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Seminar: Political Healing

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Summer Semester 2025

Living Solidarity in Times of War: Mutual Aid and Collective Presence in Practice

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15 September 2025

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1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine is a geopolitical event that affects the daily lives of many people in Germany and Europe. Since the start of the war in 2022, millions of Ukrainians have been seeking refuge in Germany (Statista 2025). As a result, the question of solidarity and support for refugees has gained importance, which has led me to think about how I can take responsibility.

This topic is crucial for me personally. As a Russian living in Germany, I have experienced a profound inner tension since the beginning of the war. On one side, I still feel connected to my cultural heritage, language, and traditional values. On the other side, I often have the impression that my heritage is being viewed in a political sense. I increasingly feel that “being Russian” is no longer understood as a cultural affiliation but instead is frequently associated with Russian politics, with which I neither identify nor support.

These attributions caused feelings of guilt, shame, and insecurity within me. The internal conflict made me want to reevaluate my actions and my position in society. I didn't want to remain passive and numb to these feelings but rather find a way to overcome them and take responsibility. This personal struggle led me to ask myself: What concrete forms can solidarity take in everyday life?

To answer this key question, I draw on various theoretical approaches. First, I will examine Dean Spade's concept of mutual aid, which describes solidarity as a collective practice that meets immediate needs and builds long-term community power. Furthermore, I draw on Jonathan Schmucker's reflections on protests as a democratic practice and take up Timothy Snyder's perspective from *On Tyranny*, which emphasizes that democracy is also defended through small gestures and physical presence in public life. I will link these theoretical perspectives to the lived situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany and illustrate them through concrete examples of solidarity in practice.

In addition to these theoretical perspectives, I will draw on my own experiences with solidarity, which show how it translates into practical engagement and becomes tangible in my everyday life.

2. Mutual Aid as a Practice of Solidarity

Dean Spade defines mutual aid as projects that directly meet people's needs and highlight the structural injustice that causes these needs: "They directly meet people's survival needs and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust" (Spade 2020: 7). This makes clear that mutual aid is not only aimed at providing short-term assistance but also an expression of shared responsibility and conscious resistance to social inequality and structural exclusion.

For Ukrainian refugees in Germany, this signifies that support should go beyond providing accommodation, clothing, or food. It must also address structural inequalities such as language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, or the lack of social networks. In the context of social isolation, Spade describes mutual aid as a radical act: "... where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable – is a radical act" (Spade 2020: 8). Mutual aid has, therefore, not only a material but also an emotional impact. Spade emphasizes that it can break down isolation, prevent stigmatization, and motivate people to act collectively: "It broke stigma and isolation, met material needs, and got people fired up to work together for change" (Spade 2020:10).

This is particularly significant in the context of the war in Ukraine, since refugees suffer not only from the loss of their homes, their safety, and material foundations, but also from social isolation. A new language, unfamiliar institutions, and complex administrative processes shape the everyday lives of many Ukrainian refugees. Although government measures such as emergency shelters and financial support can provide important initial assistance, they are often not sufficient to overcome long-term exclusion and isolation in a new country.

Mutual aid initiatives, on the other hand, offer a different form of support: "Mutual aid projects also build solidarity" (Spade 2020: 13). According to Spade, they go beyond the provision of material goods and services by focusing on interpersonal relationships and creating spaces where people can meet on equal terms. Unlike hierarchical aid structures, mutual aid enables active participation and shared responsibility. This signifies

that refugees are not just recipients of support but become part of networks in which their own skills, experiences, and perspectives are valued.

Spade also emphasizes the role of mutual aid in building larger social movements: “Mutual aid is essential to building social movements” (Spade 2020: 12). “Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements” (Spade 2020:14). When volunteers find housing for refugees, teach them German or translate letters from government agencies, these are not just individual offers of help. Instead, they are part of a larger solidarity network that has the potential to shape social change by connecting people from different backgrounds into an active community. Therefore, mutual aid aims not only to provide immediate support but also to long-term social transformation. Spade emphasizes: “This is exactly how movements are built, as people become connected to each other and one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation“ (Spade 2020: 15). What initially begins as simple acts of assistance for Ukrainian refugees can become the starting point for a broader engagement on issues of social injustice and integration.

Another important aspect of mutual aid is its focus on the diversity of human experiences. Spade says: “Groups doing mutual aid to directly address real problems in real people’s lives tend to develop a multi-issue and solidarity-based approach because their members’ lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability” (Spade 2020: 15). Those who engage with refugees don’t encounter a homogenous group but rather a variety of experiences shaped by gender, class, language, migration, disability, mental health issues and discrimination. Mutual aid recognizes this diversity and develops flexible, cooperative forms of support. For Ukrainian refugees, this can mean that solidarity also encompasses psychological support, protection from discrimination, legal advice, or help with family reunification.

Spade goes on to describe how direct contact with the complex realities of injustice can result in growing awareness and expanding solidarity: “Solidarity and an ever-expanding commitment to justice emerge from contact with the complex realities of injustice” (Spade 2020: 15). Supporting refugees thus becomes more than just short-term crisis aid. It can become a place for political education and solidarity-based networking. Dean Spade's reflections on mutual aid make clear that it is not only about material support, but also about creating relationships, trust, and capacity for action.

To sum up, Spade's perspective is especially important in view of the war in Ukraine. Many refugees in Germany face isolation, language barriers, and stigmatization. Small gestures such as a brief conversation, a friendly question, or practical help can transform unfamiliarity into a sense of belonging. These encounters have political significance as they break down isolation and create opportunities for participation. They create moments in which people feel seen and included, whilst reminding us that democratic action begins in everyday interactions based on respect and attentiveness.

Everyday gestures and encounters also correspond to what Timothy Snyder describes in *On Tyranny* as fundamental political practice. He emphasizes that democracy is not only protected by institutions but must also be lived in everyday life. In Lesson 3, Snyder says: "Make eye contact and engage in small talk" (2017: 81-86). Encountering other people in everyday life, maintaining eye contact, or striking up a conversation builds trust. What may seem trivial at first glance becomes a subtle but effective form of resistance against fear, isolation, and the undermining of social bonds that authoritarian systems often try to enforce.

3. Local Initiatives of Solidarity

These theoretical perspectives become tangible when looking at initiatives that support refugees in Germany. One example of solidarity in action is the initiative *Über den Tellerrand*, which was founded in Berlin in 2013 and is now active in over 40 cities. The initiative aims to create encounters between refugees and locals on an equal footing. *Über den Tellerrand* focuses on joint activities that promote mutual learning, exchange, and trust. Particularly well-known are the cooking events, where people from different countries of origin come together, share their recipes, and eat together (Über den Tellerrand n.d.).

Particularly for Ukrainian refugees, encounter projects such as *Über den Tellerrand* can be an important step in developing a sense of normality and belonging in Germany after fleeing their home country. At first glance, cooking and eating together seem like everyday activities, but they help to turn unfamiliarity into familiarity and

ensure that cultural differences have a unifying effect. For refugees, this can be an important step toward experiencing recognition and participation in a new society.

Another local example of solidarity in practice is the initiative *an.ge.kommen* in Giessen. It was founded to give refugees who are new to the city a perspective and a point of contact in everyday life. It aims to create an intercultural space that facilitates encounters between refugees, migrants, and the community of Giessen. The initiative offers German language courses, joint activities, practical assistance in everyday life, and language and women's cafés. (Angekommen Giessen n.d.).

An.ge.kommen has become an important project for Ukrainian refugees who come to Giessen and the surrounding area. For them, the initiative by *an.ge.kommen* e.V. means much more than just organizational support. Many of them face the challenge of learning German, navigating bureaucratic structures, and building a new social environment. Through language cafés, everyday support, and opportunities for exchange, the initiative offers spaces where normality, belonging, and mutual recognition are possible. In this way, *an.ge.kommen* demonstrates how solidarity at the local level can respond directly to global crises and create spaces where refugees are not only supported but actively integrated into the community. The local context in particular shows that solidarity is not only visible in large political demonstrations or national networks, but also in very concrete ways in the small student town in which I live.

These offers reflect what Dean Spade describes as mutual aid. Solidarity is a practice that not only meets immediate needs but also builds relationships and empowers people to take action. The key to this idea is meeting people on equal terms. Refugees can contribute their own resources, build networks, and actively become part of a new community instead of just being recipients of aid.

The practical examples show that integration and solidarity can take many different forms. In everyday encounters, in jointly organized projects, and in the willingness to take responsibility for one another. Solidarity in this sense is not limited to providing aid in times of acute need but also signifies creating spaces in which trust, participation, and mutual recognition can grow. Initiatives such as *Über den Tellerrand* and *an.ge.kommen* show that solidarity is a shared practice in which everyone both gives and takes. What may seem like ordinary activities can take on a profound political

significance as they build inclusive communities, counteract exclusion, and embody a lived form of democracy in which belonging is actively created. Timothy Snyder captures this dimension when he emphasizes in *On Tyranny* that democracy is not only protected by institutions but also begins in everyday life. His advice to “Make eye contact and engage in small talk” (Snyder 2017: 81) underscores the political power of even the smallest gestures.

This combines Spade's concept of mutual aid with Snyder's idea of everyday democracy. Solidarity results when people treat each other openly and respectfully in their daily lives, and it strengthens society by creating spaces of shared responsibility and community. These forms of everyday solidarity form the basis on which broader political practices can be built. They prepare the ground for public expressions of collective presence, such as demonstrations and protests, which I will address in the following chapter.

4. Protest: The Power of Collective Presence

Smucker states that protests are often dismissed as naive, utopian, or merely self-expressive. However, he points out that they can also be much more than that: “But it can be profoundly pragmatic” (Schmucker 2025: n.pag.). He thus makes the point clear that protest is not only an emotional expression, but also a strategic tool. Protests have the power to put issues on the public agenda, mobilize majorities, and put pressure on politicians. They can challenge the legitimacy of leaders and open new spaces for social discussion.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of the war in Ukraine. Peace demonstrations have the potential to focus social attention, make solidarity visible, and apply pressure on political decision-makers. They are collective actions that make solidarity visible. At the same time, they are a signal that society is not remaining passive and silently accepting war and violence but is actively taking a position. Collective concern is translated into political action to emphasize that peace is not only a matter for

the state but also a social responsibility that can only be achieved through collective commitment.

However, Schmucker warns that protest is only effective if it is part of a long-term strategy to build power and bring about long-term change: “Protest is not an end in itself. Tactics require broader long-term strategies for power building” (2025: n.pag.). Protests against the war in Ukraine or for peace are important, but they only have their full effect when they are linked to longer-term structures. Only when public protest is linked to continuous engagement can it become a political force that goes beyond symbolic gestures.

To ensure that protests have a lasting impact, they need concrete points of reference. Peace demonstrations should not stand alone but should also serve as starting points for further activities. Such activities could include practical support, direct dialogue with those affected, participation in civil society campaigns, or self-organized refugee projects, as mentioned in the previous chapter. They should be linked up with protests to ensure that engagement is firmly anchored in the long term.

In lesson 4 in *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder makes a similar appeal: “Practice corporeal politics.” Snyder believes that democracy can only remain alive if people are visible, tangible, and present together. He calls on people to take to the streets, participate in rallies, or gather with others. This perspective is crucial in times of war, as demonstrations, protests, and peace marches make solidarity visible and tangible. They transform concern into action and give people back a form of collective presence. Snyder thus reminds us that protests are much more than mere symbolic gestures. Protests are necessary democratic practices that create a sense of belonging and overcome isolation.

This becomes evident in the protests that have taken place in Germany since the start of the war in Ukraine. As *Zeit Online* reported, as early as February 27, 2022, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Berlin under the slogan “Stop the war! Peace for Ukraine and all of Europe.” Another particularly striking example of solidarity was the peace demonstration in Cologne the following day. According to *Spiegel Online*, on February 28, 2022, 250,000 people turned the canceled *Rosenmontag* parade in Cologne into a large peace demonstration. The famous *Rosenmontag* parade,

which attracts many visitors every year and is of great cultural and economic importance to the region, was supposed to take place on that day, but in view of the outbreak of war, the city decided to cancel the parade and organize a large peace rally instead.

The photo below captures this spirit of solidarity: participants, draped in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, hold up signs reading “No War.” Their embrace and shared message illustrate how personal gestures and collective protest have merged into a powerful statement for peace.



Figure 1: Oliver Berg / dpa, via ZEIT ONLINE, „Friedensdemo statt Kölner Karneval –Zehntausende erwartet“, 28.02.2022

Carnival is a very important event in the Rhineland and is closely associated with the joy of life, community, and tradition. The fact that the carnival parade was canceled and turned into a protest march for peace shows the enormous social relevance of the start of the war in Ukraine. Many people who would otherwise celebrate with costumes, loud music, and satire instead carried peace flags, posters, and the colors blue and yellow through the streets. Especially because Carnival in Cologne is a highlight of the year for many people, the conscious decision to forego this celebration was a powerful symbol. It signaled that exuberance and joy were not possible without concern at that moment and that solidarity with the people of Ukraine was more important than tradition.

This decision was not only an act of political positioning but also a moment of social pause and reflection. The decision to cancel the *Rosenmontag* parade highlighted that solidarity could transcend cultural customs. It demonstrated that many Germans were willing to put their own celebrations aside to show solidarity with those affected by the war. The peace demonstration in Cologne is an impressive example of how deeply protests can affect everyday life. Usually, *Rosenmontag* is a day of celebration and exuberance. In 2022, the day turned into a collective statement for peace and against war in Europe.

According to *rbb24*, on the third anniversary of the invasion, February 24, 2025, again thousands gathered in Berlin to express their support for Ukraine and send a clear signal against the war (“Brandenburger Tor leuchtet in Ukraine-Farben” 2025). One might have expected society's attention to wane over time, for example, due to other crisis issues. The fact that rallies continue to be held regularly in the event of the war in Ukraine and that so many people are still willing to show solidarity in public spaces proves consistency. It illustrates that solidarity with Ukraine was not just a spontaneous feeling in the first weeks of shock but has remained even after years and has become a lasting political and moral concern.

The image below of the *Brandenburger Tor* illuminated in the Ukrainian national colors has become a powerful visual symbol of this ongoing solidarity. The lighting transforms one of Germany's most important national landmarks into a sign of international solidarity and conveys the message that support for Ukraine remains unbroken even years after the start of the war. At the same time, it shows how national symbols can be reinterpreted in times of crisis. The Brandenburg Gate, normally associated with German history and identity, transcends its traditional meaning here and becomes part of a broader European and global struggle for peace and democracy.



Figure 2: Sebastian Gollnow / dpa, via rbb24, „Tausende Menschen demonstrieren in Berlin für Frieden in der Ukraine“, 24.02.2025

This ongoing protest is an important sign for Ukrainian refugees in Germany, as it shows that their situation has not been forgotten. At the same time, it signals to the outside world that social support for Ukraine remains strong even after many years. These examples illustrate that protest is part of a vibrant democratic culture. It transforms individual commitment into collective action and strengthens the sense of belonging. In this way, protest fulfills exactly what Smucker and Snyder describe. By physically coming together, taking responsibility, and mutually reinforcing each other's stance, people make democracy tangible.

5. Experiencing Solidarity in Everyday Life

The reflections of Spade, Schmucker, and Snyder have theoretically demonstrated how solidarity, mutual aid, and protest can be conceived as political practices. In the following, I will relate their thoughts to my own personal experiences with solidarity in everyday life.

5.1 Creating Belonging through a Shared Passion

My personal experiences with solidarity are especially evident in my role as a rhythmic gymnastics coach at a sports club. Rhythmic gymnastics is one of the most popular and widespread sports in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, many Ukrainian girls who have fled to Germany with their families have joined my training group. They want to continue practicing their sport in Germany, which for them signifies a piece of home, normality, and joy.

For this reason, I have made it my mission not only to teach physical techniques, but also to turn the gym into a place for meeting, exchange, and mutual support. During training, the girls often start conversations in which they talk about their worries and problems at school. Although I was originally taught that talking during training is undesirable, I have made the conscious decision to always have an open ear, as I want to support the refugee girls as they adjust to a new and unfamiliar environment. Over time, I have noticed that this openness makes a big difference. For many of the girls, training is not just a sporting activity, but a place where they can gain confidence and share their experiences. Sometimes it's about very practical things like homework, language difficulties, or insecurities in everyday life. By listening, they feel appreciated and realize they are taken seriously. These small moments help the girls feel that they are not alone but part of a community that supports and encourages them.

In addition, my knowledge of Russian allows me to provide further assistance. Many parents encounter language barriers, specifically when registering for competitions. In such cases, I guide them through the entire registration process and act as a translator. For me, these small acts of support are more than just assistance. They give Ukrainian families the feeling that they are not alone and build trust. At the same time, they enable the girls to continue enjoying their sport and to experience a degree of stability and normality in their new everyday lives despite the difficult and stressful circumstances. This form of support goes beyond the scope of sports. It helps families find their orientation in an unfamiliar environment and ensures that bureaucratic barriers do not become insurmountable obstacles.

What keeps impressing me in my work as a coach is the solidarity between the kids themselves. There are no distinctions made during training. Girls who have fled Ukraine and are new to the club are integrated into the group right from the start. No one is excluded. Furthermore, every gymnast benefits from the other. The German girls can learn from the athletic experiences of the Ukrainian girls, who can learn from the German gymnasts. This mutual openness shows that solidarity does not only result from big gestures, but also from everyday interaction. I often see how friendships develop that go far beyond training. The gym fosters a feeling of team spirit and belonging that becomes more important than the actual sport. This aspect particularly touches me because it shows how naturally children live together in a respectful and supportive manner. They treat everyone equally, regardless of their background.

When I compare my experiences in the sports club with the theoretical considerations of Dean Spade and Timothy Snyder, I recognize parallels. Spade emphasizes that mutual aid can be more than just material support. It can also break down isolation and create relationships. That is exactly what I experience in the gym. It is not just about training, but about creating a network of belonging in which mutual support becomes a natural part of the process. In *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder also makes clear that democracy is not solely supported by institutions but is anchored in everyday life. His advice to “make eye contact and small talk” highlights the importance of incidental gestures. My own experience as a rhythmic gymnastics coach shows that it is precisely these small actions, such as striking up a conversation or helping with translation, that build trust and overcome feelings of exclusion. They make belonging a tangible experience.

5.2 Experiencing Collective Presence in Gießen

While solidarity in a sports club is primarily shown through daily interaction with one another, I have also experienced solidarity in public spaces during demonstrations. A significant experience for me was participating in the “Antikriegstag” on September 1 this year in Giessen. According to the *Giessener Allgemeine* (“Rund 100 Menschen bei Antikriegstags-Kundgebung” 2025: n. pag.), more than a hundred people marched

through the city together to send a message of peace under the slogan “Giessen stands against war.” For me personally, it was moving to see that even in a relatively small city like Giessen, people are willing to take to the streets and show their solidarity with those affected by war.

Jonathan Schmucker describes protests as a necessary practice in democratic societies: “First, it is brave and worthy to engage in protest for just causes, against powerful actors; not only that, it's necessary if we want to have democracy” (Schmucker 2025: n.pag.). In doing so, he points out that protests are courageous acts by individuals and a necessary tool for keeping democracy alive. Especially in times of war, it becomes clear that a democratic culture needs the active engagement of citizens. Protests are not just a symbolic act but open up spaces where people can raise their voices, highlight injustices, and experience community.

For me, this idea became particularly tangible during the demonstration in Giessen. The participants showed clearly that they are not willing to accept war and violence silently. Instead, it became visible that people here were taking responsibility for a common cause and that democracy is not an abstract concept but is anchored in the active attitude of each individual. Such demonstrations are more than just public gatherings. They create a sense of community and give participants the experience of being part of a larger movement.

For Ukrainian refugees, this can be an important signal, as the demonstration shows them that their situation is not being overlooked and that they are not alone in Germany. At the same time, such a protest sends a clear signal to the outside world that solidarity is still alive even three years after the start of the war. The demonstration in Giessen thus embodies, on the one hand, a sense of belonging and democracy in action and, on the other hand, the consistency of an attitude that demands peace and justice in the long term.

In *On Tyranny*, Snyder emphasizes the importance of physical presence in public spaces: “Practice corporeal politics” (2017: 84). In doing so, he reminds us that democracy is protected above all by people's decision to be collectively visible. For me, participating in the *Antikriegstag* in Giessen was precisely this kind of democracy in action. It was not only a political statement, but also an experience of community that

arose from the physical presence of all those involved. Especially in times when many political debates take place online, it was important for me to experience how powerful it can be to actually be present on the ground, side by side with other people who are committed to peace and justice.

Participating in the demonstration on the *Antikriegstag* made clear to me what Smucker describes in theory. Protests are more than just one-time events. They are a practice that requires courage, needs organization, and becomes especially powerful when it connects people. Just as solidarity arises through small gestures in everyday life in a sports club, on that day, it became publicly tangible on the streets of Giessen.

Both experiences from my personal life have shown me that solidarity can take many different forms. It manifests itself in the familiar setting of everyday interaction through listening, support, and mutual assistance, but also in the collective decision to publicly advocate for peace and justice. Solidarity means, on the one hand, being present on a small scale, as in my example in the sports club, but also in the neighbourhood or in encounter projects, where a friendly word or translation assistance can help to break down exclusion and create a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it also unfolds on a larger scale when people take to the streets to take a stand together against war and violence. These two levels do not contradict each other but complement each other. Everyday gestures give solidarity consistency, while protests strengthen its visibility and political effectiveness.

These experiences have shown me that solidarity is not only a response to crises, but also a source of political healing. It has helped me overcome my feelings of passivity and guilt by transforming them into action and shared commitment.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of this portfolio, I mentioned how being Russian in Germany during the war in Ukraine caused me to experience an inner conflict marked by feelings of guilt and shame. These feelings led to withdrawal and passivity, as I was afraid of being identified with the war because of my origins. However, in the course of my work, I realized that it is possible to find a way out of these feelings by taking responsibility and actively showing solidarity.

My examination of the theoretical considerations of Dean Spade, Timothy Snyder, and Jonathan Smucker has helped me develop new perspectives. Spade has shown that solidarity can be a practice between equals that empowers both those affected and those who support them. Snyder, for his part, has pointed out that democracy is not solely anchored in institutions, but must be lived out in everyday life. His reference to small gestures such as eye contact and conversation, as well as his emphasis on presence in public spaces, shows that my own actions can also have political significance. Furthermore, Schmucker makes it clear that collective presence and public resistance are essential for democracy to remain alive. This motivated me to participate in this year's *Antikriegstag* myself. There, for the first time, I consciously experienced how important it is not only to reflect on one's own point of view in silence, but to make it visible together with others. For me, it was a step away from passivity, away from feelings of guilt and shame, toward a feeling of being able to take responsibility and be part of a community of solidarity.

Based on the question of what concrete forms solidarity can take in everyday life, this work has shown that solidarity in times of war in Ukraine is a lived practice that can be expressed in many different ways. It is visible in public and collective actions such as peace demonstrations, which send a clear signal against war and violence. In this sense, protests are not only symbolic acts, but concrete expressions of democratic culture that make responsibility visible. At the same time, solidarity is evident in everyday, often unremarkable encounters in which a sense of belonging and recognition can be experienced, such as in sports clubs, neighborhood initiatives, or projects such as *Über den Tellerrand* or *an.ge.kommen*.

What connects all these forms of solidarity is the understanding of responsibility not to ignore the struggles of refugees, to overcome one's own passivity, and to create places of care and connection. For me personally, this means that through solidarity, I have found a way to deal with my feelings of guilt and shame. Instead of withdrawing and feeling that my background is a burden, I have learned that I can make a positive contribution through active engagement.

In summary, solidarity can take concrete forms in everyday life. From structures of mutual aid and public demonstrations to small interpersonal gestures that create a sense of belonging. Solidarity has shown me that I don't have to remain trapped in feelings of guilt, but that responsibility can be translated into actions that give not only others but also myself a new perspective. Solidarity has thus transformed my initial feelings of guilt and shame into a capacity for action and a sense of belonging.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Oliver Berg/dpa. „Friedensdemo statt Kölner Karneval – Zehntausende erwartet.“ Zeit Online. Zeit Online, 28 Feb. 2022. Web. <https://www.zeit.de/news/2022-02/28/friedensdemo-statt-koelner-karneval-zehntausende-erwartet> (9 Sept. 2025).

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