

Well-attended meeting at Berlin's Humboldt University on attempts to downplay the crimes of Nazism

Our correspondents

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More than 60 students and workers attended a meeting Monday at Humboldt University in Berlin to discuss the attempts currently under way to downplay the crimes of National Socialism. The meeting took place as part of the Humboldt University student parliament election campaign being conducted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

Humboldt University IYSSE spokesperson and candidate Sven Wurm introduced the meeting with a discussion of the experiences of the student group over the past few months. After the IYSSE began to voice its opposition to the downplaying of the historic crimes of German imperialism, it was publicly denounced by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ).

At the same time, the IYSSE's campaign against historical falsification met with a powerful response from students and young workers. About 200 people attended an IYSSE meeting against war in October of last year. "These experiences show how important our campaign is and how important it is to build the IYSSE. We are the only youth organisation that opposes war from a socialist standpoint," Wurm said.

The main speaker was Christoph Vandreier, a WSWs writer and spokesperson for the IYSSE in Germany. Vandreier placed the downplaying of the crimes of the Nazis in its historical and political context and showed how it is bound up with the return of German militarism.

He explained that in the postwar period, leading Nazis were able to keep their posts in government, in business and in universities, where they sought to prevent any exposure of the true extent of the crimes of the Nazis. Only with the growth in strength of the workers' movement and the birth of the student movement in the 1960s did a broader discussion of National Socialism become possible.

The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, as well as countless publications and studies, made it impossible to maintain the old Nazi myth of a supposed war of self-defence against the Soviet Union, and the claim that the crimes of Germany were qualitatively no different from the crimes of the other nations involved in the conflict.

Vandreier explained Trotsky's analysis that fascism was brought to power by the ruling class after the defeats of the First World War in order to perpetuate the aims of German imperialism. Trotsky explained that, to achieve this, the powerful organisations

of the working class had to be destroyed. The roots of Hitler's anti-Semitism were to be found in this programme as well.

Right-wing academics went on the offensive once again in the 1980s. Emboldened by the "spiritual, moral turn" proclaimed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, they published a number of articles in 1985 calling for a revised understanding of the Third Reich and the "normalisation" of Germany's relationship with its past.

Ernst Nolte, in particular, sought to present the Holocaust as an understandable reaction to the "Russian revolution's campaign of destruction." According to Nolte, the Nazis carried out the "Asiatic deed" of mass murder because they viewed themselves and those around them as the real or potential victims of this kind of "Asiatic deed."

In his report, Vandreier described how Nolte's articles in the 1980s produced an outpouring of indignation among historians and academics. "Many scholarly articles revealed that Nolte's claims lack any historical validity," he said. "After this public debate, Nolte's views were discredited."

Now, efforts are being made to rehabilitate Nolte, who is being permitted to voice his opinions in major newspapers once again. Both journalists and professors have repeated his theses and sought to separate the Holocaust from its roots in German imperialism. Jörg Baberowski, chair of the Department of Eastern European History at Humboldt University, has played a prominent role in this campaign.

In an article published in *Der Spiegel* in February, Baberowski declared, "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right," and added, "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."

"These statements do not represent a momentary lapse," Vandreier said. "Baberowski has dedicated himself to rehabilitating Nolte since his student days in Göttingen. Throughout his works on Stalinism and the Russian revolution, he seeks to present German fascism as a justifiable reaction to Stalinist violence.

In accordance with his irrationalist theory of history, Baberowski presents the Russian revolution as nothing more than a brutal eruption of violence. For Baberowski, Stalinism is a direct consequence of the Russian Revolution.

"Baberowski's portrayal of Bolshevism and Soviet society

consists of barbaric hordes who were only waiting to overrun civilised Europe,” said Vandreier. “In this way, he is implicitly saying that the German Reich had to defend itself.”

In his book *Scorched Earth*, Baberowski suggests that the Soviet Union had sought a war against Germany. Baberowski wrote, “With regard to war, Stalin and his followers were in total agreement and nothing would have pleased the dictator more than to wage wars that he could win.”

Baberowski presents the war of destruction of the Nazis and the industrial extermination of the Jews merely as one stage in the escalation of the war on the eastern front that had nothing to do with Nazi ideology or German imperialism. In *Scorched Earth*, Baberowski writes: “Hitler’s soldiers...were engaged in a war whose dynamics they could no longer escape.... Hitler was ill advised to wage war on a regime in which mass violence had become second nature and whose soldiers knew how to manage such violence. The Wehrmacht could not hold permanent sway against a power such as this.”

Vandreier quoted another of Baberowski’s writings from 2007 in which he wrote, “Stalin and his generals imposed a war of a new type on the Wehrmacht—which no longer protected the civilian population.” Baberowski repeatedly engaged in comparisons in which he described Stalin’s dictatorship as more brutal than National Socialism. “According to Baberowski’s version of history, Hitler and his supporters were only emulating what Stalin and his followers had already done in the Soviet Union,” Vandreier concluded.

Vandreier said that the positions formulated by Baberowski today go even further than the revisionist theses presented by Nolte in the 1980s. He explained that while there has been sharp criticism of Baberowski in academic journals in which the revisionist character of his works is demonstrated, there is no public debate over them.

“The fact that there is no public protest against Baberowski’s theses has nothing to do with the quality of his arguments,” Vandreier said, “but rather with the political bankruptcy of his former critics. Over the past 30 years, a substantial shift to the right has taken place in the formerly left academic milieu.”

This process is not limited to the universities, Vandreier explained. “If there are once again thousands of extreme right-wingers marching through Dresden, this is only because a systematic campaign has taken place to legitimise these types of politics,” he said. “Numerous politicians, from Bodo Ramelow, the Left Party minister-president of the state of Thuringia, to Interior Minister Thomas De Maizière, have declared that the concerns of the demonstrators are justified or are offering to engage them in discussion.”

The growth of right-wing forces is to be explained by the growth of social polarisation and the return of German militarism. “The militarisation of Germany demands the mobilisation of the most backward elements of society. In the media, in academia and on the street,” said Vandreier. “No one brings this connection out so clearly as Jörg Baberowski himself.”

In October, Baberowski expressed the intellectual consequences of his rehabilitation of Hitler. In a deliberately casual tone, Baberowski suggested that in order to achieve victory over the

“terrorists” abroad, nothing less than the methods of Germany’s war of extermination in World War II are required. “If one is not willing to take hostages, burn villages, hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict and it is better to keep out altogether,” Baberowski declared.

Vandreier emphasised, however, that the IYSSE does not view the turn to the right by academic layers as grounds for pessimism. Indeed, the very aggressiveness of the pro-war campaign shows the magnitude of the opposition of the population. The IYSSE bases itself on this opposition.

“And if the *FAZ*, and the university heads and the department chairs attack us because of this, and if none of the professors are ready to criticise Baberowski, then this makes it clear that a socialist perspective is necessary to fight against war and its ideological preparation. This is why it is important to build the IYSSE,” Vandreier concluded.

A lively discussion followed the lecture and continued long after the official end of the meeting. Many participants were astonished by Professor Baberowski’s public statements, about which they had previously known nothing.

Arnd, a history student in his third semester at Humboldt University, said he was enthusiastic about the IYSSE’s principled opposition to war. He added that he would vote for the IYSSE in the upcoming student parliament election because it is the only “principled” group in the race. He also said he was inspired by the meeting to read Trotsky’s writings on Germany.

Kathrin and Silvan, medical students at Humboldt University, had found out about the meeting from IYSSE leaflets they had received from a campaign team at the Charité university hospital. Kathrin took several leaflets with her that day and distributed them to other medical students, three of whom came to the meeting.

Silvan said he was impressed by the IYSSE meeting. He had spent a year in Bolivia and had not followed political developments in Germany during that time. But the report “brought up questions that have to be asked today.”

Kathrin said she was disturbed by the open propaganda for military campaigns and the large turnout of right-wingers at Pegida demonstrations. She took part in a counter-demonstration against Pegida and “decided to pay more attention to politics and history. As one can see by my participation today, I am already acting on this decision.”



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