

Socialist Equality Party of Germany publishes open letter to Professor Jörg Baberowski

24 January 2014

We publish here a letter sent by the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) to Professor Jörg Baberowski, head of the Department of Eastern European History at the Humboldt University in Berlin.

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Professor Baberowski,

For the last meeting of your colloquium this semester, you have invited the British author Robert Service as a contributor. He is due to speak on 12 February on the topic “Trotsky: Problems of a Biography.”

To invite Robert Service to give a lecture on the subject of biography amounts to an intellectual provocation. There is hardly a work that has so discredited its author as the Trotsky biography by Robert Service that appeared in English in 2009 and in German in 2012. It is not a scholarly work, but rather, as the doyen of research on communism Professor Hermann Weber (Mannheim) put it, a “diatribe,” which “deals in lies, historical falsifications, dubious references and even anti-Semitic prejudices.”

Acknowledged historians from several countries have confirmed this estimation. In June 2011, Bertrand Patenaude, a historian at California’s Stanford University, published a devastating critique of Service’s biography of Trotsky in the respected academic journal *American Historical Review*. Patenaude wrote: “In his eagerness to cut Trotsky down, Service commits numerous distortions of the historical record and outright errors of fact to the point that the intellectual integrity of the whole enterprise is open to question.” The errors are so crude that they “are at times jaw-dropping.”

Prior to this, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board and chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), David North, had already documented numerous errors, misleading accounts and

falsifications by Service, which in part originate from the arsenal of Stalinist propaganda. The *American Historical Review* agreed completely with North, whose book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* is also available in German. The journal came to the conclusion: “North calls Service’s biography a ‘piece of hackwork.’ Strong words, but entirely justified. Harvard University Press has placed its imprimatur upon a book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship.”

Then, in July 2011, fourteen renowned historians, political scientists and publicists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland addressed a letter to the publisher Suhrkamp advising against the publication of a German edition of Service’s biography of Trotsky. They also concluded that he had “violated the basic standards of historical scholarship,” and described his biography as a “diatribe.”

Among the signatories of the letter are specialists of international renown: Professor Hermann Weber (Mannheim); Professor Oliver Rathkolb, head of the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of Vienna; Professor Peter Steinbach (Berlin), director of the German Resistance Memorial Centre; Professor Heiko Haumann (Basel); and Professor Mario Kessler (Potsdam).

Any serious scholar would have attempted to defend his academic reputation against such a devastating judgment. But not Robert Service. He has not made a single attempt to refute the accusations raised against him. The reason is that he sees himself not as an historian, but as a right-wing propagandist. Service has openly acknowledged this himself. According to a newspaper report, at a presentation of his book in London he expressed the hope: “If the ice pick [the weapon with which Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico in 1940] didn’t quite do the job of killing him

off, I hope I've managed it."

In this context, it is obvious that you have invited Service not for scholarly, but for undisclosed political reasons, Professor Baberowski.

The invitation to Service stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of yourself and your faculty on the day the renowned American historian Alexander Rabinowitch presented his book *The Bolsheviks in Power—The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* in Berlin in October 2010. Then, you refused to make available an appropriate lecture hall and declined even to welcome Rabinowitch or acknowledge the presence of this internationally acclaimed expert on Russian history.

Four months previously, the online forum “H-Soz-u-Kult” had published an enthusiastic review of Service’s Trotsky biography shortly after it appeared in English. The review, by Andreas Oberender, a member of your faculty, was written under your editorial supervision. It praised the biography in glowing terms without saying anything concrete about its content or citing a single sentence from it. Instead, it added to Service’s depraved calumnies against Trotsky some additional ones.

Last summer, along with Service, you participated in the Summer Workshop of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. The Hoover Institution is a stronghold of the anti-communism of the Cold War and post-Soviet era. It appears that the plans to invite Service were laid there.

You are, of course, free to meet and collaborate with whomever you choose. But your students have the right to know about the objections raised against a book that is to be presented within the framework of a colloquium under your professorship, and to form their own judgment.

In the invitation to the colloquium it states, “All those interested are warmly welcome.” We gladly accept this invitation. We will naturally respect the framework of the colloquium, but we expect that critics of Service will be given the opportunity to pose questions and present the well-founded objections to his book. To date, he has not replied to these objections. Since you have invited him to talk about the problems of his biography of Trotsky, he is now obliged to do so.

On behalf of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party), German section of the

International Committee of the Fourth International,
Wolfgang Weber



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