

Campaign against Muslims in Germany generates Mozart opera controversy

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Germany now has its own debate over terror and security. Leading forces in German politics and the media are seeking to create an atmosphere of hysteria and fear in political and cultural life and thereby provide a justification for the increasingly aggressive stance taken by the government at home and abroad. As is already the case in the US and Great Britain, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is being used as the pretext.

The shock of recent days was visible on the face of Kirsten Harms, the director of the German Opera House in Berlin. Following her recent decision to remove Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* from the schedule of the opera house, she found herself at the center of a swirling controversy.

In the middle of September she received a warning from the Berlin interior minister, Ehrhard Körting (Social Democratic Party—SPD) and the Berlin criminal agency (LKA), which led her to take the unusual step of canceling the performance.

Following its own investigation, the LKA had come to the conclusion that the presentation of *Idomeneo* at the German Opera could create “a dangerous scenario with major potential consequences for public security and order.”

The LKA statement continued: “The present worldwide situation is characterized by a broad rejection of Western ideology by parts of the Muslim world population. Amongst other things, the situation is exacerbated by military actions in different Muslim-dominated countries, which are interpreted by Islamic fundamentalists as an attack on their religion. Calls for resistance on the basis of, in part, ‘petty reasons’ have led to substantial reactions (controversy over Mohammed caricature).”

Harms explained to the press that Körting had personally called her in the midst of her holiday in August to inform her of the LKA report and to warn against presenting the Mozart opera. He mentioned that he knew of an anonymous threatening call and, according to Harms, Körting went on to say that he loved the German Opera, he often drove past the building and did not want a situation where it was no longer standing.

The *Idomeneo* production at the German Opera House has part of the repertoire since March of 2003 and is the work of director Hans Neuenfels. Neuenfels has deviated from the classic interpretation of the opera, inserting a scene at the end of the piece featuring the beheading of figures representing the ancient Greek sea god Poseidon, as well as Buddha, Jesus and also Mohammed. The purpose of the scene is to demonstrate how the main protagonists in the opera turn away from God.

According to Neuenfels, “The production is not aimed at Islam or any another religion, but is rather a discourse over the institution of religion.” In contrast to the Mohammed caricatures printed last year by a Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten*, the current controversy in Berlin is not the outcome of a deliberate provocation against the Islamic faith.

One could certainly argue over whether the decision made by Harms to call off the production was correct. Any censorship on religious grounds and all attacks on artistic freedom and free speech are reactionary and must be rejected. But this is not really the issue at stake in this instance. If the aim was avoiding unnecessary danger to the public and performers, Harms' decision was understandable.

On the basis of the warnings given by Körting and the LKA, Harms was obliged to assume that there was an acute and immediate danger, and found herself in a situation for which she had no responsibility, but which could involve potentially tragic consequences. In an interview on German television, she admitted that in making her decision she had been influenced by reactions to the recent speech by the Pope, which led to polarization and confrontation with much of the Muslim world.

Harms was evidently seeking to avoid a situation where the Opera House she headed would be drawn into a debate over Islamism, with all the attendant political overtones—precisely the situation which has now come about. In order to avoid any debate and the attention of the media, she even sought originally to keep her decision secret.

However, instead of respecting her decision or honestly discussing her motives, leading politicians and the media immediately launched an aggressive and abusive political campaign, which had no bearing on the issue at stake and says a great deal about the political aims of those involved.

Harms was accused of cowardice by the highest political authorities. She was charged with capitulating to the dictates of Islamic fundamentalists and establishing a dangerous precedent which threatened free speech.

In a remarkable display of unity, all those responsible for the recent attacks on basic democratic rights (including new anti-terror laws), those who themselves advocate a Big Brother-type authoritarian state in Germany, suddenly proclaimed themselves devoted defenders of free speech.

German Chancellor, Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) declared, “We must take care that we do not

continually back down because of fear of violent radicals. Self censorship based on fear is unacceptable.”

German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) stated that Ms. Harms had “gone crazy,” adding that he found the cancellation of the piece “unacceptable and ludicrous.” Another leading CDU member, Wolfgang Bosbach, spoke of a “case of bowing down before terrorists,” and the law-and-order Bavarian interior minister, Günther Beckstein (Christian Social Union—CSU), assessed the decision to call off the opera as “sad proof that Islamic extremist agitation is already evidently having an effect” on free speech in Germany.

Minister of Culture Bernd Neumann (CDU) said that when concern over possible protests “leads to self-censorship, then the democratic culture of free speech is in danger.”

Leading members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party joined in the chorus. The head of the SPD parliamentary fraction, Peter Struck, said the cancellation represented surrender “to a possible danger.” The SPD’s Dieter Wiefelspütz spoke of an “embarrassing action,” and the leader of the Greens, Claudia Roth, called the cancellation a “signal act of cowardice.”

The only public voice in support of Harms came from the German Stage Union, which declared that all such criticisms were hypocritical. The chairman of the directors’ group of the union, Holk Freytag, stated that Harms had responded to authorities such as the LKA, and that her decision was justified if it prevented unnecessary humiliation of Muslims worldwide.

The storm of criticism following the cancellation of *Idomeneo* has nothing to do with the defense of free speech, but is rather part of a hysterical and malicious campaign aimed at intensifying anti-Islamic sentiment. The intimidation of critical voices is directed at creating the ideological justification for a more aggressive foreign policy and restrictions on democratic rights at home, while at the same time diverting attention from those leading politicians whose own policies have led to the increased danger of terror attacks in Germany.

The government of Angela Merkel has carried out a considerable shift to the right in terms of foreign policy. It has more or less publicly backed the crimes of US imperialism in Iraq and unreservedly supported the brutal war of aggression by Israel against Lebanon. The German military is now carrying out its biggest-ever post-war military operation by sending German naval units to Lebanon.

The ruling elite in Germany is embarking on an increasingly confrontational course, not just in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, but also in Germany itself.

This is what Merkel means when she says, “We must take care that we do not continually back down because of fear of violent radicals.” The German population must accustom itself to terror attacks, which become more and more likely as German foreign and domestic policy becomes increasingly ruthless. Israeli-type security conditions are increasingly on the agenda for Germany.

This is why there has been such a broad rejection of Harms’ argument—i.e., that she sought to reduce the risks for the public and opera staff. As is the case in the US and Great Britain, the media and cultural institutions are being taken in hand for the purposes of

a broad and hysterical “anti-terror struggle,” in which the real causes of terror are not to be raised—i.e., the aggressive drive by imperialist powers for oil and power in the Middle East and around the world.

Following the comments by Merkel, Schäuble and company, Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD), Interior Senator Körting and Culture Senator Thomas Flierl (Left Party-PDS) also fell into line, although they had all been advised of the cancellation of the opera. Now they sought to portray Harms’ decision as her own initiative, and to distance themselves from their former stance.

For his part, Flierl stated that “based on the estimations with which she was presented” he had regarded the decision made by Harms as “responsible,” but he now acknowledged that “the fact that the security doubts were neither up-to-date nor substantiated means that they were insufficient to justify a decision to cancel.”

Körting played down his previous warning and declared that his comment regarding his wish to see the building still standing was merely a joke. In line with Wowereit, Körting declared: “The caricature controversy, the debate over the lecture of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg and the discussion over the cancellation of *Idomeneo* at the German Opera House in Berlin make clear how necessary it is to conduct an open discussion with Muslims in Germany about respect for religious feelings on the one hand and freedom of speech and culture on the other.”

This comment exposes the real aim of the campaign surrounding the opera. The Mozart opera is to be utilized alongside the provocative Mohammed caricatures and the recent speech by the Pope to create a climate of fear and hysteria with regard to Muslims.

Körting has already shown where he stands on such issues. Only weeks ago he banned the display of pictures of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on demonstrations protesting against the Lebanon war and threatened to break up such demonstrations if his edict was not complied with.

When the same politicians refer to “self-censorship” they lack any credibility. All of them agree when it comes to cutting subsidies for culture in general and for Berlin’s three opera houses in particular. They demand that the opera houses be as profitable as possible—a state of affairs which can only be achieved with full houses. In other words, German opera confronts the same criteria which prevail in German television: artistic quality and freedom must be sacrificed in favor of productions based on the lowest common denominator, tailored to appeal to private commercial sponsors.



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