

Halle (Saale)

Successful anti-racist organising despite political pressure

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways

1

Halle shows how a city can organise and institutionalise civic anti-racist projects under difficult circumstances, as most of Eastern Germany is under much greater political pressure from right-wing groups than Western Germany.

2

Halle is a good example of how civil society welcome structures, which were set up during the “Summer of Migration” in 2015, have become permanent—even after the decline in arrivals. They continue to provide lasting local solidarity work.

What is unique about the city?

Persistent anti-racist activism: Despite high pressure from right-wing groups, the local anti-racist scene has worked to improve the lives of refugees at the municipal and state level for more than two decades. Over the years, its network of welcome initiatives have not only had a local impact, but have also ensured the city of Halle demands improvements from the state government. Halle has also adopted some progressive measures that significantly improve access to individual housing for refugees.

What is the focus of local migration policies?

Providing lasting local solidarity work: Local movements have focused both on targeting inhumane migration policies, as well as on building alternative structures in the absence of municipal action. The protest against deportations from Leipzig-Halle airport, and the abolition of the patronising voucher system for refugees, stand out in terms of critical actions. A citizen-run welcome centre also offers support in many areas of daily life.

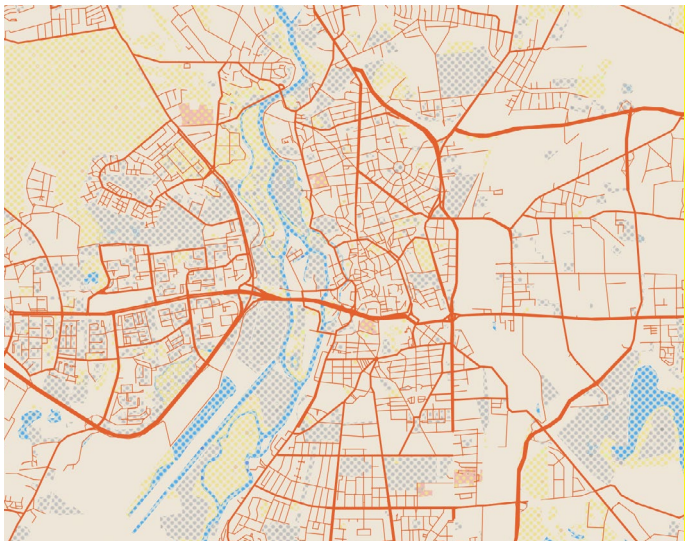
What are the most outstanding results so far?

A meeting café for newcomers and long-time residents: Keeping up the “welcome culture” of 2015 in a comparatively hostile environment is itself an outstanding result of activism in Halle. In terms of individual projects, the “welcome centre” stands out. When Halle’s administration refused to open an integration centre as the city council proposed, a civic initiative took over and opened a meeting café for refugees and

locals. It continues to offer several support services and is a well-known meeting spot today. It offers help in learning and speaking German, in filling out forms for authorities, and in applying for jobs.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Months before the Seebrücke movement emerged in summer 2018, an initiative involving activist groups, institutions, individuals, and city administration employees had already formed in Halle. Thanks to their relentless activism, the city council decided that Halle should join “Cities of Safe Harbours,” and support the Potsdam declaration.



Population

238,762

Location

East Germany, in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt

Mayor

Bernd Wiegand (independent)

2. Local Background & context

Halle is a good example of how civil society welcome structures, which were set up during the “Summer of Migration” in 2015, have become permanent, even after the decline in arrivals. They continue to provide lasting local solidarity work. However, their interaction with local policymakers can be tricky and institutional support can’t be taken for granted.

Although an anti-racist civil society does exist in East Germany, it is under much greater political pressure from right-wing groups than is the case in West Germany. This is especially true for anti-racist initiatives that receive public funds, as one of the most popular political strategies of the far-right AfD in East Germany is to discredit local anti-racist initiatives as “extremist” in order to deprive them of public funds.

How to resist and organise in an hostile environment.

It was thus a symbolic political success that the city of Halle, together with groups from civil society, created the “HALLIANZ” fund.¹ It supports

¹ <https://www.hallianz-fuer-viel-falt.de/foerderung/>

voluntary work by associations and individuals, and anti-racism is a focal point. The money comes from the federal program Demokratie leben!² (“Living democracy”) and from private donations.

In 2020 alone, three projects in the anti-racism field were financed with money from the fund. The local Georg-Cantor-Gymnasium invited Seebrücke representatives for a project day and dealt with topics on asylum and refugees. Support was given to the mobile food collective FoodNot-Borders³, which not only cooks at anti-racist actions, but in turn uses the income to support anti-racist projects.

The HALLIANZ fund also provided money for the “Coffee Party for Women.*” This is a discussion room for women with a refugee or migration background. Students from Halle set themselves the goal of creating a meeting place to give women the opportunity to discuss intimate topics, accompanied by two interpreters. They wanted to provide women, who have not lived in Halle or Germany for long, with contacts for topics such as sexuality or the body. The group brought together interested women and interpreters so that future meetings can be self-organised.

The Fight for Public Support

Public support for antiracist initiatives cannot be taken for granted in cities like Halle. Just how much, for example, became apparent when left-wing parties proposed a city council resolution in December 2017. The city council decided that as of March 2018, staff positions for a “Specialist Centre for Democracy – Against Racism and Xenophobia” should be established.⁴ This unit would also deal with activities in the field of refugee solidarity. However, the mayor did not fill this post until 2020. In July, he even announced that he would ignore the decision. There would be no specialist office for right-wing extremism, but instead a specialist office “for democracy” and “against all extremism.”⁵ The Left criticised this sharply.⁶ However, Halle has introduced a part-time position of a coordinator for the city’s reception activities, who has been joining assemblies of local anti-racist groups.

Anti-Deportation Protests

The local Solidarity City group regularly organises protests against deportations and discriminatory state practices in Halle and its surrounding region.

One of these was at Halle-Leipzig Airport, of which the city of Halle is also a shareholder. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID—19 pandemic, Germany had carried out a total of 33 highly controversial deportation flights using collective charters since 2016. With the flights organised by the federal government and some federal states, a total of 907 men were returned to Afghanistan. The majority of the flights took off from the centrally located Halle/Leipzig airport.

Local groups protested on the spot almost each time, with the Seebrücke/Solidarity City group being involved since the protests began.

² <https://www.demokratie-leben.de/>

³ https://www.facebook.com/foodnotborders/?locale=de_DE

⁴ http://buengerinfo.halle.de/vo0050.asp?__kvonr=16792&voselect=16229

⁵ <https://radiocorax.de/ob-wiegand-neun-monate-nach-dem-anschlag-von-halle/>

⁶ <https://dubisthalle.de/linken-stadtverband-kritisiert-wiegand-interview-zum-terroranschlag>

Georg Schütze of the Halle Office of the Refugee Council of Saxony-Anhalt said that for transparent and fair procedures, possible illnesses of those affected must be passed on, and that the sick are medically accompanied. He criticised authorities repeatedly for refusing to allow independent deportation observers at the airport.⁷

Abolishing the voucher system

Since autumn 2017, the social welfare office in Merseburg (Saalekreis), which geographically surrounds the city of Halle, has been giving Gutscheine (“vouchers”) instead of cash to refugees.⁸ It is a sanctioning measure for refugees whose asylum applications were rejected and who have only a “Duldung”(people on a toleration certificate).⁹ Like all refugees, they are subject to an obligation to cooperate in obtaining passports and thus de facto facilitate their own deportation. In cases where people with Duldung are without passports, the authorities use a legal regulation to deprive them of social welfare benefits in order to force them to “voluntarily leave the country” or undergo deportation. One means of exerting pressure is to refuse cash and instead issue vouchers. The sum of the vouchers is far below the general social subsistence level. As a rule, adults receive vouchers valid for 150 euro per month, whereas the normal allowance is 354 euro. Due to the lack of cash, they can no longer pay their lawyer fees, tickets, or telephone credits, for example. Nor can the vouchers be used to pay for medication or items such as tobacco or alcohol. The vouchers cannot be changed for cash in the shop, nor is cash given in return if the vouchers are not fully used. In 2020, there were about 500 refugees living in the Saalekreis who were entitled to social benefits according to the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act. For about 150 of them, this entitlement is limited. They receive the vouchers instead of cash, which are issued every two weeks. This was particularly critical, because the voucher system for refugees had been abandoned at the federal level in 2012, after a decade of protests.

Volunteers – which later included the Seebrücke and Solidarity City group – began exchanging these vouchers for cash in 2017. An activist involved states:

“For us it is absolutely clear that the voucher system as a whole must be abolished. It is racist, stigmatising, degrading, and means a considerable deterioration of the already difficult living situation of refugees.”

⁷ <https://www.saechsischer-fluechtlingsrat.de/de/2018/11/13/gemeinsame-pm-rueckfuehrung-ab-seits-der-richtlinie-zur-heutigen-abschiebung-nach-afghanistan/>, Hinterland Magazin 39, S. 93x

⁸ <https://www.saalekreis.de/de/hilfe-fuer-auslaendische-fluechtlinge.html>

⁹ According to German aliens law, a Duldung is a certificate of temporary suspension of deportation

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 Assistance and social interaction for refugees and locals: “Welcome Treff”

One of the most important projects for refugee support in daily life is the so-called “Welcome Treff” – a large civil society-run meeting place for refugees and other citizens. It was opened by a civic initiative in 2015 after the city refused to open its own centre. It is offering several different support services and is a well-known meeting spot for different groups.

In the summer of 2015, even before the sharp increase in refugee arrivals in the second half of the year, the Linke (Left Party) and the SPD (Social Democrats) made a push to transform Halle’s foreigners administration into a welcoming authority. In September 2015, the city council commissioned the Mayor to develop a concept for a “Welcome Centre” for asylum seekers, refugees, EU citizens, and international students.¹⁰ This should offer the functions of a registration office, immigration office, housing agency, support for child care, school attendance and study opportunities, counselling on living expenses, and information on the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad. The application went through, but was never implemented, as the mayor refused to comply. On his initiative, the state administration office declared the city council plan “illegal.”¹¹ The reform, which would actually have made Halle a lot more “welcoming,” was off the table. The administration did not want to have such a project imposed on it. But only a few months later a similar institution opened – offering large parts of what the planned communal “Welcome Centre” would have had: the “Welcome Treff.”¹²

How to run a Meeting Café

Established in December 2015, the initiative is a meeting café for refugees and locals. It offers help in learning and speaking German, in filling out forms for authorities, or applying for jobs. It is open longer on some days, and offers opportunities for games or sports. It is run by the Freiwilligen-Agentur Halle-Saalkreis e.V. and the city of Halle.

The Welcome Treff offers volunteers as personal Lotsen (pilots) for refugees. They provide initial information and orientation, advice, and translations. They help with everyday appointments, visits to authorities and doctors, with the search for language courses and leisure activities, or with the registration of children in kindergarten or school. A series of evening events called “Society and Integration” offers free education on various topics. Its speakers design their seminars in such a way that non-native speakers can also follow.

In 2017, a separate women’s café was added under the roof of the Welcome-Treff – after all, a good third of Halle’s refugees are women. These meetings often first need a protected space and time, in order to develop confidence and open themselves, says the director of the Wel-

¹⁰ http://buengerinfo.halle.de/vo0050.asp?__kvonr=11937

¹¹ <http://buengerinfo.halle.de/getfile.asp?id=167035&type=do&>

¹² <https://www.willkommen-in-halle.de/welcome-treff/>

come-Treff, Julia Burghardt. “We began with an idea workshop and were impressed about the large resonance and ideas the women have. The women should be further encouraged to develop their abilities and support each other.”¹³ Starting in 2018, the Welcome Treff was also a place where the local Solidarity City group met, which in turn is partly made up of activists from the Welcome Treff. In 2020, the “Welcome-Treff” was awarded the German Neighborhood Award.¹⁴ The jury found that the Welcome Treff “sets an example for more diversity at this special location in Halle and is thus an inspiration for other regions throughout Germany.”¹⁵

4.2 No Lager, but a home

In addition to public support for alternative and anti-racist projects, the debate in Halle has long revolved around the issue of housing for refugees. Campaigning work by civic initiatives like NoLager, which lasted well over ten years, gradually created a critical public awareness of camp accommodation. As a result of this activism, the city has used its municipal agency, leading to several improvements. Refugees can move into their own homes more quickly than in other cities. Moreover, around 700 Integration Flats with favourable conditions for refugees were created, as well as a residential care home for female refugees.

As with almost everywhere in Germany, the city of Halle accommodates refugees in collective accommodation. This was made an issue by the anti-racist scene as early as 2002. In the following years, the group documented violations of fundamental rights in the collective accommodation centres of Saxony-Anhalt. “We support refugees and refugee initiatives in their political struggle for an improved living situation, for housing and for the right to stay. We oppose all forced housing in collective centres and camps and demand their closure,”¹⁶ they wrote, calling for people to be housed in decentralised housing. The activists fought against Residenzpflicht¹⁷ and the deportation of rejected asylum seekers. Closing the camps and giving refugees single apartments has also been a main demand of the Solidarity City group in Halle.¹⁸

Municipality’s Room for Maneuver

In Saxony-Anhalt, it is up to the districts and independent towns to decide whether to give the refugees housing or let them live in homes. As a rule, however, the asylum law¹⁹ stipulates that asylum seekers are accommodated in shared accommodation. Nonetheless, the receiving municipalities have room for flexibility – particularly from a humanitarian point of view – in providing accommodation. The state of Saxony-Anhalt recommends that families with at least one underage child, should be given accommodation after six months in the camp. Single parents should also be allowed to move into flats after three years.

Halle has shortened these deadlines. Here, refugees can move into their own homes more quickly than in other cities – in some cases after only two weeks in collective accommodation. The decisive factor here is whether the prospects of staying are considered good. However, there is no legal entitlement to this acceleration.

¹³ <https://hallelife.de/nachrichten/vermischtes/details/staatssekretaerin-susi-moebbeck-besuchte-frauencafe-im-welcome-treff.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.nachbarschaftspreis.de/de/welcome-treff/>

¹⁵ <https://www.nachbarschaftspreis.de/de/welcome-treff/>

¹⁶ <https://no-lager-halle.org/home.htm>

¹⁷ Residenzpflicht is a requirement for asylum seekers and tolerated persons living in Germany. It obliges the persons concerned to stay only in the area determined by the competent authority. The official term is spatial restriction.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/SolidarityCityHalle/posts/628678337982936/>

¹⁹ https://www.gesetze-im-inter-net.de/asylvfg_1992/_53.html

The Integration Flats Model

Since 2016, the city of Halle has followed a phased model for housing refugees: First, they are accommodated in shared accommodation. At the same time, the city began renting around 700 flats as so-called Integrationswohnungen (“integration flats”) from municipal housing companies. These are given to refugees by the municipality with the help of sub-tenancy agreements. After recognition, the tenancy agreements are taken over by the refugees.

Although the integration flats are distributed throughout the city of Halle, there is a special concentration of refugees in a few districts: “The majority of the available stock of these companies is in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods.”²⁰ There, rental flats of small and medium size are still available at relatively favourable prices and conditions. “This may explain why integration into the regular housing market for refugees in Halle was already well advanced at an early stage.”²¹ At the beginning of 2017, 44 percent of asylum seekers in Halle were already integrated into the regular housing market.²²

Today, there are two collective accommodation centres in the city with 202 places. In addition, there are 174 block flats and 731 Integrationswohnungen.

A residential care home for female refugees

Additionally, Halle has a Flüchtlingsfrauenhaus, or a residential care home for female refugees with or without children. Since it was founded in Köthen in 1996 and moved to Halle in 2001, the facility has offered a special form of shared assisted living for traumatised refugee women travelling alone and their children who have experienced violence in their country of origin, on the run or in shared accommodation. It is a protected area without male access. Requirements of entry are that the women (and their children) are asylum seekers or are on a Duldung (“Toleration”) and living in Saxony-Anhalt. The house, which is funded by the federal government and the state, is a model for the rest of Germany.

²⁰ BBSR (Hrsg.) (2017): Integration von Flüchtlingen in den regulären Wohnungsmarkt. Bonn: BBSR-Online-Publikation 21/2017

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

4. Advocacy and Network activities

Months before the Seebrücke movement emerged in summer 2018, an initiative of activist groups, institutions, individuals and city administration employees had already formed in Halle. Thanks to their relentless activism, the city council decided that Halle joins the alliance “Cities of Safe Harbours” and supports the Potsdam declaration.

On the initiative of the local Seebrücke Group, on December 19, 2018, Halle’s city council passed a resolution for the “reception of people rescued from distress at sea.”²³ The resolution was requested by an alliance of four left parties. The conservative CDU and FDP, as well as the far right AfD, had previously voted against the resolution in the Finance Committee. It states: “The city council of Halle declares its willingness (...) to accept people rescued from distress at sea, especially in the Mediterranean.” The council hoped that by respecting the mayor’s autonomy, he would take the matter up. But the resolution has had no practical consequences for the time being.

Joining Municipal Solidarity Networks

18 months later, on June 11, 2020, the city council therefore adopted a second declaration,²⁴ introduced by Die Linke (Left). It states that the “City of Halle” joins the alliance “Cities of Safe Harbours” and supports the “Potsdam Declaration”. This is a declaration from June 2019, in which initially around 60 German cities and municipalities publicly declared their willingness to admit people rescued from distress at sea.

Halle, it was decided, would initially take in five unaccompanied minors and an additional contingent of up to 145 people from refugee camps in Greece. The Mayor was asked to inform the office of the alliance “Cities of Safe Harbours” of the decision and to take all further steps to accommodate the refugees. In addition, he was asked to contact the state of Saxony-Anhalt and the federal government. The mayor was also to advocate a humanitarian reception program in Saxony-Anhalt vis-à-vis the state government. In addition, the state government should support a Bundesrat (State Chamber) initiative by the state of Berlin to change this. The aim of this initiative was to amend the German Residence Act in such a way that the federal states could adopt humanitarian admission programs without the federal government’s consent. The background to this is that the conservative Federal Interior Ministry had been refusing to approve local and state initiatives for direct refugee admission since 2018.

²³ http://buengerinfo.halle.de/to0040.asp?_ksinr=15937

²⁴ http://buengerinfo.halle.de/to0040.asp?_ksinr=16739

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ The number of racist violent acts in Saxony-Anhalt is alarming: in 2022, people were attacked and injured at least every two to three days for racist, extreme right-wing, antisemitic and/or anti-LGBTIQ* motives. Violence against political opponents continues to be the second most frequent motive for crimes.²⁵ The city of Halle continues to be a stronghold for racist violence in Saxony-Anhalt but the local anti-racism scene continues working to improve the lives of refugees.
- ◆ The initiative “Welcome Treff” was awarded again in autumn 2021, this time by ‘Bündnis für Demokratie und Toleranz – gegen Extremismus und Gewalt (BfDT)’ as an exemplary project nationwide.²⁶
- ◆ Bernd Wiegand (former Mayor, independent) has been temporarily removed from office since 7 June 2021 in the wake of the affair surrounding his premature Corona vaccination.²⁷ His legal replacement is mayor Egbert Geier (Social Democratic Party). The next regular elections will not take place until 2026. Wiegand had been in office in Halle since 2012 and relied on the formation “Hauptsache Halle” (which was criticised for joining forces with Gernot Nette, who in the past was politically active for the far-right AfD and appeared at LEGIDA, a right-wing, anti-islamic movement²⁸) in the city council. Geier, on the other hand, is less controversial. So far, Halle admitted “about 1,200 more Ukraine refugees [...] than would be required according to the allocation key” under his government.²⁹
- ◆ Since 2022, the city of Halle has been organising a new initiative called “housing sponsorships”, for citizens who would like to participate in the accommodation of war refugees from Ukraine. As part of this housing sponsorship, the sponsors agree to arrange the furnishing and equipping of a flat. The city itself provides the flat.³⁰

²⁵ <https://dubisthalle.de/156-rechte-straftaten-in-sachsen-anhalt-halle-saale-hat-mit-48-den-hoechsten-anteil>

²⁶ <https://welcometreff.de/programm/>

²⁷ https://lwa.sachsen-anhalt.de/fileadmin/tx_tsrssinclude/landesverwaltungsamt_15_06_2021_pressemitteilung_disziplinarverfahren-gegen-ob-wiegand-vorlaeufige-entfernung-aus-dem-dienst.pdf

²⁸ <https://dubisthalle.de/wegen-aufnahmen-eines-ex-afiders-halle-gegen-rechts-kritisiert-stadtratsfraktion-hauptsache-halle>

²⁹ <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen-anhalt/halle/halle/jahresueckblick-halle-egbert-geier-100.html>

³⁰ <https://dubisthalle.de/kein-platz-in-der-eigenen-wohnung-dann-wohnungspatenschaft-fuer-ukraine-fluechtlinge-in-halle-uebernehmen>

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