

For freedom of speech at Humboldt University

The Socialist Equality Party (Germany), The International Youth and Students for Social Equality
29 April 2015

The following is an Open letter from the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to Humboldt University in Berlin.

Dear Professor Olbertz,

Humboldt University has published a “Public statement on behalf of Jörg Baberowski” on its official web site [1], which accuses the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and its student and youth organization, the IYSSE, of “vicious defamation,” “slander,” and “character assassination” directed against Jörg Baberowski, chair of the department of Eastern European History. It is signed by yourself, as president of the HU, as well as 26 other professors.

We reject these accusations with indignation. Under the pretext of defending the reputation of a professor, a fundamental assault on the freedom of speech and opinion is taking place. The “statement” is an attempt to intimidate, suppress and criminalize criticism of controversial political views publicly put forward by a member of the university.

With this “statement,” Humboldt University is establishing a dangerous precedent, whose significance goes far beyond the immediate dispute. Should it go unchallenged it would pave the way for the political *Gleichschaltung* of the university: the suppression of political criticism and, along with it, all serious scholarly activity. It resumes the ignominious past of HU and its predecessor, the Friedrich Wilhelm University, which served as ideological bulwarks for war propaganda in the First and the Second World Wars.

The accusations you level against our party and our student organization are utterly baseless. They rest on insinuation, unsubstantiated allegations and outright lies. Nowhere do you address, factually, what the issues actually are. You do not refer to the content of our criticism of Professor Baberowski, although it is openly documented and accessible to everyone.

Professor Baberowski’s affirmation of Ernst Nolte

You present Professor Baberowski as a diligent scholar, who has been unjustly attacked. This is not the case. Jörg Baberowski is a public personality. He appears regularly in the media and takes an unequivocal stand on controversial political issues.

In February of last year, he openly declared his support for Ernst Nolte. Nolte is the foremost Hitler and Nazi apologist among German academics. This is not opinion, but a well-established fact. In 1986, Nolte triggered the “Historian’s Debate,” in which he downplayed the crimes of National Socialism, describing them as an understandable reaction to Bolshevism. Today he moves in neo-Nazi circles and is an unabashed defender of Adolf Hitler.

A film broadcast on German television channel BR-Alpha on January 13, 2013 shows Nolte in friendly conversation with Horst Mahler, well-known attorney of the neo-fascist NPD, following a speech to the far-right dueling club “Thuringia.” Mahler has been convicted several times for Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic statements. [2] At the end of last year, Nolte complained, in the magazine the *European*, of the “huge volume of hate and condemnation” that had made “the one-time ‘liberator’ [Hitler]

into a representative of ‘absolute evil.’” He praised Hitler “as the forgotten representative of tendencies of ‘self-assertion’ ... missing in the official politics of the German government.” [3]

Nolte’s extreme-right views have been known for a long time. For this very reason, CDU chair Angela Merkel refused in 2000 to present him the Konrad Adenauer Prize of the Deutschland Foundation. That did not prevent Baberowski, however, from publicly supporting Nolte fourteen years later. At the beginning of last year he declared in *Der Spiegel*: “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.” Baberowski also told the news magazine that he had already defended Nolte’s arguments as a student and, because of his defense, was shouted down in a seminar in 1986, at the high point of the Historians Debate. [4]

In the same *Spiegel* article, Baberowski trivialized Hitler with the provocative statement: “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.” We have not taken this quote, which positively compares Hitler with Stalin, out of context. It is in line with Nolte’s central argument that the crimes of National Socialism were merely a defensive response to the Soviet threat.

Neither does the objection that Baberowski was defending the Nolte of 1986, and not the Nolte of 2014, stand up to scrutiny. Nolte’s transformation into an open defender of Hitler had already been anticipated in 1986. Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Hans and Wolfgang J. Mommsen, and other leading historians understood this at the time and, in the course of the Historians Debate, denounced Nolte as an apologist for Nazi crimes. Habermas accused Nolte of considering “the extermination of the Jews only as the unfortunate result of a nevertheless understandable reaction to what Hitler must have felt was a threat of annihilation.”

In our publications and lectures, we have repeatedly called attention to Baberowski’s affirmation of Ernst Nolte. This was a central element of our criticism. But it apparently does not disturb the university. By accusing us of “slander” and “character assassination,” you are declaring yourself to be an ally of Ernst Nolte. This is not just a defense of Baberowski, it is a defense of Nolte— with far-reaching implications. With this statement, Humboldt University has allied itself with an unrepentant Nazi apologist. That will be understood all over the world, whether you care to acknowledge it or not.

We do not know if all the signatories of the “statement” are aware of this background, or whether they simply feel under pressure to sign a letter put out by an influential, well-connected professor at Humboldt University. But with their signatures, they assume political, intellectual, and moral responsibility for the positions of Ernst Nolte.

Professor Baberowski’s trivialization of war crimes

The accusation that Professor Baberowski trivializes crimes of the Second World War is not, as you write, a defamation. This accusation has been raised not only by us, but also by academic publications. It is substantiated by many passages in Baberowski’s writings. We cited one

example on October 23, 2014, at a meeting of the IYSSE on the theme “Why do the German elites once again want war?” which was met with great interest. More than 200 participants packed into an overflowing lecture hall at Humboldt University to hear it.

You mention this meeting, but carefully avoid quoting the passage to which you refer. Your “statement” declares that, at a seminar of the IYSSE on October 25, 2014 [sic!], a “Power Point presentation featured a photo of hanged partisans, accompanied by quotes from Jörg Baberowski, deliberately taken out of context.”

The quotation in question was as follows: “The Red Army left the advancing Wehrmacht with destroyed cities and villages, whose starving populations no one could provide for ... Under these conditions, the infantry regiments of the Wehrmacht in their search for food and shelter rapidly transformed into bands of marauders which robbed the peasants and townspeople, not because they dreamed of the extermination of Slavic sub-humans, but because they had no other alternative.” [5]

The Wehrmacht terrorized and destroyed the Soviet population, therefore, because the Red Army left them with no other choice, and not because the Hitler regime and its general staff had planned a war of annihilation from the beginning and issued the appropriate orders. The Nuremberg Trials and historical research have proven conclusively that the latter was the case.

Also, this quotation was not “deliberately taken out of context.” A large number of similar statements can be found in Baberowski’s work. He writes in the same book from 2007 that, “Stalin and his generals imposed on the Wehrmacht a new kind of war which no longer spared the civilian population.”

Five years later, in *Verbrannte Erde* [*Scorched Earth: Stalin’s Reign of Terror*], Baberowski wrote: “In any war, such conditions [as those which prevailed on the Eastern front] are reason enough for the enemy to resist and commit atrocities. Such behavior cannot be explained on the basis of ideological convictions. Hitler’s soldiers did not wage an ideological war, rather they fought a war whose dynamic they could no longer escape.” [6]

We are not alone in criticizing *Scorched Earth* for sanitizing the Nazis’ war of annihilation. The book also provoked opposition among specialists in the field. Following its release, the journal *Osteuropa* published three separate commentaries, which raised objections to the book. [7]

Benno Ennker accused it of presenting “an implicit exoneration of the Wehrmacht” and wrote of Baberowski’s assertion that the National Socialists had no longer been able to bring their war of extermination under control: “Such an exculpation—unsupported by evidence—of the ideologically planned extermination policy in the East by ‘situation and circumstances’ had up to now only been associated with the scandalous Polish historian Bogdan Musial.”

Jürgen Zarusky commented: “Baberowski has yet to present any evidence for his reckless assertion that the Soviet leadership welcomed the war. He largely ignores German plans to turn the war into a war of annihilation.”

Christoph Dieckmann accused Baberowski of having “not presented a balanced, differentiated study, but rather a 500 page polemic in which accusations and polarized positions are formulated ...” He misjudges “the research which has demonstrated the broad consensus within the German leadership and the heads of the Wehrmacht prior to the attack on the Soviet Union, to subject millions of Soviet citizens to death by starvation within a few months.” Given this research, Baberowski’s version of events takes on the character of “apologetics.”

Are you also accusing the *Osteuropa* journal, with which we have no connection, of slandering and defaming Baberowski?

Baberowski’s justification of the methods associated with wars of annihilation is not limited to the past. At an October 1, 2014 panel discussion on the theme “Germany as Intervention Force?” held at the Schlüterhof of the German Historical Museum, he said of the fight against

jihadi groups: “And 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.” [8]

Neither you nor Baberowski have ever addressed these public justifications of methods that violate every international legal standard and convention. Instead, you defame us because we make the public aware of them.

A manufactured accusation

Because you do not want to confront the content of our criticisms, you manufacture false accusations in order to discredit us. You claim that, at a conference of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, which took place in Berlin from January 25-27, 2015, Baberowski was “denounced as a Holocaust denier” by “a participant who hid his face.”

We question whether this incident ever took place. How could anyone with his face covered sit in a public conference? Be that as it may, the PSG and the IYSSE have absolutely nothing to do with the incident. To link us to it is a baseless insinuation.

No representative of our organization took part in the conference. Nor have we ever called Baberowski a “Holocaust denier.” We voice our criticisms openly, not “with hidden faces,” and we reject the disruption of meetings, as a matter of principle, in the manner described.

The biography of Trotsky by Robert Service

You write that we have vilified Baberowski “not least because of his scholarly examination of a controversial biography of Trotsky.” This stands reality on its head. Rather than conducting a “scholarly examination” of Robert Service’s Trotsky biography, which is what is being referred to here, Baberowski resorted to scandalous methods to suppress any critical examination.

When Baberowski invited Robert Service to speak on this 2009 Trotsky biography at a public colloquium, at his Institute on February 12, 2014, the biography had already been thoroughly discredited.

In his book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, the leading Marxist, David North, had demonstrated that Service’s biography was riddled with dozens of factual errors, half-truths, distortions, falsifications and outright slanders.

Professor Bertrand Patenaude (Stanford University) had fully confirmed North’s assessment in the prestigious journal *The American Historical Review* and concurred with his judgment, that Service’s book was a “piece of hackwork.” Patenaude drew the conclusion: “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.” Patenaude continued: “At times the errors are jaw-dropping.” [9]

Fourteen well-known historians, political scientists and journalists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland had addressed a letter to Suhrkamp Verlag, advising against the publication of a German edition of the biography because it “violated basic standards of historical scholarship.” The signatories of the letter included experts of international repute such as Prof. Hermann Weber (Mannheim), the head of the Institute of Contemporary History at the University of Vienna Prof. Oliver Rathkolb, the head of the German Resistance Memorial Center, Professor Peter Steinbach (Berlin), Prof. Heiko Haumann (Basel) and Prof. Mario Kessler (Potsdam). [10]

Any genuine scholarly examination of Service’s biography would have been obliged to take this critique into account. In order to prevent this, Baberowski resorted to the most undemocratic measures. To ensure that Service confronted no critical questions, he cancelled the colloquium at short notice and moved it from the advertised meeting place to a secret location in the main building of the HU. At this new location, Baberowski barred access, with the assistance of security guards, to any visitors he suspected might pose critical questions.

Among those locked-out were—together with a number of HU history students—David North, author of the most profound critique of the Service biography, and Professor Mario Kessler, a signatory of the letter to Suhrkamp Verlag.

The IYSSE had actively sought to ensure a genuine scholarly examination of Service's book. We informed Baberowski, in advance, that we planned to participate in the colloquium; we acquainted students at HU with the background to the dispute; and we submitted written questions. When the rumor was circulated that the IYSSE planned to disrupt the event, we wrote to Baberowski to make clear that we had no such intention.

All these letters remained unanswered, including a letter to you, Prof. Olbertz, in which we complained that Baberowski's approach violated "basic principles of democracy and freedom of expression" at Humboldt University. This pattern was repeated throughout the entire dispute: Baberowski and the university management refused any substantive discussion, did not reply to our letters and then claimed, without any substantiation, that we were conducting a smear campaign.

Already, by the autumn of last year, the Department of History at Humboldt had posted a "Statement on the attacks on Dr. Jörg Baberowski," which expressly advocated political censorship. The statement declared that criticism of Baberowski's public statements would not be tolerated in "lecture halls of Humboldt University," and called upon "teachers and students of Humboldt University to oppose the campaign against Professor Baberowski." We wrote to you at the time, Prof. Olbertz, to raise our protest. Once again we received no reply. [11]

The latest "statement," signed by yourself, represents the culmination of these attempts to suppress critical opinion at the HU. For the first time, the university management has now positioned itself behind the attempt to stifle the right to criticism and freedom of expression.

We hope, in the interests of the university, that you, together with all the other signatories of the "statement," will reconsider your position and withdraw your signature.

Be assured, we will not let the matter rest. We intend to inform the students and faculty of the university, and the German and international public, about these developments and encourage protest against them.

With best regards,

Ulrich Rippert Socialist Equality Party

Christoph Dreier, International Youth and Students for Social Equality

Notes:

[1] <https://www.exzellenz.hu-berlin.de/de/exzellenzinitiative/gremien-1/forum-geisteswissenschaften/oeffentliche-stellungnahme-fuer-joerg-baberowski>

[2] *Ernst Nolte – Ein deutscher Streitfall*, by Andreas Christoph Schmidt, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0l2ZWRqDtZc>. The "Thuringia" speech and the scene with Horst Mahler begin at the two-minute mark.

[3] *Das Tabu brechen*, by Ernst Nolte, *The European* 4/2014

[4] *Der Wandel der Vergangenheit*, *Der Spiegel* 7/2014. English: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/questions-of-culpability-in-wwi-still-divide-german-historians-a-953173-2.html>

[5] *Kriege in staatsfernen Räumen: Russland und die Sowjetunion 1905–1950*, by Jörg Baberowski 2007

[6] *Scorched Earth: Stalin's Reign of Terror*, by Jörg Baberowski, New Haven: Yale University Press 2015

[7] *Osteuropa*, 62/4, April 2012

[8] As audio file:

https://www.dhm.de/fileadmin/medien/relaunch/AUDIO/Schlueterhofgespraeche_01.10.2014_1.mp3

[9] *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3, S. 900-902, Oxford University Press

[10] <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2011/11/lett-n23.html>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](http://www.wsws.org/contact)