

'WE DIRECT THIS APPEAL TO THE CONSCIENCE OF THE WORLD AND WE PLEAD IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE': WRITINGS AND WORKS OF THE UNION OF STATELESS VICTIMS OF FASCISM*

JORDANA SILVERSTEIN**

*On 11 June 1945, the *Verbond Van Statenloze Slachtoffers Van Het Fascisme* — or the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism ('Union') — was launched in Amsterdam with a meeting and manifesto. This article provides for the first time an in-depth examination of the Union's Manifesto, as well as its leaders, aims, and activities. It explores their work which was aimed at navigating the effects of statelessness and furthering the project of attaining rights for stateless people, including their right to reject citizenship and a designation as 'enemy aliens'. Through their writings, we come to learn how the Union were effective and assertive political communicators, writing from knowledge, experience and expertise. Recovering the history of this organisation, this article offers an important opportunity to gain insight into the political and social histories within which organisations led by and for stateless people have acted, and continue to act.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	Where Does the Union Sit within Statelessness Studies?	4
II	The Manifesto.....	6
III	Key People in the Union.....	10
IV	Aims of the Union	12
V	The Union's Activities.....	19
VI	Conclusion	21

On 11 June 1945, the *Verbond Van Statenloze Slachtoffers Van Het Fascisme* — or the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism ('Union') — was officially launched in Amsterdam with a meeting and a manifesto. In the cover letter attached to the Manifesto that was later sent to governments around the world, the Union explained that:

* Acknowledgments: This article was researched and written on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri and the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples and I pay my respects to all their Elders past and present. These always were and always will be Aboriginal lands — sovereignty has never been ceded. I also thank Jozefien Boone for her invaluable research and translation assistance, which made this article possible. Funding for the writing of this article was provided by ARC FT240100322, 'Intergenerational Stories of Statelessness: An Oral History Project'.

** Jordana Silverstein is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow based in the Melbourne Law School. An award-winning historian who is currently studying memories and histories of the long aftermaths of statelessness, she is the author of *Anxious Histories: Narrating the Holocaust in Jewish Communities at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (Berghahn Books 2015) and *Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders* (Monash University Publishing 2023), and is the co-creator and host of the 'Being Stateless' podcast (2024). She sits on the boards of the Institute of Postcolonial Studies ('IPCS') and the International Federation for Research in Women's History ('IFRWH'), and is a co-Convening Editor of *Postcolonial Studies*.

We trust that every intelligent person will approve of such a solution of the stateless problem which will be acceptable to a civilised community. We believe naturalisation to be the only final solution. However, our Union wishes to advocate and promote a legal position for the stateless which will make their life as normal as possible within the limits of the existing laws until they will cease being stateless.¹

This would be their purpose: to advocate for an end to statelessness, and in the meantime, for those who were stateless to be able to live without the disadvantages which were then accompanying them.²

The Union was formed by a group of survivors of the fascism of World War Two ('WWII') who were living in the Netherlands. They saw themselves as working, from their western European vantage point, not just for the rectification of their own condition but for all stateless people. They organised events, produced written statements, took on members, and faced surveillance from the state's security forces. They did not exist for long, but they articulated themselves as trying to have both a local and a global impact. The Union has largely fallen out of the collective academic memory of both the European postwar period and the ongoing movement for rights, equalities, and justice for stateless people. Indeed, it seems that there is only one secondary text which mentions them, a Master's thesis by Nicolaas Derk Jan Kool that explores peoples statelessness in the Netherlands after WWII.³ In this article I seek to rectify this gap, this forgetting, by tracing what we can know of this group from our current day vantage point.

The Union was part of a growth in post-war organisations around the world which came together to campaign for the rights of, and justice for, refugees, migrants, and stateless people, as well as of individuals who worked to lobby and pressure the United Nations ('UN') and other bodies for a recognition of their collective rights and liberties.⁴ That is, this Union was just one of a number of groups that proliferated at this time with similar names, such as the Union of German and Stateless Antifascists or the Committee for Stateless Russian Emigrants, based in Munich.⁵ It is important that they organised and wrote from within European experiences of statelessness: thus their work was part of European projects at this time. Looking at their writings and their works, it is evident that this group of people was agentic and that they were effective, and assertive, political communicators. They wrote not from deficit, but from knowledge, experience and expertise. They were also limited by a regime of nation-states, against which they pushed and tugged. We can never know how much their political horizons were limited by strategic impulses and requirements,

¹ Letter from Dr B Karlsberg to The Prime Minister of the Government of the Dominion of Australia, 3 October 1945 (National Archives of Australia: A1067, IC46/61/3).

² On qualities of citizenship amongst statelessness, see, eg, Lindsey N Kingston, 'Statelessness as a Lack of Functioning Citizenship' (2014) 19 *Tilburg Law Review* 127.

³ Nicolaas Derk Jan Kool, 'Niet Thuis in Nederland: Waarom en Hoe Veranderde de Positie van Oud-Spanjestridders en Duitse Joden in Nederland na de Tweede Wereldoorlog met Betrekking tot Hun Stateloosheid' (Master's Thesis, Leiden University 2018).

⁴ On stateless people in particular see, eg, the report provided by Jerzy M to the UN Secretary-General that is outlined in Peter Gatrell et al, *Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom* (Oxford University Press 2025) 205–6 ('*Reckoning with Refugeedom*'). More generally, see 'Refugeedom and Political Expression' in *ibid* ch 7 186–220 and 'Palestinian Refugees' in *ibid* ch 6 173–5.

⁵ Letter from Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism to Mr Sark the Representative of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, 13 March 1947 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone]; *Reckoning with Refugeedom* (n 4) 200.

nor how reflective their language and writings were of what they truly thought, ideally wanted, or actually did. This thus cannot be the question at hand: in this article I am not looking for the truth of what they ideally wanted, but rather for what they — in presumably constrained circumstances — argued and worked for.⁶ Importantly, this group existed at a key moment in the development of categories of refugees, stateless people, citizenship and the state — and the bureaucracies and legal and political regimes that continue to co-create these categories.⁷ In their work, they make clear something which later scholars of statelessness have come to say: that the stateless do not seek merely citizenship, but a full suite of rights which will recognise their place within society and community, both local and international.⁸ Marginalisation takes many forms, and acquiring citizenship is an insufficient solution for the stateless.⁹ They demonstrated that there is communal, not individual, work to be done. That this is not the work of a later liberalism which operates on individual rights, but rather a communal movement, a group mobilisation, for collective gains.¹⁰

In this article, I approach this group via some of the archival traces which remain, collected in the National Archives in the Netherlands and in Australia, as well as in newspaper articles. I trace their foundational manifesto, key people involved in the group's founding, the aims of the Union and their activities. There is an unfortunate lack of information about them currently available. It is thus my hope that through this excursion into their history, more space will be opened for others to examine, analyse and integrate their work into our ongoing historical narratives. Looking at this organisation also provides an important intervention into statelessness studies, which while it has examined moves by stateless people to narrate and govern their own experiences, has largely overlooked the long history of organisations and bodies run by stateless people themselves. By centring my description and analysis on how stateless people have organised themselves in the past, my hope is that people — both those who have been stateless and those who have not — working in both the academic and non-governmental organisation realms of statelessness will find clarity and inspiration for their future work. There is much we all can learn from the histories of stateless people and how they collectively have defined, analysed and fought against statelessness and its negative effects across different times and spaces. This is of great utility and relevance, as in looking at the Union's writings and works, we come to see that their concerns continue to linger and endure in matters of statelessness today.

I approach my examination of these documentary traces of this organisation through a feminist practice of listening. Although these are written documents

⁶ On constraint in the writings of refugees in the post-war moment see, eg, Peter Gatrell, 'Raw Material: UNHCR's Individual Case Files as a Historical Source, 1951–75' (2021) 92(Autumn) *History Workshop Journal* 226, 227–8 ('Raw Material').

⁷ Liisa Malkki, 'Refugee and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things' (1995) 24 *Annual Review of Anthropology* 495, 497, 500 ('Refugee and Exile'); Roger Zetter, 'Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity' (1991) 4(1) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 39; Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford University Press 2013) 89–117; Miriam Rürup, 'Legal Expertise and Biographical Experience: Statelessness, Migrants, and the Shaping of New Legal Knowledge in the Postwar World' (2017) 43(3) *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* [Knowledge and Migration] 438.

⁸ Lindsey N Kingston, 'Worthy of Rights: Statelessness as a Cause and Symptom of Marginalisation' in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds), *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge 2017) 17.

⁹ *ibid* 17–34.

¹⁰ *ibid* 27.

rather than oral ones, I am drawn to understanding them via what Sara Ahmed has described as a practice of listening with a ‘feminist ear’, to hear in new ways what is being said.¹¹ As such, I am interested in adopting a practice of extensive quotation rather than paraphrasing throughout this article, so as to be able to hear (or read) peoples words at length. This provides a possibility of appreciating their turns of phrase and how they construct an argument: it gives access to aesthetics and vocabulary, as well as ideas and politics. These are texts that are part of a history of stateless, refugee, and exiled peoples’ writings, and I want to consider them as such.¹² We can hear the words that are brought together to mount an argument, to articulate a position, to express pain, hope, desperation and/or a political program. By engaging with extended extracts, these words are given space. I want them to breathe — I want us to hear them together. These words are important, I feel. They were written in order to be encountered by others — deliberately across space, but also across time, I think.

By looking at the Union’s Manifesto, their membership, their activities and their political programs, we can come to new knowledge of the questions and struggles that some stateless people engaged with as they navigated life and politics in the aftermath of WWII.

I WHERE DOES THE UNION SIT WITHIN STATELESSNESS STUDIES?

In January 1943, Hannah Arendt published ‘We Refugees’, a foundational article describing her experience and ideas of refugee-ness — framing it in terms of a broader ‘we’.¹³ This ‘we’ negotiates their Jewishness, statelessness, outlaw-ness, migration, belonging and relations with other peoples. This is a ‘we’ who is out of place and trying to build place. It is a ‘we’ which Arendt articulates herself. As has been argued, in this piece:

Arendt refused to reduce [the refugees’] tragic fates to a series of individual tragedies, but insists that their exclusion was a systematic, political phenomenon... Refugees therefore should not be understood as a marginal phenomenon but a central part of the political system of nation states that reveals its most fundamental limitations — as well as the possibility of moving beyond them.¹⁴

In one sense, Arendt’s piece provides an example of the type of political work which the Union was also performing: creating a group identity and political project which pointed to the problems caused by the nation-state, rather than by stateless and/or refugee individuals themselves. The creation of a group is fundamental to both Arendt and the Union. Where they differ, however, is in what goes into making these groups — where Arendt writes as an individual marking

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press 2021) 3.

¹² See, eg, Arthur Rose, ‘A Genealogy of Refugee Writing’ in Emma Cox et al (eds), *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities* (Edinburgh University Press 2019) 50–64; Anna Bernard, ‘Genres of Refugee Writing’ in Emma Cox et al (eds), *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities* (Edinburgh University Press 2019) 65–80; Gatrell, ‘Raw Material’ (n 6); Ilana Feldman, ‘Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims’ (2008) 21(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 498; Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights and Refugees* (Oxford University Press 2018).

¹³ Hannah Arendt, ‘We Refugees’ (1943) 31(1) *Menorah Journal* 69, republished in Hélène Lambert (ed), *International Refugee Law* (Routledge 2010) 3–12.

¹⁴ Mikkel Flohr, ‘Beyond the Nation State: Rereading Hannah Arendt’s “We Refugees” Eighty Years Later’ (2024) 46 *New Political Science* 6, 6; On Hannah Arendt’s work, see also Lyndsey Stonebridge, *We Are Free to Change the World: Hannah Arendt’s Lessons in Love and Disobedience* (Hogarth 2024).

out the terms of a group problem, the Union is a group who is collectively marking out those terms. The different forms of writing and claim-making which individual theorists and political organisations can do and undertake is instructive.

Arendt framed her discussion on refugees and drew in stateless people, and this emphasis is reflected in the relevant historiography: there has been a focus on refugees' actions and attitudes, while there has been limited attention paid to stateless people as such — with some important exceptions of course.¹⁵ That said, it is important to note that while there is crossover in who has been a refugee and a stateless person, the two descriptors are certainly not complete synonyms. My task here is not to outline the differences — for formal definitions of either category is not useful or important here — but rather to point to the absence in the historical work which has been undertaken. And while scholars will often try to determine the relative 'agency' of a refugee or stateless person, I take an alternate approach in this article of deploying a discourse analysis, in order to explore what the Union was arguing for.¹⁶ Similarly, we have important post-WWII histories of refugees such as the work by Michael Marrus and Peter Gatrell, amongst many others, who sketch out some of the histories of European refugees and the archives which exist to examine their stories — including from refugees themselves.¹⁷ Additionally, vital work by Mira L Siegelberg provides a transnational and trans-temporal exploration of statelessness, including that many international lawyers have long seen the state as the problem rather than the solution, without focusing in on one particular moment or group of people and their intricacies.¹⁸ Finally, there is a great deal of work on statelessness which has been undertaken by legal scholars, exploring questions which arise from understanding statelessness as a question and problem of law.¹⁹

In this article, however, I draw on social and cultural history approaches in order to demonstrate the importance for statelessness studies of understanding specific histories of statelessness. Locating the Union historically and highlighting some of the people involved enables this article to speak as part of the growing direction within statelessness studies towards centring stateless people's knowledges and insights.²⁰ It is clear from their writings that the Union understands themselves to be putting forward a political project to define and

¹⁵ See, eg, Mira L Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Harvard University Press 2020); Linda K Kerber, 'Toward a History of Statelessness in America' (2005) 57(3) *American Quarterly* 727; Linda K Kerber, 'The Stateless as the Citizen's Other: A View from the United States' (2007) 112(1) *American Historical Review* 1.

¹⁶ On historiographical approaches to studying refugees, see, eg, Ruth Balint and Zora Simic, 'Histories of Migrants and Refugees in Australia' (2018) 49(3) *Australian Historical Studies* 378. On important methodological approaches to studying stateless persons, see, eg, Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, 'On the Threshold of Statelessness: Palestinian Narratives of Loss and Erasure' (2016) 39(2) *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* 301.

¹⁷ See, eg, Michael R Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press 1985); Gatrell, 'Raw Material' (n 6); *Reckoning with Refugeeedom* (n 4).

¹⁸ Mira L Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Harvard University Press 2020).

¹⁹ A great deal of this literature is available in *Statelessness and Citizenship Review*. See, eg, Michelle Foster and Hélène Lambert, *International Refugee Law and the Protection of Stateless Persons* (Oxford University Press 2019).

²⁰ See, eg, Natalie Brinham, 'All Ears to the Ground: Resisting Mass Citizenship Stripping and Citizenship Violence' (2025) 7(1) *Statelessness and Citizenship Review* 5; Eve Hayes de Kalaf, 'Reframing the Windrush Scandal as an International Statelessness Crisis' (2024) 6(2) *Statelessness and Citizenship Review* 179.

determine themselves, and their pasts, presents and futures. This article seeks to take that determination seriously and place it at the centre of the discussion.

II THE MANIFESTO

The Manifesto, a founding document of the Union, was created in Amsterdam and deliberately sent around the world and reported on in newspapers.²¹ For example, the cover letter for the document on its arrival in Australia — which was posted from Sarphatistraat 75, Amsterdam, on 3 October 1945 and arrived on 7 January 1946, before being sent on to the Prime Minister's Department and the Department of External Affairs the next day — explained that: 'for your further guidance it may serve you to know that the attached [M]anifesto has been or will be submitted to all Authorities and social organisations which — in view of their public duties or functions — have to deal with the matter concerned'.²² Signed by their Chairman, Dr B Karlsberg, the posted cover letter and manifesto were written in English, indicating their commitment to engage with the world at large, while also being specifically focused on and inspired by the condition of stateless people in the Netherlands.

The Manifesto began by explaining that the Union was established by 100 people 'who had followed the call of those having taken the initiative. A preliminary board consisting of three and an advisory council consisting of four persons were elected'.²³ They then provide an emotion-laden history of the effects of Nazi Germany on stateless people:

Tremendous are the sacrifices which this struggle has demanded. But — comparatively speaking — there is no group of men which has suffered as much as those who were made outlaws a long time before the outbreak of the war because of their religious or political persuasion or of their racial descent. They all were stateless in fact, many of them also de jure.

By hundred-thousands and millions they were deprived of the rest of liberty still remaining to them, in Germany and in German-occupied territories and they were assassinated irrespectively of age or sex. To this group all formerly German Jews are belonging, but also many others hated by the tyrants because they refused allegiance to the ruling system of barbarism.

Small, much too small is the number of those who survived.²⁴

The Manifesto queries what the UN will do, and whether it will force them to take a nationality that they do not want or leave them without a nationality. It asks:

... those having possessed formerly the nationality of the defeated countries and being now de facto and mostly also de jure stateless, will they have to live the life of parias [sic], will they remain being outlaws, will they be forced into re-acceptance of a nationality which is looked upon as a disgrace by the rest of the

²¹ See, eg, 'De Joden', *Veritas: Onafhankelijk Dagblad Voor Delft En Omstreken* (Netherlands, 4 August 1945).

²² Letter from Dr B Karlsberg to The Prime Minister of the Government of the Dominion of Australia, 3 October 1945 (National Archives of Australia: A1067, IC46/61/3). While the indications are that it was sent to other countries, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article to explore its reception and any responses generated elsewhere. Australia — where I am based — is mentioned in this article because it was thanks to this presence in the National Archives of Australia that I learned about the Manifesto and the Union.

²³ B Karlsberg, *Manifesto* (Manifesto, 1945, National Archives of Australia: A1067, IC46/61/3) 1.

²⁴ *ibid* 1.

world? Will they be delivered [sic] to mercy or will they be entitled to human rights? Human rights, the fundamental rights of every member of civilised society?

We, the stateless, who have survived do not want any privileges. We direct this appeal to the conscience of the world and we plead in the name of justice that the same fundamental rights will be made available to us to which the citizens of the United Nations are entitled as a matter of course.²⁵

In this they articulate that they want to be incorporated into the nation-state system, but to choose where they will belong. This would indeed come to be the position of the UN with regard to refugees, after they adopted a resolution on the ‘Question of Refugees’ in February 1946, which asserted that ‘no refugees or displaced persons who have finally and definitely, in complete freedom, and after receiving full knowledge of the facts... shall be compelled to return to their country of origin’.²⁶

The Union explained the legal situation that stateless people faced and argued for a broad definition of statelessness, as both *de jure* and *de facto*.²⁷ They were writing before there was the UN *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless People* (‘1954 *Statelessness Convention*’), which would set out a definition of statelessness and open for signature in 1954.²⁸ As such, they provided an important corrective to the *Convention*, whose drafting did not involve engagement with stateless people themselves, and to those who study and work in statelessness who exclusively rely on the understanding of statelessness which the *Convention* proposes.²⁹ In the Manifesto they write that: ‘According to our conception every person should be recognised as “stateless” who has lost his or her former nationality *de jure* and/or *de facto* without having obtained a new nationality, and — accordingly — as “stateless victims of fascism” if the status in question has been caused by actions taken by authoritarian governments.’³⁰ But, they are clear: ‘We shall not tolerate anybody within our organisation who could not pass successfully through the closest investigation into his attitude and behaviour during the German occupation.’³¹ It was of vital importance that this Union be made up only of those who had been victims, never perpetrators: they make clear that they wanted stateless people punished if they have been involved in war crimes — but that they should be understood as innocent until proven guilty.³² The question of morality was also important to them, with the Union writing that:

... our conception [of who is stateless] is formed by considerations of moral character. It would be contrary to any sense of justice if the first victims and — in

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *Question of Refugees*, UN Doc A/RES/8(I) (12 February 1946) c(ii).

²⁷ *Manifesto* (n 23) 2.

²⁸ *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, opened for signature 28 September 1954, 360 UNTS 117 (entered into force 6 June 1960).

²⁹ Betsy Fisher, ‘Exclusion in the 1954 Convention’s Drafting Process: Insights from the Travaux Préparatoires’, *Critical Statelessness Studies Blog* (online, March 2022) <<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/statelessness/research/critical-statelessness-studies-blog/exclusion-in-the-1954-conventions-drafting-process-insights-from-the-travaux-preparatoires>>, archived at <perma.cc/5USS-XG62>. See also Betsy L Fisher, *The Travaux Préparatoires of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons* (Compilation, 1 March 2022).

³⁰ *Manifesto* (n 23) 2.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

many cases — also the first active opponents against authoritarian principles should be forced to accept not only the responsibility for but also the consequences of the crimes committed against them after their enemies have been beaten. However, this would be the case if they would be compelled against their own will and also contrary to theory and practical application of international law to reconstruct their former nationality.³³

They are then practical about what they wanted, and what needed to be implemented:

The stateless must cease being stateless. This is our aim, and we believe that — in the interest of society — this must become a common aim. The definite solution of this problem cannot be reached but by the naturalisation of the stateless victims of fascism in the territories of residence. Considering naturalisation in the various countries being subject to various legal regulations showing considerable discrepancy from each other and in view of the fact that such naturalisation could not be expected within a very short time we are aiming at the temporary arrangement which could be materialised within the limits of the present legislation and also in accordance with the situation created by war.³⁴

As part of this temporary arrangement, they offered a range of other demands for access to equal treatment with citizens, equal access to social support and equal availability of international travel.³⁵ In terms of the legal position, they called for the: ‘right of returning to such places from which the resp. persons were deported against their will by the fascist power’ and, ‘the right of moving freely in their territories of residence and work without any restriction by police actions &c. applied against suspected aliens. In this connection once more the attention is directed to the fact that this [M]anifesto is concerning such persons only who are not suspected politically or in any other way.’³⁶

In terms of ‘social position’, they argued that people should attain access to state support, financial credit, work, access to schooling if they missed out, ‘insurance against illness, invalidity, unemployment &c [sic]’, access to the professions, and ‘[a]bove all the stateless victims of fascism are to be exempted from any restrictions in connection with labour permits in such countries where aliens may not be employed without special permit according to the present laws but where exemptions are admissible’.³⁷

Further, in terms of international travel, they suggested that they should have access to a UN-recognised passport, issued by the country where they live, as the travel documents that most countries were issuing were insufficient. ‘The bearers of such passports,’ they wrote, ‘should be subject to the same regulations as the holders of national passports as far as visa’s and — especially — the right of returning to their countries of residence are concerned.’³⁸

They finished the Manifesto by making clear this was a Netherlands-based organisation looking out into the world:

Our union wishes to serve the interests of the stateless victims of fascism in the Netherlands but recognises the necessity of international cooperation also in this matter. Therefore, the union appeals to all and any organisations existing or to be

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid* 3.

³⁵ *ibid* 3–4.

³⁶ *ibid* 3.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid* 4.

established in future outside the Netherlands with the demand of collaboration and promotes the foundation of an international federation of unions serving the same purpose.³⁹

They were additionally declarative of the legitimacy, purpose and standing of their project, affirming that:

The union is no committee. It does not underestimate the good intentions of committees and institutions of that sort which have devoted in the past and are devoting now their efforts to the improvement of the position of stateless victims of fascism. But the union wants to make it clear that on no condition the legitimate cause of the stateless victims of fascism must be made again a matter of charity how well intended such charity may be.

The stateless cannot dispose of any material power. Their future position will be the evidence as to the degree in which justice and reason will be exercising their influence upon social relations.⁴⁰

The Manifesto ends there.

Throughout, calls for justice are the strongest. Indeed, in an August 1945 newspaper article covering the state of Jews in the Netherlands, the call for justice as part of the Manifesto was highlighted:

... there are thousands of so-called stateless persons, including many former Germans, who no longer see any future ahead of them, are formally regarded as enemies in our country and, if they cross the border, are imprisoned in monasteries or camps. Strong protests have rightly been raised against this treatment in various newspapers and a 'Confederation of Stateless Victims of Fascism' has been established in Amsterdam, which in a manifesto urges that the elementary principles of justice be followed with regard to this socially and economically completely devastated category. Voices have been raised to grant Dutch nationality to the stateless Jews residing in the Netherlands.⁴¹

But this article also noted that their perspective was not universally accepted, writing that: 'Objections can be heard against this, based on the assumption that these people, who had fled a certain regime, after the disappearance of this regime can be returned to their country of origin without objection, even if they personally do not feel like it.'⁴²

As we can thus see, this was a movement, a union, being framed not around benevolence, humanitarianism, or charity, but rather around a just claim for self-determination and to again be part of world society. This Manifesto and its cover letter called for people to listen and to act.

These documents were circulated amongst the Australian bureaucracy (as they presumably were in other locations around the world), with the Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department writing to the Director-General of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch on 24 January 1946, explaining that:

I attach hereto for your information copy of letter from the Chairman of the abovementioned Association [the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism], together with a copy of the manifesto referred to therein setting out its views as to the

39 *ibid.*

40 *ibid.*

41 'De Joden' (n 21) 2.

42 *ibid.*

treatment that should be afforded “stateless victims of Fascism” by the nations of the world. I shall be glad if you will return the enclosed after perusal.⁴³

In reply on 29 January 1946, the Director-General of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch sent a memorandum back to the Secretary of the Attorney-General’s, thanking the Secretary for sharing the Manifesto and noting in his cover letter that: ‘It seems that the desires of the Union have largely been granted to Stateless victims in Australia and those who have been able to qualify are freely granted Naturalisation.’⁴⁴ Here we thus see an example of the ways that governments then, as now, attempt to wriggle their way out of their responsibilities to stateless people. For statelessness is, after all, a condition created by nation-states and their governments. It was this key factor which the Union was at pains to articulate, demonstrate and work against. Indeed, given that refugees are centrally a product of ‘categorisation and labelling’, the Union’s efforts to define themselves and explicate what this definition would mean provides a significant attempt to disrupt the power of the state to define and thus control.⁴⁵

Thus, this Manifesto sits as part of a long history of struggle with the nation-state and all it can — and claims to — do.

III KEY PEOPLE IN THE UNION

The Union was formed ‘by the initiative of Dr Bernhard Karlsberg’, who was born in Hamburg and was ‘without nationality’.⁴⁶ Or at least this was how they were understood by the Intelligence Service in Amsterdam, who were careful to place the group under surveillance and report on their activities. The Intelligence Service noted in early December 1945 that, from their vantage point:

The plans for the foundation of the Union are designed by Dr Karlsberg during times of occupation. The union has not been active illegally. The Union does not maintain any contact with organisations in the Netherlands, which are also actively working in this area. The number of members of the Union is 350-only heads of families or single persons, regardless of their previous nationality. Housemates of members automatically become member of the union, if they are family members, which makes the number of members 1000. The biggest part of the members is of Jewish descent.⁴⁷

By their understanding too, ‘[w]ithin the framework of activities of the Union, no political activity of any kind will be permitted’.⁴⁸

Karlsberg was born on 11 October 1899. He studied law and political sciences, acquiring his doctorate, before joining his father’s successful Cunard ships passenger agency business. He was politically active at university in Munich, and, as described in his wife’s *stolpersteine* memorial, he ‘became a member of a Jewish self-defence organisation where he came together with other students to

⁴³ Memorandum from the Secretary to the Director-General of Security, Attorney General’s Department, Canberra, 24 January 1946 (National Archives of Australia: A472, W6534).

⁴⁴ Memorandum from the Director-General, Commonwealth Investigation Branch to the Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 29 January 1946 (National Archives of Australia: A472, W6534).

⁴⁵ Peter Gatrell, ‘Refugees in Modern World History’ in Emma Cox et al (eds), *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities* (Edinburgh University Press 2019) 18.

⁴⁶ Intelligence Service Amsterdam, *Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism* (Document, 4 December 1945, Nationaal Archief: 2.04.80, Inventory 3641) [tr Jozefien Boone].

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

protect Jewish eastern European refugees from antisemitic attacks'.⁴⁹ He was also politically active, at first in a Zionist organisation and then in the communist party, both before and after the Nazis came to power. His wife, Ilse, also joined, and according to one of their daughters:

... they didn't keep their political activity at all a secret from us children. We learned all the songs like the Internationale and followed the developments in the Soviet Union with our parents' enthusiasm. After Hitler came to power, that naturally became a great burden for us children since we constantly had to be reminded never to talk about what we did at home. Unlike my father, my mother remained a member of the party her whole life.⁵⁰

The children — of which there were three, two girls and a boy — were raised 'without any religious beliefs and [they] only knew the traditions, like kosher food and Jewish holidays, from visiting [their] grandparents'.⁵¹

But in 1934, after someone who had been arrested as a political prisoner named Bernhard Karlsberg in his confession, both Bernhard and Ilse become more cautious and sent their children to safety in Switzerland. A warrant for Bernhard's arrest on charges of high treason was soon issued, and he fled to Basel on 25 January 1935. Ilse joined them all later that year, before moving with the children to Prague. Bernhard applied to both France and the Netherlands for a residential permit, eventually receiving one which would result in his reuniting with his family in Amsterdam, where he worked as a lawyer.⁵²

Bernhard was expelled from the communist party — due to his outspokenness 'against the conditions in the Stalinist Soviet Union' — but not before he and his family were all denaturalised.⁵³ After Germany occupied the Netherlands, and the Dutch authorities provided lists of residents to the German occupation powers, the children were once again sent away at times — seemingly as part of his Zionist politics — to 'Wieringen (children of Jewish refugees were prepared for their emigration to Palestine at Werkdorp Wieringermeer)'.⁵⁴ Bernhard moved around to protect himself, but Ilse refused and was eventually arrested, deported to Germany and imprisoned in various locations. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Bernhard and the three children survived, and he would later move to England and remarry.⁵⁵

In his remaining time in Amsterdam, Karlsberg worked on his plan to establish the Union. Alongside him on the Board in December 1945 were, as noted by the Intelligence Service Amsterdam, a group of others: 'Aloin Alfred Kranklin Tenner, born in Rauenstein, 27th of February 1885, manufacturer of toothpaste... secretary; [and] Dr. Richard Strauss, born in Barmen, 17th of January 1905, merchant',⁵⁶ and

⁴⁹ Ursula Erler, 'Ilse Mathilde Karlsberg (née Heilbron) * 1900: Hallerstraße 5 (Klosterallee 8) (Eimsbüttel, Harvestehude)' *Stolpersteine Hamburg* (Web Page, September 2019) <https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/en.php?&LANGUAGE=EN&MAIN_ID=7&BIO_ID=3498> [tr Suzanne von Engelhardt], archived at <perma.cc/YZV2-7D5H>. *Stolpersteine* literally translates to 'stumbling stones'; they are an 'art monument' project, wherein small stones are laid in the footpath at the site where someone who was persecuted in the Holocaust lived before they were deported. For more information, see 'Home Page', *Stolpersteine* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/>>, archived at <perma.cc/JZD8-ZKL5>.

⁵⁰ Erler (n 49).

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism* (n 46).

‘those with a seat in the commission of supervision and advice are: Walter Haarburger, born in Hamburg, January 19th 1905, manufacturer leatherware...; Max Edmund Hesse, born in Berlin, February 21th [sic] 1895, mechanic... Kate Rosenberg, wife of Kahn, born in Berlin, April 1st 1908...; and Alphons Leo, born in Leipzig, September 21th [sic] 1898, dentist’.⁵⁷

This leadership would change over time, with elections being held at relevant intervals.⁵⁸

Alongside this leadership, people over the age of 18 could apply to become ordinary members of the Union. The membership form asked for basic details: name, date of birth, birthplace, profession, children under the age of 18, former nationality, ‘since when’ has the person been stateless, and ‘since when’ had they been living in the Netherlands. Prospective members were asked where they had lived before the Netherlands, and what their profession was then. Why had they migrated, what did they do during the occupation, and were they ‘a member of a German or German-founded organisation? If yes, what was your occupation in this organisation (these organisations also include the Jewish Council for Amsterdam)?’ Witnesses were requested.⁵⁹ Finally, the form asked: ‘In the section “Special Announcements” please indicate, among other things, whether the member or prospective member was arrested during the occupation, or was interned in a concentration camp or the like.’⁶⁰

From this form, we gain a sense of what was important to the Union, what kind of membership they were trying to build, and that it was important to the leaders that this be a membership-based organisation. Together, they would undertake serious and much-needed work.

IV AIMS OF THE UNION

This Union was part of a moment of ‘refugees’ self-expression and political activism’ after WWII amongst displaced people (‘DP’), particularly in Europe.⁶¹ The activities in DP camps have been widely documented, but political activities were broader than that as this Union demonstrates.⁶² They had a clear set of aims, coalescing around improving the rights of stateless people: their access to welfare, support, housing, self-definition and self-determination.

The Union was knowledgeable about the particularities of the historical moment in which they were working and the conditions which had created their statelessness. This was, as noted earlier, a European-based and oriented project which they were also attempting to, in part, export elsewhere in the world. They explained to their members and other audiences the circumstances, including that ‘many of today’s formally stateless persons were already considered by the Dutch authorities as de facto different from the normal status long before the outbreak of the war’.⁶³ They were also stateless, the Union was at pains to point out, not:

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ For instance, discussion of who was elected in December 1947 is contained in Letter to Members of the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, December 1947 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

⁵⁹ *Questionnaire* (Form, Nationaal Archief: 2.04.80, Inventory 3641) [tr Jozefien Boone].

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Gatrell, ‘Refugees in Modern World History’ (n 45) 24.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *Memorandum* (Memorandum, 14 August 1945, Nationaal Archief: 2.04.80, Inventory 3641) [tr Jozefien Boone].

... through any fault of their own. They have not committed any act or omission which, according to generally and internationally recognised principles, is such as to lead to the loss of nationality... In the vast majority of cases, the persons in question were deprived of the essential rights of nationality before the nationality was officially withdrawn.⁶⁴

They experienced, that is, a de facto statelessness, before being made de jure stateless. This deprivation was 'because of their political beliefs or because of their race'.⁶⁵ And the effects of this statelessness followed people, with the Netherlands adopting measures for Jews who had come from Germany. An example the Union offered — to describe the intricacies of its effects — concerned marriage:

Since promulgation of the so-called Nuremberg Laws, so-called Aryan and non-Aryan persons of German nationality could no longer marry each other in the Netherlands, because the Netherlands and Germany mutually recognised the impediments to marriage applicable under their laws. On the other hand, this could happen if a party was 'ausgebürgert', ie had lost German nationality under the laws in force in Germany at the time.⁶⁶

Thus, the Union aimed to relieve people of the burdens of these laws. By drawing attention to how they worked, the Union played both an educative and advocacy role.

Part of this political work involved connecting with other organisations, both those at an international level and those overseas. This was reported on to members, with it being explained in a letter:

It goes without saying that our Association will make every effort to help realise the internationally recognised principle of freedom in the choice of domicile in this matter as well. Our association is in contact with the Dutch representative of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, which will soon be replaced by the Intergovernmental Refugee Organisation.⁶⁷

They explained that they wanted to 'seek and maintain contact with similar associations in other countries and stimulate the foundation of "An International Federation of Stateless Victims of Fascism" and be a part of it'.⁶⁸

They were clear that they had a political program for a local constituency. At an assembly of the members of the Union held on 25 June 1945 in Amsterdam, a set of goals were adopted. The Union described how it 'has the goal to assemble the stateless people who are residing in the Netherlands and have lost their nationality as a result of measures from authoritarian states and promote their mutual interests', and that they were working with 'competent authorities' to

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Letter from Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, Commissioned by Dr B Karlsberg, December 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.09.5026, Inventory 527) [tr Jozefien Boone]. The Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was formed in 1938, as part of the Evian Conference, 'to administer intergovernmental efforts to resettle refugees from Nazi Germany. Its work was expanded in 1943 to cover all European refugees and terminated in 1947 when its activities were taken over by the International Refugee Organization.'; 'Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees', *UNHCR Refworld* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.refworld.org/document-sources/intergovernmental-committee-refugees>>, archived at <perma.cc/GH9K-NUKC>.

⁶⁸ *Statutes of the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, Adopted by the Assembly of Members, Held on the 25th of June in Amsterdam* (Document, Nationaal Archief: 2.04.80, Inventory 3641) [tr Jozefien Boone].

create the possibility for ‘the acquisition of the nationality of the state of residence for stateless people’.⁶⁹ They were clear that they supported stateless peoples’ rights:

Until this goal has been reached, the Union supports stateless people in the protection of their rights regarding the law, on which they can make a claim to based on their history, especially to the right to residence, unlimited freedom of movement, unobstructed practice of one’s profession, an exemption from special and discriminatory provisions, the acquisition of passports, etcetera.⁷⁰

Their claim for ‘unlimited freedom of movement’ along with the ‘acquisition of passports’ points to a specific problem that stateless people faced and continue to face: restrictions on their ability to move around the world and determine for themselves where and how they live. Indeed, as Sara Dehm shows, the making of controls on people’s movements within international law has been understood to be a project of managing individuals.⁷¹ However, the Union wrote and acted against this, demanding the right to movement on the basis of a practice of instantiating group freedom. Of course, for some, this includes the ability to decide to live where they are indigenous to, or where they had previously lived: many stateless people want to return and often are prevented, just as many others seek a new location. These desires of where to live are not straightforward, conditioned as they are by collective needs and rights, by the striving for dignity, and by the violence of geopolitical manoeuvres. Within this realm, as Tendayi Bloom has noted, ‘perhaps claiming non-citizenship within the recognised system of [s]tates could be seen as an empowered political step’.⁷² This is a practice which, as I will explore more shortly, many stateless people have undertaken — choosing for themselves to reject a citizenship which they do not desire and do not want.⁷³ Or relatedly, strategically accepting or acquiring a citizenship in order to create the means for a form of liveable life.

Passports are of central concern for stateless people, and the issue of passports was of great importance to the Union.⁷⁴ In December 1946, they made a series of recommendations, first explaining the situation that people faced, that is:

Nowadays, persons without a nationality in the Netherlands receive two different types of passports or identity cards for foreign travel. The actual aliens passport (just as often referred to as an erroneous favour pass) has — at least until now — been issued exclusively to persons who were already stateless before 10 May 1940. All others receive an identity card for foreign nationals, but they must be able to

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Sara Dehm, ‘Contesting the Right to Leave in International Law: The Berlin Wall, the Third World Brain Drain and the Politics of Emigration in the 1960s’ in Matthew Craven, Sundhya Pahuja and Gerry Simpson (eds), *International Law and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press 2019) 162, 166.

⁷² Tendayi Bloom, ‘Members of Colonised Groups, Statelessness and the Right to Have Rights’ in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds), *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge 2017) 153, 162 (‘Members of Colonised Groups’).

⁷³ See, eg, Jordana Silverstein, ‘Files, Families and the Nation: An Archival History, Perhaps’ (2023) 47(4) *Journal of Australian Studies* 721, 725.

⁷⁴ On the construction and use of the passport, see John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge University Press 2009).

demonstrate, just as well as the first category, that they must and are able to travel abroad.⁷⁵

Given this, the Union sought to increase the use of an ‘international passport for persons, which resorts under the Intergovernmental Refugee Committee’, noting that ‘we can point out that 15 countries have decided to issue and provide such a document. It remains to be seen to what extent this document will replace the passports or identity cards already used in the Netherlands.’⁷⁶ They campaigned for this kind of passport, as they explained the reasons for its being needed:

Our association will make some remarks in a special Memorandum about a passport for stateless persons, which memorandum will be handed over to the Dutch representative of the said Intergovernmental Committee. In this connection, we will point out in particular that stateless persons not only need a visa for their trips abroad, which are sometimes extremely difficult to obtain, but that they also have to bear much higher financial costs due to the short period of validity, the compulsion to obtain visas, etc, than their non-stateless compatriots.⁷⁷

This focus on an international passport arises from the problem that the nation-state system assigns each person to a country. An international passport — which was in some way present for stateless people in the interwar period in the form of the Nansen Passport, and was discussed in 1946 as part of the *London Agreement* —⁷⁸ became impossible for both national and international regimes which focused questions of sovereignty on attaching individual people to individual states. That is, it was only because of the increased implementation of a world system which imagines both that travel requires documentation and authorisation, and that the realm of the international cannot be the space for the holding of that authority.⁷⁹ As such, stateless people and their desires and claims to travel, as well as to determine their own movement, presented — and continue to present — a ‘challenge... to the existing system of States that relies upon its own ability completely to assign all people to one and only one recognised State’.⁸⁰ The Union was prepared to make this challenge, in order to work against the problems which were being thrust onto stateless people resulting from their lack of access to citizenship, and thus to a proper travel document.

Their political work also involved trying to ensure that people were correctly categorised. They repeatedly asserted themselves as refugees, as sitting in that moment outside the system of nation-states, and not as participants in the genocidal violence. Like other stateless people around the world, they were clear that they wanted to be ‘classified’ accurately, and that this meant not as enemy

⁷⁵ Letter from Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, Commissioned by Dr B Karlsberg, December 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.09.5026, Inventory 527) [tr Jozefien Boone].

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Agreement Relating to the Issue of a Travel Document to Refugees Who Are the Concern of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees*, opened for signature 15 October 1946, 11 UNTS 73 (entered into force 13 January 1947) (*‘London Agreement’*).

⁷⁹ On the *London Agreement* (n 78) and Nansen Passport, see Jens Vedsted-Hansen, ‘Article 28/Schedule: (Travel Documents/Titres de Voyage)’ in Andreas Zimmerman, Terje Einarsen and Franziska M Hermann (eds), *The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol: A Commentary* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press 2024) 1326, 1334–5. See also Philippa Hetherington, ‘The Nansen Passport as Site of International and Exilic Memory’ in Glenda Sluga, Kate Darian-Smith and Madeleine Herren (eds), *Sites of International Memory* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2023) 38.

⁸⁰ ‘Members of Colonised Groups’ (n 72) 165.

aliens.⁸¹ They asserted their claims to justice, to what should be rightfully theirs, and they asserted that they were stateless and refugees and that they did not participate in the crimes of the Nazis. This also meant that they demanded that they should get to determine their statelessness:

It will not be doubted by anyone that persons who, for whatever reason, have lost their German nationality and who reside outside the present-day German frontiers, are not subject to the German legislature, even if it is now supervised by the Allied military commander. We do not consider here whether in general in such cases the status of statelessness can or must be regarded as ended if the denationalised state revokes the denationalisation. We are of the opinion that this is not the case and that the restoration of the former nationality also requires a declaration by the stateless persons themselves that they wish to accept their former nationality.⁸²

For the Union, it was important that stateless people not be compelled into a citizenship from which they felt — or materially were — estranged. They used the language of morality in their discussion of whether German Jews living in the Netherlands should be forced to become German again, stressing the importance of how a person feels, and writing in a memorandum that:

it is... abundantly clear that — given the future position of a German subject established outside or within Germany — the renationalisation of German Jews should in fact be regarded as a severe punishment, a moral and material one, even if they are exceptionally allowed a further stay in their present countries of residence.⁸³

As they continue:

The day of the German capitulation was for them the day of liberation from an oppression and from a pariah existence that has lasted longer than since 1940. Many of them have been in the active struggle against the degrading system since 1933 and even longer of national socialism and fascism. We therefore believe that, apart from considerations of a legal nature, these foreigners may also expect, for purely human reasons, a regulation of their status which, within the framework of the existing laws of the country, would also provide them with the beginning of a bearable life serving the community.⁸⁴

For, they stress, there was a reciprocal feeling of belonging, noting:

The vast majority of the persons in question, including those returning from the deportation, have grown into Dutch national life in a way that would probably not have been possible under pre-war conditions. We can also consider as proof of this the fact that thousands of Dutch families have given shelter to non-Dutch persecuted persons of race, religion or political conviction, although they had to take into account the great dangers involved... A common destiny that arose under such circumstances has in many cases led to a perfect assimilation of these foreigners to their Dutch environment.⁸⁵

⁸¹ See, eg. *Address Given by Dr M Joseph on the Occasion of the First Meeting of the Councillors of the Association of Refugees (NSW) on December 6th, 1943* (Document, National Archives of Australia: A472, W6534) 4.

⁸² *Memorandum* (n 63).

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

But alongside this assimilation, differences remained between those who were citizens and those who were stateless. The Union noted a lack of social support, health care and provision of work for stateless people:

The Dutch People's Recovery in Amsterdam for instance does not allow stateless persons returning from German concentration camps to housing, and in other respects they receive either no help at all or at least very minimal aid, although these people still had their homes and their property destroyed by the same barbaric measures of the occupier, as their Dutch fellow sufferers.⁸⁶

This question of citizenship — of how and whether people would be able to articulate themselves in relation to nation-states — was a live political question at this moment in time, as international bodies were considering the roles and relationships of citizenship within the nation-state system, particularly as it related to refugees and stateless people. As Andrew Paul Janco has described, the insertion of the word 'unwilling' into the 1951 *Refugee Convention* in order to describe refugees as 'people "unable or unwilling" to avail themselves of state protection given a legitimate fear of persecution,' marked a moment when it 'became legally possible for an individual to annul his or her belonging to a state, given claims of persecution recognised by an international body' rather than leaving that power 'to exile or denationalise' only to the state.⁸⁷ While this power is obviously attenuated by state systems of control and bureaucracy, it is a notable discursive moment. Indeed, as we can see through Janco's work, the Union was not the only group of people in post-war Europe who were seeking to determine for themselves where they would live and which country they would claim — and thus be claimed by.⁸⁸ In February 1946, the UN General Assembly would, in their resolution on the 'Question of Refugees', 'establish that DPs could refuse repatriation given "valid objections", while also noting that the main task of work with DPs was to return them to their home countries'.⁸⁹ Further, in the UN Secretary General's *A Study of Statelessness* report of August 1949, there was an 'explicit claim that an individual can reject the protection of his or her state'.⁹⁰ In August 1945, the Union's call for stateless people to be able to decide for themselves sat within the realm of a consideration of community relations, justice and self-determination. In the aftermath of a world which had demonstrated that states did not protect, this was a moment of assertion of 'the right of DPs to reject state protection'.⁹¹ Indeed, it was a demonstration that people could speak back to the state and its claims, thereby making visible and working to undo its authority to determine and define, against a 'legal apparatus [that] tends to take the contemporary order of sovereign nation-states as given'.⁹² That is, where the nation-state instantiates claims to sovereignty over people, the Union was instantiating a repudiation of the absoluteness of that power.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, opened for signature 28 July 1951, 189 UNTS 150 (entered into force 22 April 1954); Andrew Paul Janco, "'Unwilling": The One-Word Revolution in Refugee Status, 1940–1951' (2014) 23(3) *Contemporary European History* 429, 429–30.

⁸⁸ *ibid* 431–2.

⁸⁹ Janco (n 87) 437, citing *Question of Refugees* (n 26).

⁹⁰ Janco (n 87) 443, citing UN Ad Hoc Committee on Refugees and Stateless Persons, *A Study of Statelessness*, UN Doc E/1112 and E/1112/Add.1 (1 August 1949).

⁹¹ *ibid* 433.

⁹² Malkki, 'Refugee and Exile' (n 7) 502.

As Bloom has described: ‘discourse around statelessness often constructs citizenship of a recognised State as the core or even sole allocator of rights, personhood and political existence, and as unambiguously desirable’, and thus erases the ways that both stateless peoples and Indigenous peoples have tangled with the very practice of citizenship and how it creates ‘unjust structures’.⁹³

In this way, we can look to how the Union demonstrates why a citizenship which is imagined as singular — as being something which attaches a person to one place — is not unambiguously desirable.⁹⁴ And why, when citizenship is granted by a state one does not wish to be attached to, it ‘can be experienced as stifling, rather than only emancipatory and empowering’.⁹⁵ The Union is further evidence of what Bloom describes today as the issue of statelessness, wherein ‘what is problematic... is not the absence of citizenship, but the loss of rights and political being that is associated with statelessness’.⁹⁶ That is, for the Union, the displacement that members experienced — and the manoeuvrings that arose as a result — were evidence of a ‘sociopolitical’ concern, as described by Liisa Malkki, that needed to be managed.⁹⁷ We see that these problems of statelessness continue into the present.

Relatedly, as noted above, the difficulty of the category of ‘enemy alien’ — and of Jews who had been Germans being designated as such — was something which the Union considered and worked on. This was important for moral and political reasons, as well as the fact that being designated as an ‘enemy’ had material repercussions. In an update at the end of the year in 1946, the Union explained to members that those who were regarded as ‘enemy subjects’ by the Netherlands faced problems following a *Royal Decree on enemy assets, relating to all who were in possession of an enemy nationality on 10 May 1940 or later* (‘*Royal Decree on Enemy Property*’).⁹⁸ They explained that:

Since the *Royal Decree on Enemy Property* not only stipulates that enemy property has become the property of the State of the Netherlands, but that an enemy national cannot perform valid legal acts (with the exception of consummating a marriage, drawing up a will, etc.), this decision indeed represents a particular difficulty for a large majority of our fellow sufferers. This difficulty can only be overcome by obtaining a so-called no-enemy declaration, with the further disadvantage, however, that the petitions submitted for obtaining this declaration are subjected to an exceptionally lengthy treatment.⁹⁹

This was a process — of petitioning for ‘anti-enmity’ — that many were going through, and their ‘patience’ was being ‘put to a severe test’ in waiting for this to be declared.¹⁰⁰ Applying for and being granted this status was of urgent importance given the implications. For there were also additional concerns about continued residency in the Netherlands, as ‘according to the Dutch aliens regulations, every foreigner needs a residence permit’.¹⁰¹

⁹³ ‘Members of Colonised Groups’ (n 72) 154.

⁹⁴ *ibid* 160.

⁹⁵ *ibid* 157.

⁹⁶ *ibid* 159.

⁹⁷ Liisa Malkki, ‘National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees’ (1992) 7(1) *Cultural Anthropology* 24, 33.

⁹⁸ Letter from Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, Commissioned by Dr B Karlsberg, December 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.09.5026, Inventory 527) [tr Jozefien Boone].

⁹⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*.

The Union update explained that

While it is certain that no one who has not misbehaved will be forced to return to Germany, there is still the possibility that a distinction will be made between those who were admitted before the war without any condition of further emigration and those whose admission to the Netherlands was expressly linked to the condition of further emigration... [W]e believe that as a general trend we must conclude that the ultimate emigration of a certain percentage of the former refugees still residing here in the country would be pursued by the Dutch authorities.¹⁰²

But this was something which the Union was anxious to work against, noting that '[it] goes without saying that our Association will make every effort to help realise the internationally recognised principle of freedom in the choice of domicile in this matter as well'.¹⁰³ Further differences in access to housing and personal property were made visible through the organising around 'war violence damage', which allocated compensation for Dutch citizens, and then for others who the relevant Minister decreed — although, explicitly not for 'enemy nationals'. There was no 'right' to compensation, the Union noted.¹⁰⁴ This 'legal inequality' was something which the Union was working through, as part of their efforts to ensure stateless peoples' right to determine their place in the world.

V THE UNION'S ACTIVITIES

The Union was, it appears, highly active over a number of years. They wanted to gather in new members, pursue their political program, disseminate their message widely, and make links with other relevant organisations. From Dutch newspapers, we can learn that the Union advertised for stateless people to attend their office in Gelderland 'in order to be able to complete a questionnaire'. Presumably this was the questionnaire for new members as detailed above. The notice was printed in multiple local papers in July 1945, including *De Waarheid* [The Truth],¹⁰⁵ *Geldersch Dagblad* [Newspaper from Gelderland],¹⁰⁶ and *Nijmeegsch Dagblad* [Nijmegen Daily Newspaper].¹⁰⁷ The advertisement briefly explained statelessness as — 'any person who has lost his former nationality without acquiring a new one as a result of measures taken by the authoritarian governments', and explained that: 'The object of the [Manifesto] is the acquisition of equal elementary rights, which are self-evident to all citizens of the united nations.'

They held public talks as part of their work. By way of one example, in February 1948, a talk by Mrs Dr Hilda Verwey-Jonker about the 'Refugee problem' was advertised in newspapers, and invitation letters were sent to relevant organisations and individuals.¹⁰⁸ Verwey-Jonker was a member of the Dutch delegation at the International Refugee Organisation, and a Marxist politician and sociologist. The first Dutch sociologist to receive a PhD, she was an advocate for

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ 'Verbond Van Statenloze Slachtoffers Van Het Fascisme', *De Waarheid* (Netherlands, 12 July 1945) 4.

¹⁰⁶ 'Statenloozen', *Geldersch Dagblad* (Netherlands, 19 July 1945) 1.

¹⁰⁷ 'Statenloozen', *Nijmeegsch Dagblad* (Netherlands, 19 July 1945) 1.

¹⁰⁸ Invitation from Dr B Karlsberg, Chairman, Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism, February 1948 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

refugees and migrants, as well as a campaigner around economic issues and a member of the Social Democratic Labour Party (a Marxist political party), co-founder of the Labor Party, and someone who had represented women at the UN.¹⁰⁹ The talk took place in Amsterdam and was advertised in one newspaper whose title translates to ‘The Jewish Watchman: The Official Organ of the Dutch Zionist Union’¹¹⁰ and another called ‘The Flame: Socialist Weekly For Freedom And Culture’.¹¹¹ This speaks to the breadth of who the Union was seeking to engage, and the various types of politics they seemingly aligned themselves with.

Indeed, as noted above, in his role as Chairman, Dr Karlsberg was active in trying to form connections with other relevant organisations. In July 1946, he wrote to Dr A Sark, the representative delegate from the Netherlands to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees in The Hague, seeking a means to connect. Karlsberg explained that he had been in contact with Sir Herbert Emerson — a former imperial British public servant who had worked as Governor of the Punjab and Home Secretary in British India, and then as the League of Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees, before becoming Director of the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees — and that he was interested to speak with Sark as well. Karlsberg described the Union, explaining that they were a group ‘who tries to look after the interests of the category in question [being stateless people], without distinguishing between race, religion, or political preferences, [and they were] ... founded in June 1945. Since then, many stateless victims of fascism in the Netherlands have joined us.’ He sent a copy of the Manifesto and asked for ‘the opportunity to exchange views with you on the problems that concern us’.¹¹² This request would result in a meeting, as well as an ongoing relationship between the men and their organisations, with letters passing between them across the rest of 1946.¹¹³ They exchanged materials, including on ‘a passport for refugees’ and other relevant documents, and discussed plans to meet.¹¹⁴

This was all part of the Union’s political work, as they continued to agitate at the levels of national and international politics and government. They held meetings for their members where they offered briefings on the state of affairs across their major issues: of how stateless people would be classed (as enemy aliens, or not); where people would be compelled to live; what citizenship they would have; what their opportunities for work, property ownership and compensation would be; of how stateless people could, and could not, travel; and how statelessness would intrude into such matters even as marriage. They were eager to ensure that stateless people were aware of the disadvantages that they faced, of how the laws were changing over time.¹¹⁵ This was key to the Union’s

¹⁰⁹ Margit van der Steen, ‘Jonker, Hilda (1908–2004)’, *Huygens Instituut* (Web Page, 8 March 2018) <<https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/Jonker>>, archived at <perma.cc/XVQ5-R3R5>.

¹¹⁰ ‘Mevrouw Verwey-Jonker Spreekt’, *De Joodse Wachter* (Netherlands, February 1948) 8.

¹¹¹ ‘Verbond Van Statenloze Slachtoffers Van Het Fascisme’, *De Vlam* (Netherlands, 13 February 1948) 2.

¹¹² Letter from Dr B Karlsberg to Dr A Sark, 14 July 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

¹¹³ Letter from Mr H M L H Sark to Dr B Karlsberg, 15 August 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

¹¹⁴ Letter from Dr B Karlsberg to Dr A Sark, 16 October 1946 (Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

¹¹⁵ *Propaganda Gathering, 14 February 1946* (Letter, 1946, Nationaal Archief: 2.05.31, Inventory 53) [tr Jozefien Boone].

work: they undertook to fight for political change and they sought to engage and build a collective sense of stateless people as political actors

VI CONCLUSION

If we return to the Manifesto, I argue that we can see the Union of Stateless Victims of Fascism claiming the centrality of people being able to determine their nationality, rather than it being decided upon, managed and controlled by nation-states. In this sense, it would seem, they were arguing against something fundamental to the modern nation-state, and the ideas of sovereignty and control that are prioritised within international law — that it is the state that gets to decide, rather than the people. This was part of their call for justice and against charity: the matter cannot be resolved by benevolence on the part of the nation-state deciding to welcome stateless people in and giving them citizenship.

For these questions about statelessness and nation-states are ultimately questions about how peoples continue to organise themselves, how they want to organise the world, and how broadly they can dream. There are a series of useful questions which arise from the work of this Union, for all of us who come after. What are the political claims to be made, the histories and experiences each person and group will come to know and draw on? Which other political currents, movements, and activities — some of them potentially at odds with a desire for universal justice for all — will movements for justice for stateless people engage with? In the words of the Manifesto, what are the demands that can rhetorically and productively be claimed that: We [can] trust that every intelligent person will approve of? Understanding these histories can be a form of world-making. For it has been noted by Barzoo Eliassi that to ‘limit or prevent’ statelessness ‘would entail redefinition and reconfiguration of the state system and its citizenship regimes that have been structured by nationalist thoughts’.¹¹⁶

In their work, the Union conceptualised across nationalist borders, asking countries to take responsibilities for people who were not their citizens. This was a rejection of the requirement for membership in a state, in favour of an idea of a world citizenship or a type of communal belonging that would exceed the restrictions — social, cultural, political, human — that the state necessarily works to impose. The growing number of organisations of stateless people, dedicated to tackling statelessness, testifies to the necessity of the ongoing work to change how stateless people interact with and are treated by nation-states.¹¹⁷

It is unclear from the remaining archives exactly how long the Union existed for, or why it ended. It was still active in late 1947 and early 1948, most probably later still. This article, as such, offers simply an instructive glimpse, a sense of who they were. There is much work still to be done: to recover and analyse more fully these traces of political organising amongst stateless people in the aftermath of genocides. This is a task that, writing in 2025, has poignant and heartbreaking echoes through the years, to other groups of stateless people — Palestinians, Rohingya, Kurds, Tamils, and more — who are today working collectively for

¹¹⁶ Barzoo Eliassi, *Narratives of Statelessness and Political Otherness: Kurdish and Palestinian Experiences* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2021) 6.

¹¹⁷ See, eg, Chris Nash, ‘Networking for Change: The Development of the European Network on Statelessness and Perspectives on Developing Other Regional and Global Statelessness Coalitions’ (2014) 19 (1–2) *Tilburg Law Review* 212. See also organisations such as United Stateless, Statefree, Nationality For All, and so on.

liberation, for their freedoms, rights, dignity and justice. The past devastatingly continues.