to understand citizen humanitarians’ moral reasoning and willingness to engage in subversive humanitarian actions that challenge state law and border policies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We begin this section by describing three scholarly efforts to analyse humanitarian pasts and futures, which we draw upon in our interpretations and analyses. Thereafter, we discuss the moral and political legacies and influence of WWII and the Holocaust in contemporary Europe. Last, we consider how WWII and the Holocaust are remembered in particular ways in Scandinavia and Norway, where the informants we focus on in this article are born and live. Together, the concepts, theories and contextual background we discuss in this section enable our analysis of how citizen humanitarians appropriate collective and familial memories of WWII to understand and intervene in the present and future.

HISTORIES AND FUTURES IN HUMANITARIANISM

This article builds upon and draws inspiration from scholars who have integrated history and temporality into their analysis of migration and humanitarianism. Tazzioli’s (2021; 2023) work on mountain rescues in the French-Italian borderlands is particularly relevant for our arguments. Tazzioli argues that scholarship on migrant solidarity has predominantly approached migrant struggles through a spatial approach, thus overlooking and under-theorising the temporality of solidarity and collective memories of struggles. Focusing on the Alpine borderlands, Tazzioli situates current rescue and solidarity efforts within a longer genealogy of mountain rescues of foreigners and Italian ‘clandestine emigrants’. Tracing memories of migrant passages and rescues in the past helps to de-exceptionalise and re-politicise current struggles for movement, she proposes. Similarly, Stierl (2016) draws connections between activist groups supporting migrants crossing European border zones and the militant tradition of abolitionism and ‘flight help’. In a more recent publication, Stierl (2020) further argues that historical examples of slave resistance and ‘fugitive escapes’ at sea resemble migrants’ efforts to escape via the Mediterranean and its ‘underground seaways’ today.

This article follows Tazzioli’s call for closer analytical attention to the connections between past and present struggles. However, rather than tracing such genealogies as a scholarly intervention, we consider how our informants themselves mobilise collective memories and family histories from WWII to give meaning and legitimacy to their humanitarian actions. Additionally, we build on Brun’s (2016) attention to

⁴ We use Vandevoordt’s (2019) concept of ‘subversive humanitarianism’ to describe humanitarian actions that challenge political decisions and border policies.

humanitarian concepts and imaginations of the future. Challenging the scholarly tendency to describe aid recipients as 'stuck' in the present, Brun observes that people who experience conflict and displacement 'actively extend themselves into the future through imagination and through action' (p. 401). As we shall see, this is also the case with humanitarian actors like our informants, who actively project meaning and hope into the future. Moreover, Brun underscores that futures are not simply imagined or waited for but actively 'made and taken'. In our analysis, we illustrate this by analysing citizen humanitarians as narrators of the 'dark' and 'inhumane' history of the present.

REMEMBERING WWII AND THE HOLOCAUST

Memories of WWII have strong normative powers in contemporary Europe. This is particularly the case with the Holocaust – the systematic and state-sponsored genocide of European Jews during WWII. Although the Holocaust is often declared unique and incomparable, it has left many traces in contemporary politics and human rights activism. Symbolised by the phrase 'never again', the spread and evocation of the Holocaust memory and consciousness have enabled the articulation of other forms of injustice and a moral imperative to oppose them (Rothberg 2009). As several scholars have argued, the Holocaust was also transformed from a specific war crime inflicted upon a particular group of people to a universal code of human rights abuses (Levy & Sznajder 2007). Reconfigured as a decontextualised event beyond history and territory, the Holocaust functions as a moral example for all humanity (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015). Notably, the Holocaust is usually retold and remembered as an abstract moral story between good and evil (Levy & Sznajder 2002). On the one hand, the mass killings and persecutions of Jews have come to represent moral evil (Arendt 1963). On the other hand, the selfless sacrifices of those who defied the Nazis and sought to rescue their victims – despite personal risks – represent the human capacity to 'do good'.

This study particularly draws on Alexander's (2002, 2004) work on the Holocaust as a 'cultural trauma' that has produced a 'post-holocaust morality'. According to Alexander, cultural trauma differs from individual trauma, which is based on the personal experience of a specific event, pain and suffering. Cultural traumas result from discomfort 'entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go' (Alexander 2004: 10). According to Alexander, for the non-Jewish communities in Europe and North America, the Holocaust became a cultural trauma through a process in which social groups engaged in symbolic narration. Thus, the Holocaust was transformed from a war crime inflicting suffering on a particular group in a specific time and space to a universal event that represented an evil of such magnitude that it moved beyond history and territory to become a moral example for all humanity.

In our analysis, we discuss whether the contemporary exclusion and mistreatment of migrants in Europe are considered and narrated as a new cultural trauma. Significantly, Alexander specifies that cultural trauma is characterised by symbolic constructions of 'us' and 'them' – a collective identity and a threat. 'A "we" must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger' (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015: 13). When social groups partake in symbolic narrations of a 'horrendous event' where they identify actors, describe human suffering and its causes, 'take on board' some of the suffering, and direct responsibility for it, they partake in the construction of cultural trauma (Alexander

2004). Importantly, the citizen humanitarians in this study do not refer to the collective trauma of the Holocaust to identify themselves as victims of a 'horrendous event'. However, 'they take on board' the human suffering of migrants and define 'good' against 'evil' in their own time by using the universal moral example of the Holocaust.

Central to the analysis is also how the cultural trauma of the Holocaust has created a 'post-holocaust morality' with significant political and moral functions in contemporary civil society (Alexander 2002). As Alexander points out: 'The "post-holocaust morality" makes the cultural trauma of the Holocaust work as a bridging metaphor that social groups of uneven power and legitimacy apply to parse ongoing events as good and evil in real historical time' (2002: 44). It involves a moral standard and obligation for individuals and groups to intervene and protest contemporary evil and injustices, despite their consequences and costs. We further draw upon Alexander's analysis of the civil sphere as comprising a set of culturally constructed 'binary codes' defining 'civil' (pure and good) against 'anti-civil' (polluted and evil) (Alexander 2006). According to Alexander, the Holocaust remains the most prominent moral binary code in Western societies, referring to Europe and North America in particular. In these societies, the narrative Holocaust works as a 'bridging metaphor that social groups of uneven power and legitimacy apply to parse ongoing events as good and evil in real historical time' (2002: 44). In this article, we analyse how citizen humanitarians mobilise post-holocaust morality when they describe and challenge state laws and border policies. We also consider how they symbolically and discursively define themselves in opposition to the 'anti-civil' segments of society that they blame for the 'evil' mistreatment of contemporary migrants.

TRANSNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND FAMILIAL MEMORIES

Although the collective memory of the Holocaust is said to symbolise transnational solidarity, Alexander (2002) observes that it has particular significance for Western societies, referring to Europe and North America in particular. However, the collective memory of the Holocaust has national and local twists and expressions with significant political implications. For instance, there is the Israeli version, where the cultural trauma of the Holocaust has been drawn upon to 'reinforce ethnic and religious boundaries rather than pointing to the necessity for transcending them' (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015: 31). In other parts of the world, different cultural traumas, such as slavery and colonialism, have larger affective powers and shape narratives of good and evil (Alexander 2002). In this article, we are mostly concerned with the Norwegian and Scandinavian collective memory of WWII, which has been connected to the historic 'rescuers' (Lammers 2011). That said, within Europe, there are also local twists. In Germany, the collective memory of WWII has been connected to shame, guilt and responsibility for ensuring 'never again' (Langenbacher 2014).

In Scandinavia, Jews were subjected to varying degrees of anti-Semitism, discrimination and deportation to German death camps. Nevertheless, Lammers (2011) identifies a shared collective memory of Scandinavians as the 'rescuers' of the Holocaust. Sweden and Denmark are particularly celebrated for their 'brave' and 'heroic' efforts to rescue members of their Jewish population. In Norway, which Nazi Germany occupied between 1940 and 1945 Jews suffered enormous losses. Nearly half of the country's 1,800 Jewish citizens were deported to German death camps (Bruland 2010). However, the dominant narrative has focused on Norwegian civilians who fled or risked their lives to assist Jewish citizens escaping to Sweden. The centrality of these flight and rescue narratives in Norwegian history and popular

culture exemplifies larger narratives of Nordic exceptionalism and innocence (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2016; Mogstad 2023). However, recent works have challenged the heroic narrative of Norwegians as innocent victims and rescuers during WWII and highlighted the role played by the Norwegian police and state officials in arresting and deporting the country's Jewish population to death camps (Bruland 2010). Michelet (2018) even suggests that members of the Norwegian resistance movement were complicit in the deportation of Jews. Nonetheless, memories of Norwegians fleeing or assisting Jews in escaping to Sweden remain an integral part of Norwegian history and consciousness. For many informants, such memories are also family histories passed on through intrafamilial and intergenerational transmission (Shore & Kauko 2017). We illustrate this below in the empirical analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on the two authors' doctoral research. Although our projects had different focuses and methodologies, we both studied 'ordinary' Norwegian citizens who volunteered or personally intervened to assist asylum seekers in Europe following the 2015 'refugee crisis'. Our two samples included individuals of different European nationalities, genders, classes and educational backgrounds. However, most were Norwegian, white, relatively privileged and female between 30 and 70 years old. In this article, we focus only on our Norwegian informants, who are comprised of 70 individuals. The majority had started to support migrants after 2015, yet several had previously been engaged in other forms of social, political or humanitarian work.

We conducted the research independently from June 2018 to September 2020, a period characterised by increasingly harsh border policies. The legislative changes made by the Norwegian authorities in 2016 to increase the deportation of Afghan asylum seekers are especially relevant for this study. These changes, which received widespread critique from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) and other refugee advocates, opened for returning Afghan asylum seekers to 'internal protection' without having to consider if it was 'reasonable' for the migrant to find protection (Brekke & Staver 2018). The time of our research was also characterised by the criminalisation of aid and solidarity across Europe (Carrera et al. 2019).

We applied different qualitative methods, including long-term ethnographic fieldwork, digital observations, field visits and interviews. The first author, Rabe, conducted 29 semi-structured interviews, a field visit to Spain and 6 months of close digital observations. Her informants were individuals who provided personal support to Afghan migrants who had their asylum claims rejected in Norway. She encountered some of these informants while doing research with rejected Afghan asylum seekers in Paris who absconded to Norway to evade deportation. However, most informants were recruited through the snowball method that started with these key informants. The informants were loosely connected through digital networks, however, they often operated independently (Rabe 2023). Their support involved caregiving, administrative support and disobedient acts that violated European and Norwegian law (Rabe & Haddeland 2021). Examples include facilitating unauthorised border crossings, helping rejected asylum seekers evade police and deportation, and providing residency to illegalised migrants.

Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were guided by core questions concerning legality, morality, relations and motivations for helping migrants. Digital observations were used to explore interaction and meaning-making online (Hine

2015) and consisted of two parts. The first involved close observation of informants' Facebook profiles and taking field notes of their digital activities. The second involved the observation of three closed chat groups on Facebook and WhatsApp.

The second author, Mogstad, conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Greece and Norway. This involved 9 months of participant observation as a full-time volunteer for a Norwegian humanitarian organisation working inside and outside refugee camps in Lesbos, Chios, Athens and Northern Greece. She decided to study Norwegian volunteers and border policies after volunteering on the Greek islands in 2016 and witnessing volunteers' growing responsibilities and shifting politics. The fieldwork also included semi-structured interviews with more than 50 volunteers and aid workers across Norway. Many of these interviews were conducted in the privacy of her informants' home, with informants she previously knew from Greece or political advocacy in Norway. This allowed for informal and intimate conversations based on shared experiences and trust. She also studied informants' testimonies and expressions of their convictions and emotions on social media. Compared to Rabe's informants, her informants were more organised and mostly helped migrants in Greece. However, several went to considerable lengths to support individual migrants they befriended and occasionally violated the law by helping them cross borders and smuggling documents. Many also became politically engaged and involved in refugee advocacy.

ANALYSIS AND ETHICS

The analysis presented below results from an inductive, collaborative and interdisciplinary process. We decided to collaborate after discovering that we had made several similar findings. Although our data were collected and coded separately, our collaboration involved revisiting and reinterpreting some of our data together and in conversation with theories and concepts from different disciplines.

Research on migrants and solidarity workers involves many ethical concerns and responsibilities, including power inequalities, informed consent and reciprocity (Jordan & Moser 2020). Because of our different positionalities and methodologies, we dealt with these challenges in distinct ways. However, we both respected our informants' rights to silence, privacy, and non-participation. Moreover, recognising how narratives and representations can harm, we have sought to combine criticism with respect and portray our informants as ethically concerned and reflective human beings (Bendixsen & Sandberg 2021). We also highlight the political potential of their actions and contribute to their struggles in different ways through political, academic and social engagements.

All informants have been anonymised and given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Moreover, we did not save any verbatim text from our digital observations to avoid traceability. The quotes in this article are taken from interview transcripts and digital fieldnotes and translated from Norwegian into English by the authors. Although we aimed for verbatim translation from our interview transcriptions, some sentences were slightly rephrased to ensure clarity.

JUSTIFYING DISOBEDIENCE

The analysis begins by showing how citizen humanitarians comprehended and legitimised their disobedient acts by evocating transnational, national and familial memories of WWII.

Malin was a Norwegian woman in her 60s who became engaged in helping migrants as a volunteer for the local Red Cross branch. On learning about unaccompanied Afghan minors who were awakened by the police in the middle of the night and deported to Kabul, she felt 'compelled' to act and help them evade deportation. In our interview, Malin made several connections to WWII and the Norwegian volunteers who assisted Jews in crossing the border to Sweden and escaping arrest and deportation to German death camps.

I think about the [second world] war. During the war, volunteers helped those in danger, people who had to flee [from Norway]. They did this although it was risky – they even risked getting shot at. These acts are part of our near history (...). As a pensioner, I am no longer dependent on a clean record. If the police arrest me for civil disobedience, it will not change my conviction that I am doing the right thing. It is the society that poses the threat.

As illustrated by this quote, Malin connected her decision to help rejected asylum seekers with the collective memory of WWII in Norway. While indicating that the rescuers of WWII faced higher risks than her ('they even risked getting shot at'), she acknowledged that she also risks being arrested for violating the law. Malin stressed that 'doing the right thing' is not necessarily legal and that her moral obligation to help people in need superseded her juridical obligation to follow the law. In line with post-holocaust morality (Alexander 2002), she also suggested that she had to help the rejected migrants despite risking arrest and prosecution. Moreover, by stating, 'I am doing the right thing. It is the society that poses a threat', Malin positioned herself within the moral binary code of civil versus anti-civil and good versus evil. First, she suggested that 'the society' (which we interpret in broad terms as state policies and societal attitudes towards migrants) represents a threat to the post-holocaust morality she sought to defend. Second, she associated herself with the 'good' or 'civil' against 'the evil' or 'anti-civil' elements in society responsible for migrant suffering.

Another informant, Astrid, was a retired Norwegian grandmother who helped young, rejected Afghan asylum seekers evade deportation. On different occasions, she drove her car across the border from Norway to Sweden with young Afghan migrants in the back seat. When we discussed how these acts might violate national or European laws, she reflected

I think of all the bad things people have done in the world that have been legal. Consider the persecution of the Jews. It was illegal to help them. However, who was honoured afterwards? Those who helped them.

Astrid used the collective memory of WWII to give meaning and legitimacy to her disobedient humanitarian actions. To begin with, she referred to the rescue of Jews to illustrate that what is today recognised as good and honourable acts were illegal at the time. In doing so, she questioned the morality of the law and alluded to a timeless, universal value that distinguishes between what is good and evil in society (Levy & Sznajder 2002). By implicitly comparing her disobedient acts to help Afghan migrants escape deportation with the illegal rescues of European Jews during WWII, Astrid further legitimised her actions as morally good. She also hinted at the prospect of being honoured for her efforts in the future.

The two examples illustrate how citizen humanitarians in our study drew symbolic parallels between WWII and the present-day treatment of migrants in Europe. First, they used the Holocaust as a 'bridging metaphor' to define what is good and evil in their time. They also placed themselves on the 'good' or 'civil' side of the moral binary code in society. Second, they mobilised post-holocaust morality to legitimise their disobedient humanitarian acts as morally right and justified. From their perspective, the violation of the law is not immoral because opposing the injustice inflicted upon migrants is a moral obligation comparable to the act of rescuing Jews during WWII. According to post-holocaust morality, societal evil and inhumanity must be opposed at any cost (Alexander 2002). Thus, citizen humanitarians answer a higher transcendent law, which they place above national and EU legislation (Halliday & Morgan 2013). In all this symbolic work, our informants' comparisons with the rescuers of Jews during WWII were critical. We suggest that the WWII rescuers served as 'moral exemplars' (Robbins 2018) who expressed the post-holocaust values our informants believed in and sought to live by. Moreover, by making these comparisons, our informants write themselves into an honourable genealogy of humanitarian rescuers.

FAMILIAL HISTORIES

Several informants also connected the contemporary predicament of illegalised migrants to the experiences of their own family members who were imprisoned, forced to flee or who joined the resistance movement during WWII. In our research, we observed that having such familial memories from WWII made it easier for our informants to identify with the plight of contemporary migrants fleeing war or facing deportation. Some informants also suggested that their moral values and humanitarian sensibilities were 'in their blood' or transmitted intergenerationally via socialisation.

Bernhard was a Norwegian man who assisted several rejected Afghan asylum seekers in Europe by hosting them in his apartment in a Spanish city. On a few occasions, he also helped migrants crossing European borders by driving them from Spain to France without authorisation. Like Malin and Astrid, he recognised that these actions might cause him problems with the police.

(...) I did not know the consequences if the police stopped me. However, my father was in German captivity [during WWII] and I heard war stories from him. I believe the situations are somewhat similar.

This quote from Bernhard illustrates that WWII memories do not always figure as abstract or national narratives of good and evil. Instead, remembering his father's stories, a member of the Norwegian resistance movement, allowed Bernhard to feel personal identification and empathy. Illustrating how family memories can shape individual identities or subjectivities (Shore & Kauko 2017), Bernhard suggested that his moral compass was almost an inherited sense of morality that enabled him to violate the law for the right cause.

Another informant, Ole, also referred to family memories from WWII to explain his decision to help migrants illegally. Ole came from a part of northern Norway that experienced enormous damage and loss during 1944 to 1945, when Soviet forces liberated the region.⁵ In 2015, he volunteered to help migrants in Greece. When he

⁵ The civilian population in Troms and Finnmark, of nearly 60,000, was forcibly moved south, however, approximately 25,000 people hid away in the mountains and the countryside.

got home, he became engaged in helping migrants who arrived in his hometown after crossing the Russian border. On one occasion, he drove two migrants from the local asylum reception centre to the nearby town, where the migrants entered the local church and claimed church asylum. A police officer stopped him and charged him with helping migrants evade deportation and unauthorised travel and stay within the Schengen area. He was later acquitted in court. Reflecting on this experience, Ole said the charges did not bother him as he knew he was doing the right thing. He connected the plight of the migrants to his grandparents, who had to flee from their homes when Soviet forces liberated Northern Norway.

My grandparents experienced the war. They had to flee (...). I received these values with my mother's milk: the refugees who come here, we cannot leave them outside to freeze.

Ole suggested that his moral values were transmitted intergenerationally via his mother's breast milk (*morsmelk*), a metaphor for socialisation. In our interview, he also described a natural inclination to break the law to help others. Like many informants, Ole implied there is a 'we' who knows what is right and wrong. Based on our conversations with Ole, we believe that this 'we' can refer to multiple bodies: First, his family, who carried personal memories of displacement from WWII. Second, local people in northern Norway who regularly receive migrants crossing the Russian border. Third, Norwegians, who have a robust humanitarian self-image and self-ascribed plight to help others because of their great fortune (Oxfeldt 2018). Fourth, a larger civil sphere in European societies who share a common identity based on a shared past influenced by the enlightenment and prospects of a shared future (Habermas & Derrida 2003). In other words, the 'we' Ole and others referred to might draw upon local, national and familial histories. However, directly or indirectly, it also draws upon the collective memory in Europe of WWII and the moral imperative to address suffering and injustice (Levy & Sznaider 2007).

POLITICAL CRITIQUE AND FUTURE RECOGNITION

The second part of the analysis discusses how citizen humanitarians mobilise WWII memories and references to describe and criticise European and national border policies. We further elaborate on our informants' belief in the judgement of history and their future recognition as moral and political subjects 'on the right side of history'.

CRITICISING CONTEMPORARY BORDER POLICIES

Like the Danish and German volunteers Jensen & Kirchner (2020) studied, the citizen humanitarians in our study accused both the EU and their national governments of the 'inhumane treatment' of refugees and other migrants. When expressing their disapproval of current border policies, they regularly decried the failure to 'learn from the past' and protect the moral values and rights culture inherited from WWII. Moreover, national and European authorities were accused of being 'blind to' or 'without regard for' history and for violating the continent's humanitarian heritage.

For some informants, this 'failure to learn from history' made them deeply concerned about the future of Europe and their own countries. Åse, a Norwegian informant, shared the following

I am so worried about what is happening with our country: the blindness to history and xenophobia. I thought we had agreed, 'never again,' but now these sentiments are resurfacing.

In this statement, Åse compared the contemporary rise of xenophobia with the persecution of Jews during WWII and decried the failure of her country to ensure 'never again'. Åse did not directly use the words 'WWII' or the 'Holocaust', but by evoking the slogan 'never again', she made the connection unmistakably clear. Moreover, by identifying the return of 'these sentiments' as worrisome, she depicted the social pain and exclusion migrants experience in contemporary Europe as a fundamental threat to her country's future. 'I thought we had agreed "never again"', she said, identifying with a moral community of civil society actors committed to ensuring that the evil of the Holocaust never repeats itself. Åse depicts the rise of xenophobia and mistreatment of migrants as threatening her identity as a humanitarian. As such, we can analyse how she constructs contemporary border policies as a new cultural trauma: it is a symbolic construction of 'us' and 'them', where the collective 'we' experience and confront an external threat to their moral identity and future (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015). Additionally, Åse's comments illustrate how different temporal concerns intersect in citizen humanitarianism. Rather than being occupied solely with immediate needs and emergencies, she turned to the past to make sense of the present and expressed deep concerns about the future.

Several informants also referenced WWII when they criticised state and European policies in newspaper op-eds or public speeches. Some described the current containment and deportation of asylum seekers in Europe as 'the shame of our age', making an implicit comparison with the moral failure of protecting Jews during WWII. By describing Greek refugee camps as concentration camps, informants also alluded to the failure of European politicians to ensure 'never again'.

In their speeches and writings, informants also appropriated the post-holocaust morality of good versus evil. For instance, some described contemporary European asylum policies as evil and the struggle against xenophobia and nationalism as a 'fight against darkness'. Significantly, many also ascribed themselves personal roles and responsibilities in this struggle against inhumanity and darkness. In other words, they described and 'took on board' human suffering and directed responsibility for it. Implicitly, they also narrated a moral binary code in civil society (Alexander 2006): those who oppose migrant suffering and xenophobia (the good and civil) versus those who cause or silently accept it (the bad/evil or anti-civil).

HISTORY AS JUDGEMENT

Like the volunteers in Jensen and Kirchner's (2020) study, many of our informants became disillusioned with politics and distrustful of their politicians. After years of increasingly stringent asylum policies, they had limited expectations that their humanitarian demands would change authorities. Nevertheless, our interviews revealed that most had not completely lost hope; they only projected their hope onto the future. Despite politicians' unwillingness to listen to them in the present, they believed that history would judge Europe's and their countries' border policies as regrettable and shameful. Moreover, even if they were lawbreakers today, they believed history would recognise and honour them for their efforts to help migrants.

Significantly, this belief that history would redeem them often involved personal desires to perform as moral exemplars for their children or grandchildren. For instance, several

informants told us they wanted to tell their future children and grandchildren that 'I was amongst those who helped refugees' or 'stood up for our values'. They also hoped their actions would evoke humanitarian values in future generations and their children specifically. As the Norwegian volunteer and mother of three, Maja, summarised

I believe it is important for our children to learn that someone fought against the darkness. If not, they may believe that the world is evil and that one can do whatever one wants. Hence, volunteering [to help migrants] is partly about creating hope. For my own sake, it is also important to be able to tell my children that I did something.

In this quote, Maja appropriated the Holocaust narrative of good versus evil to make sense of contemporary asylum and border policies. By claiming to 'fight against darkness', she also assumed the role of a moral exemplar (Robbins 2018), exemplifying the post-holocaust values she wanted her children to learn and the wider society to institutionalise.

Some informants described themselves and others assisting migrants in Europe as contemporary 'time witnesses'. In the Norwegian context, the term 'time witnesses' describes Norwegian Jews and political prisoners who survived persecution and imprisonment during WWII and later became important moral symbols and bearers of historical consciousness. By calling themselves the 'time witnesses of our age', informants sought to highlight the moral gravity of the contemporary situation for asylum seekers in Europe. They also proclaimed the moral significance and righteousness of their humanitarian actions. Moreover, the term 'time witnesses of our age' alludes to their future-oriented vision and identity as narrators of the 'shameful' history unfolding in the present (Mogstad 2023). Bente, the founder of a Norwegian volunteer humanitarian organisation, posted on her personal Facebook page:

Our volunteers are witnesses to how Europe is treating displaced people.
This story has not yet been written, but we will contribute to tell and write it.

In this statement, Bente portrayed herself and the other volunteers as both agents and writers of history. Underlying this portrayal is a historical consciousness, which 'posits history as a temporality upon which one can act' (Roitman 2013: 7). Moreover, Bente may be described as extending herself and other citizen humanitarians into the future through imagination and action (Brun 2016). Rather than simply waiting for the future to happen, she and the other volunteers are actively seeking to create it by writing and narrating the 'inhumane' history of the present.

DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this discussion, we consider two broader and political questions that arise from our findings. First, do our informants' discursive and symbolic acts contribute to the cultural construction of contemporary border policies as a new cultural trauma? Second, what are the political implications of our informants' appropriations of WWII memories and identifications with the rescuers of the Holocaust?

A NEW CULTURAL TRAUMA?

Cultural traumas are constructed when 'collective actors decide to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to who they are, where they came from and where they

want to go' (Alexander 2004: 10). Cultural traumas rely on symbolic constructions of 'us' and 'them', a collective 'we' which are experiencing and confronting an external threat to their moral identity and future (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015). As Alexander (2004) points out, social actors construct cultural traumas when they identify human suffering and its causes and 'take on board' some of this suffering and the responsibility to mitigate it.

The way our informants described the treatment of migrants in Europe as a threat to their collective values and identity fits well with these characteristics of how cultural trauma is constructed. Moreover, the citizen humanitarians defined themselves as 'on the right side of history' and defenders of post-holocaust morality. In doing so, they distance themselves from those who inflict injustice and suffering and those who let these things unfold. This symbolic construction of 'us' and 'them' produces a collective identity within citizen humanitarianism. In turn, this collective identity as protectors of the good and civil against the evil and anti-civil allows them to collectively construct a narration and coding of the present-day treatment of migrants as cultural trauma.

Notably, the suffering and injustice inflicted upon migrants entering and residing in Europe may be recognised as traumatic events for the migrants involved. However, the construction of cultural trauma is not based on individual pain and suffering: '... it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the kind of suffering at stake' (Eyerman, Alexander & Breese 2015: 12). Thus, the citizen humanitarians partake in the construction of cultural trauma, not as victims of a 'horrendous event'. Instead, citizen humanitarians identify and describe the plight of migrants in Europe, 'take on board' some of their suffering, and direct blame and responsibility for it.

Thus, we propose that the citizen humanitarians in our study partake in a symbolic narration of the present-day treatment of migrants as a potential new cultural trauma in Europe. However, importantly, we do not argue that contemporary border policies and treatment of migrants in Europe have become a cultural trauma. In a recent analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, Demertzis & Eyerman (2020) propose that cultural traumas are best studied in retrospect, since this enables scholars to analyse discursive themes, actors and effects over time. The brutal treatment and exclusion of migrants in Europe are ongoing and subject to different and often polarising interpretations and narratives. Thus, it is too early to define whether contemporary border policies might become a cultural trauma.

For the same reason, it is also too early to tell whether our interlocutors will be deemed 'on the right side of history' in future history books and narratives. Instead, we can view contemporary debates on asylum policies as symbolic battles within the civil sphere where different actors define themselves on the 'good' or 'civil' side of the moral binary code (Alexander 2006). In these symbolic battles, the collective memory of WWII and post-holocaust morality is discursive and symbolic resources actors can mobilise to fight for what they consider right and good in society. In the next section, we consider some political potentials and limitations of this engagement with history and memory.

POLITICAL POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS

Our analysis showed how our informants mobilised collective memories and references from WWII and the Holocaust to legitimise their disobedient humanitarian actions and criticise state policies. This showcases the political potential of humanitarian engagements with history and war memories. However, all 'living memories' (Fine & Beim 2007) are vulnerable to misuse and manipulation and can be appropriated

for conflicting political objectives. For instance, Stierl (2020) warns that the figure of the migrant as a slave has been used to justify the fight against smuggling and trafficking as a humane response to border crossing. Regarding memories of WWII and the Holocaust, Alexander & Dromi (2015) show how Israel has often mobilised the cultural trauma of the Holocaust to legitimise the occupation and violence against Palestinians. As demonstrated by the war on Gaza in 2023, 'never again' can also be a 'war cry' and justification for brutal retaliation (Roth-Rowland 2023).

Our informants' engagement with history and memories from WWII do not justify war and violence. Nevertheless, they entail other risks and limitations, of which we highlight three. First, our informants' mobilisation of national memories of war and rescue during WWII risk reproducing a romanticised version of Nordic and Norwegian history (Mogstad 2023). More specifically, their emphasis on Norwegian rescuers and victimhood might reinforce hegemonic narratives of Nordic exceptionalism and silence Norwegians' complicity in the Holocaust (Michelet 2018). Relatedly, suggesting that Europe is undermining its post-holocaust morality reinforces the glorified image of Europe as a 'bastion of democracy, liberty, and universal rights' (Danewid 2017). While our informants used memories and references from WWII to challenge contemporary state and European policies, they thus failed to acknowledge and confront Norway's and Europe's historical complicity.

Second, when our informants compare themselves with the rescuers of WWII, they distance themselves from the violence of the Norwegian state and European border policies. This is what Tuck & Yang (2012) describe as a 'move to innocence': a self-exonerating practice that relieves people from feelings of guilt. As we have also argued elsewhere (Mogstad & Rabe 2023), our informants' association with the rescuers of WWII can be read as an act of redemption that deflects their complicity as Norwegian and European citizens.

Third, citizen humanitarians' belief that post-holocaust morals will eventually 'win' and that they will be recognised 'on the right side of history' is not without ambivalence. As Scott (2020) argues, this belief reflects a linear and progressive view of history as moving forward and rectifying injustice. This belief in historical progress can hide the continuation of power structures and divert attention from current struggles for justice. According to Scott, it might also maintain the idea of the nation-state as the final source of a historical judgement and, therefore, hold back on alternative futures.

However, despite these risks and limitations, we maintain that memories of war and rescue can nourish political critique and subversive humanitarianism. As Rediker (2005) proposes, 'If you can recapture lost struggles in ways that are meaningful to the present, you can transmute the past into the present and future'. More specifically, our study shows that historical identification with rescuers during WWII inspired the informants to address injustice in the present, despite risking arrest and criminalisation. Moreover, connecting familial histories of flight and imprisonment during WWII with asylum seekers risking deportation today can help people identify with the plight of illegalised migrants and justify disobedient actions. Finally, making historical parallels and connections with past struggles for movement can help to de-exceptionalise contemporary border crossings (Tazzioli 2021). As a political intervention, looking to the past might also help us reframe flight and migration as desirable (Stierl 2020) and legitimate responses to war and suffering.

CONCLUSION

Humanitarian and migration scholars have increasingly attended to history and temporality and traced connections between past and present struggles for movement. Inspired by these studies, we have analysed citizen humanitarians as agents of history who mobilise the past to act in the present and extend themselves into the future. We focused explicitly on informants' mobilisation of collective memories and references from WWII, including their historical identifications with rescuers and application of the moral standards of post-holocaust morality. Moreover, we showed that migrants are not the only focus of citizen humanitarian' future-making strategies (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2021). These strategies are also directed at citizen humanitarians themselves who, despite acting at odds with political decisions and laws, aspire and believe in their future recognition on 'the right side of history'.

Theoretically and analytically, our article illustrates the importance of focusing on humanitarian actors' orientations towards the past and future. We underscored the value of analysing citizen humanitarians as situated actors with personal and political histories, memories and future imaginations. Increased focus on how humanitarian actors engage with history and memory lends texture to our understanding of what motivates them to help migrants in contemporary Europe. This might be especially vital to understand citizen humanitarians' moral reasoning and willingness to engage in subversive humanitarian actions that challenge state law and border policies.

Our study has further illustrated how different temporal concerns interact and fold into each other. On the one hand, we have seen that our informants mobilised collective memories and references from WWII to intervene in and narrate the present and the future. On the other hand, we have seen how their future imaginations and belief in the judgement of history influence their humanitarian actions and reasoning. Although we have repeatedly described citizen humanitarians as 'agents of history who use the past to intervene in the present and extend themselves into the future', this illustrates that temporal practices and imaginations are more entangled than this linear narrative suggests. Instead, we might usefully approach humanitarian actions as unfolding in a 'multi-temporal present' (Bryant & Knight 2019).

Last, we identified some of the political implications of our informants' discursive and symbolic practices. While we specifically highlighted the risks of historical romanticisation, depoliticisation and deflection of personal guilt and responsibility, we also demonstrated how memories of war and rescue can nourish political critique and subversive humanitarianism. Moreover, we showed how citizen humanitarians engage in symbolic battles over the present-day treatment of migrants in Europe. This reinforces the view of citizen humanitarians as political actors and agents of history intervening in the present and future.


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