

Humboldt University seeks to ban criticism of right-wing professor

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE of Germany

27 November 2014

The Department of History at Berlin's Humboldt University has posted on its web site an attack on the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) and its youth and student organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), for criticizing the right-wing political activities of Jörg Baberowski, the chairman of the Department of Eastern European History. We publish below an open letter to the president of the university, Prof. Jan-Hendrik Olbertz, in which the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE reply to this attack.

Dear Prof. Dr. Olbertz,

We demand the immediate removal of the “Statement on the attacks on Prof. Dr. Jörg Baberowski” posted by the Department of History on the web site of Humboldt University. The statement constitutes a partisan political attack on the Socialist Equality Party and its youth and student organization, the IYSSE, together with an attempt to mobilize students and teachers at the university against the IYSSE. All this is being done in the name of Humboldt University. This violates basic principles of democracy and freedom of expression. It creates a precedent for a modern form of Gleichschaltung—that is, the policy, pursued by the Nazi regime, of suppressing political and intellectual opposition at German universities.

The “Statement” has the character of an official declaration of Humboldt University. It appears with the university logo and the signature of the executive director of the Department of History, Prof. Peter Burschel, who has signed it “on behalf of the Department.” In the name of the university, the statement attacks an officially recognized political party, the Socialist Equality Party, as well as members of its student organization, the IYSSE, declaring in essence that any criticism of the right-wing political agenda and activities of Prof. Baberowski, inside and outside the university, is illegitimate.

We demand an investigation into how this statement came about. We want to know who proposed it, in which committees it was discussed, and who decided to publish it. Why was the Socialist Equality Party not given an opportunity, in advance of the statement's publication, to answer the allegations of its accusers?

The statement by the Department of History openly advocates political censorship. It states that criticism of Baberowski's public comments can no longer be tolerated in the “lecture halls of Humboldt University,” and “calls on teachers and students of Humboldt University to oppose the campaign against Professor Baberowski.”

What does that mean? What exactly are students being called upon to do? This is obviously an attempt to mobilize students politically in defense of Baberowski's positions against the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE. It should hardly be necessary to point out the grossly

inappropriate character of such a proposal, not only politically, but also professionally. Baberowski has at his disposal a large apparatus and considerable resources, and wields substantial authority over students. He has the ability to advance or block their careers, and students are now being instructed to come to his political defense.

The assertion that Prof. Baberowski is the victim of a political campaign by the IYSSE, and that this campaign violates “constitutionally protected academic freedom,” is absurd. It turns reality on its head.

Prof. Baberowski is not a passive scholar carrying out neutral scientific research in the ivory tower of the university. He uses his authority as chair of the department to promote revisionist and militaristic views inside and outside the university. He does so regularly on television and radio and in newspaper articles, interviews and public discussions. He also maintains close links with influential journalists, high-ranking politicians, the German army, and the Hoover Institution in California—the academic hub of neoconservatives in the US.

The criticisms we have made of Prof. Baberowski are accurate and easily verified. They are based on public statements and publicly available documents and do not constitute defamation.

In February, Baberowski was quoted in *Der Spiegel*—the most influential news magazine in Germany—calling for the rehabilitation of Ernst Nolte. This is the historian who in 1986 provoked the *Historikerstreit* (Struggle among Historians) by playing down the crimes of German National Socialism. Today, Nolte explicitly defends Adolf Hitler. *Der Spiegel* cites Baberowski as saying: “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.”

In the same *Spiegel* article, Nolte declares that Poland and England shared responsibility for Hitler's invasion of Poland, and that the Jews shared responsibility for the Gulag—views usually associated with neo-Nazi circles. Baberowski himself advocates a more sympathetic attitude toward Hitler. He told *Der Spiegel*: “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn't vicious. He didn't want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

Is this now the view of Humboldt University? By declaring criticism of Baberowski illegitimate, it assumes responsibility for these views. It is supporting a campaign of historical revisionism aimed at legitimizing Adolf Hitler and downplaying the horror of the Nazi experience.

On October 1, in a panel discussion at the German Historical Museum held under the title *Interventionsmacht Deutschland?* (Germany as an Intervention Force?), Baberowski argued for methods to be employed against jihadist groups that contravene all

international norms and legal conventions. He said: “And if you are not willing to take hostages, burn down villages and hang people, and spread fear and terror, as do the terrorists, if you are not ready for it, you will not win. Then you should leave it alone.”

Is this now the standpoint of Humboldt University? Does it seriously maintain that criticism of such fascist views constitutes an attack on academic freedom? Does this freedom now extend to justifying the war atrocities and mass murder committed during World War II by Nazi leaders who were hanged for their crimes in 1946 in Nuremberg?

The attempt by the Department of History to ban criticism of these reactionary views within the University is itself an attack on academic freedom, as guaranteed by Article 5.3 of the German Constitution. This includes not only freedom to teach—the right of teachers to express their opinions freely (which we have never questioned)—but also freedom to study. Students have the right to decide on their own studies, form their own opinions free of political pressure, and criticize the standpoints of their lecturers. The “Statement” is directed precisely against these rights.

While Baberowski seeks to evade criticism by retreating behind the principle of academic freedom, he denies such freedom to others. He has used his position as a professor and the resources at his disposal not only to disseminate his own political views, but also to silence his critics.

On February 12, he mobilized security guards to suppress criticism of his British counterpart, Robert Service, whom he had invited to a public symposium to present his discredited biography of Trotsky. The biography was described by the prestigious journal *American Historical Review* and 14 German-speaking historians as “a piece of hackwork” and “slandorous,” due to its numerous errors and misinterpretations that contravene the most basic historical standards.

When the IYSSE informed Baberowski in advance that it intended to participate in the public colloquium and submitted written questions to Service, Baberowski responded by declaring the colloquium canceled. In fact, he shifted the colloquium to another location, to which he denied access to anyone who could have raised critical questions. Among those barred from the meeting were history students from Humboldt University, renowned historians such as Prof. Mario Kessler of the University of Potsdam, and the editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, David North. Kessler was barred because he had signed the letter of 14 historians to Suhrkamp Verlag recommending that it not publish a German edition of Service’s book. North was barred because he had written a highly acclaimed book in defense of Leon Trotsky. The only ground for his exclusion was his political views.

The IYSSE subsequently complained about this behavior in an open letter to you, Prof. Olbertz, declaring that “basic democratic rights and academic freedoms at Humboldt University were in question.” We never received a reply.

When the IYSSE planned a meeting at Humboldt University in early October titled “Why do the German elites want war?” you authorized the room only under the condition that no members of the university be referred to as warmongers. After we rejected this form of censorship, you eventually approved the room.

As we later discovered, Prof. Baberowski had made representations to the university administration to prevent the holding of the meeting, which did take place and was warmly received, attracting an audience of 200 people. This showed that there is broad opposition to the right-wing positions of Prof. Baberowski among students.

The statement by the Department of History further advances these

undemocratic methods. It seeks to ban criticism at the university of the political views of a professor and mobilize teachers and students against a political party that opposes these positions. If this attitude prevailed at the university, Prof. Baberowski’s right-wing and militaristic views would in practice be unassailable.

This recalls the darkest days of the university, which, in the 1930s, played a leading role in the suppression of freedom of expression and the imposition of *Gleichschaltung* at German universities. In 1926, the National Socialist German Students League was founded at the former Friedrich-Wilhelms University, and the notorious Nazi book burning commenced here on May 10, 1933. Together with *Gleichschaltung*, the *Führerprinzip* (leader principle) was introduced at German universities. Those who refused to subordinate themselves to the “leader” of the university had to leave and faced persecution.

The statement published by the Department of History on the Humboldt University web site is a dangerous indication of the extent to which the integrity of the University has already been compromised. Prof. Baberowski and his colleagues have transformed the Chair of East European History into an ideological center for historical revisionism and anticommunism. Now they are seeking to impose their political agenda throughout the university, using undemocratic means.

We call on the University to immediately remove this statement from its web site. We repeat our demand for an investigation into how it came about. Prof. Burschel has signed it “on behalf of the Department.” The department, however, is not just him and his longstanding university colleague Baberowski, but includes all teachers and students. When and where was this statement discussed? Who was informed? Who approved it?

The students of the University have a right to know.

With best regards,

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Socialist Equality Party

Christoph Dreier

International Youth and Students for Social Equality



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wsws.org/contact