

IYSSE at Humboldt University begins seminars on the return of German militarism

Our reporters
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On Monday, the first in a series of IYSSE (International Youth and Students for Social Equality) seminars took place at Berlin's Humboldt University (HU) on the topic of "The return of German militarism and the falsification of history". The IYSSE is running candidates in the January 20-21 student union elections and has organized a series of seminars at the university as part of its campaign.

Although Monday was the first day back following the Christmas break, about fifty students and workers attended the lecture and followed it with great interest. The IYSSE had invited Peter Schwarz, the national editor in Germany of the *World Socialist Web Site*, to deliver the lecture, which was entitled, "The war guilt debate and the continuity of German foreign policy."

Opening the meeting, Sven Wurm, the president of the HU IYSSE, explained why the organization was standing four candidates in student union elections. In the past, he said, interest in these elections had been extremely low, with less than 10 percent of students voting. This was due to the fact that chiefly unserious groups had stood candidates.

"We are standing in the Student Union elections to fight against the return of German militarism and are conducting our campaign under the slogan, "Scholarship, instead of war propaganda". Wurm described how some professors were trying to rewrite history and relativize the war crimes of the Nazi dictatorship. He cited HU Professor Jörg Baberowski, who told *Der Spiegel* a year ago that "Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not cruel. He didn't want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table."

"We want to prevent Humboldt University from once again being transformed into an ideological centre for war and dictatorship", Wurm said.

Peter Schwarz followed up on this point, explaining

that only those grounded in an understanding of past would be able to oppose historical falsifications and war propaganda. Schwarz pointed to the book by David North, "The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished 20th Century", which will be published in a German translation in the spring. He quoted from the preface, where North writes, "History has become a battleground...The ever-mounting conflicts and crises of the twenty-first century are invariably entangled in disputes over twentieth-century history. As contemporary political struggles evoke historical issues, the treatment of these issues is more and more openly determined by political considerations. The past is falsified in the interest of present-day political reaction... Historical research is ever more shamelessly subordinated to the financial and political interests of the ruling class."

Schwarz then explained historical debates that sparked sharp conflicts in the second half of the last century. The first was the so-called "Fischer controversy". In his 1961 book "Griff nach der Weltmacht: die Kriegszielpolitik des Kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914-18" ("Germany's Aims in the First World War"), historian Fritz Fischer showed the continuity between the geopolitical aspirations of the German Reich in the First World War and Hitler's war aims in World War II.

The second debate was the "Historikerstreit" or "Historians' Dispute". This was triggered in 1986 by an article by Ernst Nolte, who argued that the Nazi crimes should be seen as an understandable response to the October Revolution, the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921 and the supposed barbarity of Soviet Bolshevism.

Schwarz quoted Nolte, who described the actions of the Nazis as a "reaction born out of fear of the

destructive processes of the Russian Revolution.” Nolte insisted that the “demonization of the Third Reich cannot be accepted”.

In both controversies, historians prevailed who argued that Germany either shared or bore the main responsibility for the two world wars. In the first debate Fritz Fischer influenced a younger generation of historians who then contributed considerably to the understanding of the First World War and its causes. In the second, it was the opponents of Ernst Nolte who rejected the relativization and inevitably, the justification, of Nazi crimes.

“This has now all been changed,” said Schwarz. The view of history is being brought in line with the new objectives of German foreign policy, he said.

Humboldt University Professor of Political Theory Herfried Münkler has taken on the task of attacking Fischer, Schwarz said, while Jörg Baberowski, who holds the HU chair of East European History, is concentrating on rehabilitating Nolte. It is no coincidence that Baberowski told *Der Spiegel* in February, “Nolte was wronged. Historically, he was right”.

Schwarz then focused on the Fischer controversy and refuted the arguments of Herfried Münkler point by point. The claim that Germany “slid into” the First World War or “sleepwalked into it”, the Australian historian Christopher Clark recently asserted, was refuted by the many facts and documents Fischer collected.

Schwarz cited, inter alia, a directive of Kaiser Wilhelm from 1905, which makes it clear that militarism and war preparations also had a domestic function, serving to deflect growing class tensions and suppressing the socialist labour movement. Kaiser Wilhelm feared the spread of the Russian Revolution to Germany and instructed his chancellor Bülow in 1905, “First shoot the socialists, behead them and render them harmless, if necessary through a bloodbath, and then make war abroad.”

Schwarz pointed to more critical evidence cited in Fischer’s book. In 1912, the military historian Friedrich von Bernhardi published a best-selling book entitled, “Germany and the Next War”. In Fischer’s opinion, the considerations and demands it contained, reproduced “with great precision, the intentions of official Germany”.

“In order to secure Germany’s breakthrough to become a world power, Bernhardi lists three aims: the elimination of France, the founding of a Central German Union of States under German leadership, and Germany’s expansion as a world power through the winning of new colonies.

“This was two years before the outbreak of war,” Schwarz said, adding that, “the alleged sleepwalkers clearly had Germany’s war aims firmly in mind.”

In conclusion, Schwarz said, “Münkler’s attacks on Fischer are meant to prevent the study and understanding of the historical models that underpin today’s foreign policy. They serve to poison the intellectual climate and to stifle opposition to militarism.”

It is precisely this development that the IYSSE opposes, he said.

The presentation was met with considerable interest, with members of the audience posing a number of questions. This led to a discussion about why the struggle against war requires the mobilization of the working class on the basis of an international socialist programme.

The seminar series continues next Monday with a lecture entitled, “The relativization of Nazi crimes at Humboldt University”. The presentation will address the question: Why are views that once provoked staunch opposition now accepted without criticism widely in the academic world?



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