

The attacks on Günter Grass—a balance sheet

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It is now exactly one month since the German author Günter Grass published his poem “What Must be Said”—time enough to draw a preliminary balance sheet.

There have been many acrimonious conflicts in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, but there is nothing to compare with the flood of abuse, slanders and insults unleashed in the media, including the so-called “serious” publications, against the 84-year-old Nobel laureate over the past several weeks.

The accusation of anti-Semitism has been raised dozens of times and in every variation. And this against the author of *The Tin Drum*, who was holding up a mirror to German society at a time when it was covering its past with a thick veil and when its government, administration, judiciary, editorial offices, universities and business executive suites were staffed by thousands of former Nazis!

On *Spiegel Online* the historian Michael Wolffsohn asserted that Grass’ poem is “an anti-Semitic pamphlet garbed in a sham lyric,” which “would not be out of place” in the *Nationalzeitung*, the house organ of the neo-Nazi NPD. In the *Berliner Zeitung* the Swiss historian and director of the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, Raphael Gross, called the poem a “song of hate” and asks: “What’s the problem then about describing him as an anti-Semite?”

In *Die Zeit* the journalist Josef Joffe refers to Sigmund Freud and detects the source of anti-Semitism which “pours out of the Grass-poem” from the “subconscious, hemmed in by powerful taboos—shame and guilt.” This is how the “id” is thinking inside Grass, Joffe proclaims, and cites an anti-Semitic character in a Fassbinder play: “He sucks us up, the Jew. Drinks our blood and puts us in the wrong, because he is a Jew and we are guilty. If he stayed where he came from, or if we had gassed him, I could sleep better. This is no joke. This is how it thinks inside

me.”

We wish to spare the reader further quotations from the long list of infamous calumnies depicting Grass as an anti-Semite. In fact, the allegation of anti-Semitism is not even the worst slander levied against Grass. Some authors simply berate him as a Nazi.

The literary critic of the *Berliner Morgenpost* Tilman Krause compares Grass’ poem with the infamous speech given by Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels in 1943 in the Berlin Sports Palace, calling for “total war”. Krause has detected in the poem a “plethora of figures of thought and forms of speech that cannot hide their origins in Nazi ideology.” In Grass’ last days, he writes “the ardent Nazi he once was is reentering through the back door.”

Malte Lehming, head of the opinion page of the *Tagesspiegel* also defames Grass as neo-Nazi. “Somebody who suddenly writes poetry in the jargon of the *Nationalzeitung*, without noticing, has perhaps always done so, without others noticing it,” he writes. Lehming even compares Grass with Hitler: “Grass consciously sides with the ‘silent majority’, which he seeks to give a voice—as it was before, when a silent majority found a voice, which then quickly, reinforced by loudspeakers and the thunder of tanks, could be heard throughout Europe.”

These obscene attacks on Grass say more about the authors than Germany’s most respected living literary figure. It is not Grass’ well-founded warning of a new war in the Middle East which recalls the Nazis, but rather the outrageous accusations leveled against him by a ranting pack. They have conveniently forgotten that one of the first acts of the Nazis after coming to power was the public burning of books by Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Mann, Erich Maria Remarque, Kurt Tucholsky, Carl von Ossietzky and many other world famous authors.

A few voices have sought to defend Grass against the

charge of anti-Semitism but they are timid, reserved and full of caveats. Not a single figure active in cultural, media and political circles has emerged to protest loudly and strongly against the character assassination of one of the most important representatives of German post-war literature.

This requires some explanation.

One indication is provided by Josef Joffe in an article he wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*. Joffe delivers a venomous tirade against Grass, culminating in the accusation that “he had breached a 70-year-old moral consensus, that he had turned the moral universe upside down by casting Israel as aggressor and Iran as victim.”

By “moral consensus,” Joffe means the view that the Holocaust commits Germany to permanent and unconditional support for the policies of the Israeli government, a position that Chancellor Angela Merkel summed up in her statement that the protection of Israel’s security is part of Germany’s national interest or *raison d’État*.

With this argument the German government is preparing its participation in a war against Iran. Following years of absence it wants to regain a military foothold in the oil rich region of the Middle East. In a grotesque distortion of historical facts and current political realities, it is exploiting the crimes of the Nazis to justify its own future imperialist crimes.

Grass’ poem cuts across these plans and gives expression to the widespread popular mistrust against a revival of German militarism and another imperialist war in the Middle East. This is why he is bitterly attacked.

Joffe is well aware that the policy of the “political class”, as he calls it, has little popular support. He complains bitterly that while Grass’ poem has been almost universally rejected by the media it has the support of around 90 percent of readers’ comments. Joffe’s response is to attribute anti-Semitic and nationalist motives to such sentiments.

This theme runs like a thread through numerous other attacks on Grass. The already cited Malte Lehming argues that Grass is pandering to the “mob”. Tilman Krause refers to the background of Grass (and other writers), born into “illiterate families which were intellectually incapable of ideologically countering Nazi ideology.” The Nazis, he claims, enabled this “proletarianized petty bourgeoisie” to participate in

politics. With their support they sought to build their global empire. The “old elites”, in contrast, “were suspicious to the brown mob, they were suppressed, and when possible destroyed.”

It is hard to contemplate a more brazen distortion of historical truth. While the Nazis were able to win support from desperate layers of the petty bourgeoisie, the vast majority of the working class—and also many middle class people—were bitter opponents of the Nazis. As late as 1932, the two workers’ parties, the KPD and the SPD, won more votes combined than Hitler’s Nazi Party. It was only the miserable failure of the SPD and the KPD leadership which prevented the working class from halting the rise of Hitler.

The defeat of the working class also sealed the fate of the Jews. Only after the destruction of the labor movement and the beginning of World War II were the Nazis able to fully implement their anti-Semitism and commit the greatest crime in the history of humanity.

It was the “old elites”, presented by Lehming as victims of the Nazis, that secured Hitler’s victory—the Prussian Junkers and army officers who helped him to power; the Krupp, Flick and other business leaders, who financed his rise; the bourgeois parties, who approved the Enabling Act to suppress the labour movement; the spineless bureaucrats and judges, who swore their allegiance to Hitler; the academics who mobbed their Jewish colleagues and taught racial theory; and the educated classes who were intoxicated by Hitler’s Wagner cult.

The hacks now attacking Grass represent this tradition. Their contempt for the masses, which they defame as an anti-Semitic mob, demonstrates their willingness to sweep aside basic democratic rights in order to realize the war plans of German imperialism.



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