

More Open Letters from African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany

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(Figure 1. Author: Raimond Spekking. Copyright: Creative Commons.)

This series of letters began with an introduction written by Ziga Podgornik Jakil and published jointly by [Blog Medizinethnologie of the Working Group Medical Anthropology](#) and the [Blogsite of the Working Group Public Anthropology](#) of the German Anthropological Association. These letters highlight the personal experiences of African students who escaped the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and settled in Germany. For the time being, they are excluded from Article 24, which grants EU-wide visas primarily to war refugees with Ukrainian citizenship,^[i] and their legal situation in Germany remains uncertain.^[ii] More letters will be published over the next few months in order to document their experiences.

Aimee

Before I decided to move to Ukraine, my brother, who already stayed in Kyiv with his wife, warned me that there were rumours about a possible war between Russia and Ukraine and it was not safe to come there. But I moved there anyway because I wanted to study medicine. During the seven months I spent in Ukraine, I shared the apartment with my brother and his wife. I took the mandatory Ukrainian language course, which is required for studying at a Ukrainian university. The university and the course were located in Kharkiv, but I was able to stay in Kyiv because classes were online. I also worked as a stylist with my brother's wife. In mid-February, the local news began to report aggressively about a possible outbreak of war. My brother suggested that we should move to a town in western Ukraine, where it might be safer for us in case of war. The day before the war we booked a train ticket to move there, but our train was cancelled and we stayed in Kyiv. The next morning I was awakened by an explosion so

strong that the walls of our apartment shook.

When the explosions stopped, we took the first available train to Poland. Our train first stopped in Lviv, Ukraine, and I saw a large crowd of people trying to board the train. Some people who managed to enter the train were very rude to us. They made racist remarks and demanded that we make room for them. But we managed to stay on the train. We left the train in Poland near the Ukrainian border. I saw thousands of Ukrainians at the station, while we [non-Ukrainian citizens] were only a few hundred. Polish authorities were busy helping Ukrainians, but they did not care about us and told us to wait. My brother's wife was heavily pregnant, and since our train ride took fifteen hours, my brother begged the authorities to take care of us as well. We stayed in Poland for about a week, but we did not know what to do. My brother learned through his channels that people from Ukraine are taken care of in Berlin, regardless of their origin, and so we took the first train.

When we arrived in Berlin, someone told us that we should apply for asylum, and we did. This was before Article 24 was introduced. We wanted to register in Germany. Soon after, a lawyer we contacted advised us to withdraw our asylum application, and with his help, our asylum application was successfully withdrawn. We were lucky because I know a couple of people who are still trying to end their asylum process.^[iii] In the beginning, we were housed in a hostel. I lived in a room with a few other people, and it wasn't that bad. But for my brother and his pregnant wife, it was really hard. The hygiene, especially in the toilets, was terrible. My brother soon learned about the [Tubman Network](#), which helps people with African backgrounds, and got in touch. The organization referred him and his wife to a family from Berlin where they could stay for a week. In the meantime, the heating in the hostel stopped working and I caught a cold. I was lucky that the family who had helped my brother and his wife contacted their friends, who then took me in their apartment for a while. Eventually, the family also helped us find a more stable apartment in Berlin.

In the meantime, we were unable to register in Germany and the clock was ticking. May twenty-fourth was the date until which we could stay without a visa. I was really frustrated and hopeless because I didn't know what would happen to us after that. But luck was on my side. The deadline for applying for a visa was extended by three months, and in the Telegram^[iv] group of the organization that had helped my brother and his wife, the announcement for ten full-time scholarships at a private university in Berlin appeared. It was really a tedious application process, but I managed to submit my application and I got the scholarship. Despite the initial difficulties, I really started to like Germany, mainly because of the good people I met who really helped me with everything. I haven't experienced racism yet, but I can only speak for myself. Now I hope that my new university in Berlin will help me with the visa application, because I would really like to stay here.



(Figure 2: Berlin. Copyright: Aimee.)

I know that my current situation in Germany is getting better and safer, but that doesn't mean it's the same for other international students from Ukraine. The German government should be more considerate of Black and international students because they have it even harder than Ukrainians who came to Germany. Germany should open its doors for them.

This letter was written on 22 July 2022.

Sophia

I went to Ukraine for educational purposes. I dreamed of becoming a doctor, but that was not possible in Nigeria. Studying at public universities is more affordable, but you never know how long your studies will take because universities are constantly on strike. Education at private universities is too expensive, and only the children of corrupt politicians with a lot of money can afford them. When I was still in school, I realized that I would not be able to realize my dream of becoming a doctor if I stayed in Nigeria. I decided to go to Ukraine and enrol in a university there. I lived in Ukraine for a total of six years, during which I completed the one-year mandatory Ukrainian language course and spent five years at the National Medical School in Vinnytsia.

During my time in Ukraine, I had friends who lived in Lugansk and had to flee to where I was studying because of armed conflict in that part of Ukraine. In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of war on February 24, posts on social media became increasingly alarming about the possibility of a full-blown war breaking out, and my parents urged me to return to Nigeria. I was very worried because I was not only afraid of the war, but also of returning to Nigeria empty-handed and without having accomplished anything. I have not visited my homeland since I left for Ukraine. The morning the war started, I looked at my cell phone and had dozens of unanswered calls and messages from friends in Kharkiv, Ukraine. They reported that everything was destroyed and windows were broken by explosions. I couldn't believe that the war had become a reality. I was confused and did not know what to do. The airspace was closed. So I decided to go to the store with my roommates in a dorm to stock up, but when we got there, the shelves in the store were already empty.

(Figure 3: Leaving Ukraine. Copyright: Sophia.)

In the meantime, my family was looking for a way to get me out of Ukraine. But I did not want to return to Nigeria. I contacted my friends in Ukraine and asked them about the best way out of the country. I didn't want to get stuck in a traffic jam somewhere. A day later, my roommates and I took the train to Lviv, Ukraine, because we wanted to cross to Poland. When we arrived at the Lviv train station, a train to Poland was already waiting. We joined a long line of people waiting to get on the train, but when it was our turn, the police wouldn't let us on. They only allowed Ukrainians to board. I couldn't understand that. After all, we all have the same blood in our skin. We [international students] paid our tuition and were not criminals. But this is how Ukraine treated us, with racism?

(Figure 4: Train in Ukraine. Copyright: Sophia.)

When another train arrived, the same thing happened. I was so tired and it was so cold because it was winter. I waited for three days, and at one point I put on my hoodie and my surgical mask so they wouldn't see I was Black, but the police ripped both off my head and pushed me back. I met a Ukrainian woman who was very nice. I asked her if she could tell the police officers that I was her sister or friend so they would let me on the train. After some back and forth, they allowed me to get on. Well, they pushed me onto the train. I was overwhelmed and started crying because I couldn't believe how I was treated just because I am Black. All of a sudden, I felt like I caught a cold. The train was packed, and no one was wearing a mask. I thought I had caught COVID.

In Poland, people were much friendlier. Volunteers at the station took care of me, gave me refreshments. Until that point, I had believed that all white people were similarly racist. I remember once I was in a shopping mall in Ukraine and we passed a man sitting at a table with his young daughter. When she saw us, she asked him who we were, and he told her we were "monsters." My positive experience at the train station in Poland gave me hope that not all white people are the same. I went with other Nigerian students to a dormitory that was paid for by the Nigerian government. Our government organized flights for students to return to Nigeria, but not all of us wanted to return. In the dormitory we got scared because we had to give our data and we were afraid that it could be used for deportation. I didn't know anyone in Poland and I wasn't sure I wanted to stay there. I also didn't think about going to Germany because I didn't have anyone there either, but I decided to book a ticket anyway and went to Berlin.

At the train station in Berlin, I was quickly approached by volunteers who offered me a place to stay. They were very hospitable. They even carried my bags! A lot changed in my attitude towards white people. They paid for a cab to take me to [Each One Teach One](#), an organization that takes care of African people coming from Ukraine. When I got there, I first took a COVID rapid test. I tested positive. Immediately, a group of volunteers accompanied me to the hospital, where I stayed for about two weeks. However, I could not really relax. I checked the Telegram groups I was involved in, and some people reported that the German authorities were no longer allowing people to stay in Berlin, but were sending them to other German cities. When I left the hospital, I contacted a Berlin-based Afro-German community network that connected me with a host in Berlin with whom I could stay for a few weeks.

In the following days I wanted to register to stay in Germany. I decided to go to a smaller German town because I thought it would be much faster to get my papers done there than in a big city like Berlin. So I took the train and arrived in a small town in the morning, where I immediately made my way to the Foreigners' Registration Office. The clerk at the reception asked me for my papers and I gave her my Ukrainian residence permit and my student ID. I was too afraid to give her my passport because I thought the immigration office might not give it back to me. After she took my documents, she was gone for hours, and I didn't know what was going on. I hadn't eaten anything that day and felt very weak. I noticed that the people who arrived at the immigration office finished very quickly, so maybe my case is different, I thought.

After waiting for hours, the caseworker finally came back, but she wouldn't give my documents

back. She started asking me how I had gotten to Germany. I realized that she thought I was lying when I told her I had come from Ukraine. After a while I was asked into a room where they took my fingerprints and a photo of me. Then they asked me to sign a document. I signed the first page, but then I stopped because I didn't know what I was signing. I quickly flipped through the pages and found out that I was actually signing an asylum application, not the document Ukrainians receive to stay in Germany. I got very angry and went to the clerk. I demanded that she give me back my documents, but she said that was not possible. Because I was visibly upset, she threatened to call the police and put me in jail. I had to calm down and she gave me a map of a refugee camp in the city where I was supposed to stay, but I didn't want to go there.

Fortunately, my host knew someone who lived near the city, and the next day this person accompanied me back to the immigration office, but my documents were no longer there. I was given a contact to a lawyer who provides free legal assistance, and he got me an appointment at another office. When I got there, I was told that I was still in an asylum process and that I needed a lawyer if I wanted to end it. And that is still my current situation. I am working as a babysitter and collecting money so I can pay the lawyer and apply for Article 24. Even if I apply for a visa outside Europe later, I have to stay in Germany legally first.

I appeal to the German government to understand that we [international students] spent a big part of our lives in Ukraine and this gave us hope for a good future. We paid thousands of dollars to study there and we cannot return without having achieved something. We have become a part of Ukraine, and thus the current war is also ours. Returning to Nigeria is not an option. It is not a safe country either. There is daily violence, kidnappings, and constant strikes. By going to Ukraine, we wanted to become a better person and give back to our country. I have siblings who look up to me, and I give them hope that one day they will also have the opportunity to receive such an education. We are hardworking and don't want to depend on the German government. Just give us a year or two and we will prove that we are worth staying in Germany. I am already working and attending German integration courses at the same time. We ask the German government for the sake of humanity and to make the world a better place. Show mercy to humanity.

This letter was written on 16 August 2022.

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[i] Article or Section 24 “Granting of Residence for Temporary Protection” of the German Residence Act implements the European Temporary Protection Directive, which grants up to three-year renewable residence permits to Ukrainian citizens, third-country nationals with recognized refugee status in Ukraine, and third-country nationals who cannot safely return to their place of origin. Section 24 also includes third-country nationals with family members of Ukrainian citizenship and third-country nationals with a permanent residence permit in Ukraine. In most cases, however, the international students from African (or other) countries had only temporary residence permits in Ukraine, so they do not meet this legal requirement and thus do not benefit from the article.

[ii] Germany has set a time limit within which war refugees from Ukraine can stay in Germany without a residence permit. This deadline was initially set for May 24, 2022, but was extended to August 31, 2022. At the time of preparing this letter, the Berlin Senate has extended the deadline by another six months, arguing that the additional time would allow third-country nationals who studied in Ukraine to apply to German universities. This indicates that these students face different legal situations in different states in Germany.

[iii] Asylum is usually assessed according to the country of origin, which in the case of (African) international students is not Ukraine, but their home countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, or Cameroon. After applying, these students would then have to prove that they are persecuted in their home countries, while the chances of obtaining asylum in Germany are low for people from these countries. If their asylum application is rejected, they are usually first asked to leave Germany voluntarily, and if they do not do so, a deportation order is issued. The decision can be appealed, however, with little chance of overturning it (Oltmer, 2016; Podgornik Jakil, 2020). On international students applying for asylum instead of Article 24, see also the first open letter published in the series (Medizinethnologie, 2022).

[iv] Telegram is a popular cloud-based instant messaging service that is mainly used on smartphones.