

Defend student free speech at Humboldt University! Stop state-sponsored censorship!

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality
19 May 2015

The PSG and the IYSSE unequivocally support the Humboldt University students who publish the blog “Münkler-Watch” and have become the targets of a massive intimidation campaign. We defend their right to criticize the lectures of political scientist Herfried Münkler.

What is at stake is not merely a conflict with a professor at Humboldt University in Berlin. What is at stake is the defense of freedom of expression. The state-supervised conformism—which in the Nazi period went under the name of *Gleichschaltung*—must be prevented at Humboldt and other universities. They must not be transformed from academic and research institutions into tools of state war propaganda.

The attacks on “Münkler-Watch” are a continuation and escalation of the attacks on the IYSSE, which has been denounced by the university administration and the media for criticizing the historian on Eastern Europe, Jörg Baberowski. Münkler made this connection himself, telling representatives of the press that he suspected that a group of young Trotskyists who had attacked Baberowski last year were behind the blog.

Last Tuesday Münkler invited the press to one of his lectures, where he insulted the anonymous authors of “Münkler-Watch” as “miserable cowards” and compared them to “Blockwarts” (Nazi Block Wardens). He said it was an “unbearable situation” to have to hold a lecture “under the constant threat of denunciation.” Since then, a flood of articles about “Münkler-Watch” have appeared in the German media.

Spiegel Online, *Der Spiegel*, the *Tagesspiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *taz*, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Deutschlandradio*, *Junge Welt* and *Neues Deutschland* have written about “Münkler-Watch.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published two inflammatory articles. With few exceptions, the articles are bitter tirades against the bloggers, based on half-truths, distortions and open lies.

On Deutschlandradio, Winfried Sträter called the bloggers “moral guardians” who employed “a form of vigilantism of convictions.” Jens Bisky wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that the blogger’s activities were a mix of “aggressiveness and cowardice similar to Pegida.”

The most inflammatory attack on the critical students came from the right-wing *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). On Wednesday, Regina Mönch, who began her journalistic career as a Stalinist hack in the GDR, raged: “Students bully a professor... they denounce and censor his lectures with which they are apparently intellectually overmatched.” She accused the university of responding in an “utterly lame” manner to these activities. The administration’s statement sounded like “an invitation to permanent discord or, as some professors have formulated it, to complete ‘freedom of defamation.’”

On Sunday, Friederike Haupt went even further in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (FAS). Her article could serve as a model of gutter journalism. It combines the most disparate incidents into an amalgam and in the process omits and distorts basic facts. Her article paints an absurd portrait of intimidated professors, living in constant fear of attack, who have been abandoned by a cowardly university administration. It even goes so far as to compare well-founded,

substantive criticisms made of right-wing professors with “bomb threats and appeals for murder.”

In the effort to mobilize the most backward prejudices, Haupt describes Berlin, the location of Humboldt University, as a wicked den of iniquity. Some Berliners “spend 30 hours in the club and then vomit in the subway,” she writes.

The FAS article, like many others mentioned above, aims at creating a climate of intimidation in which critique of the official school of thought is criminalized. The democratic gains won since the student revolt of 1968 are to be reversed and the universities once again turned into authoritarian institutions, in which infallible “Gods in black robes” train students to be the uncritical stooges of the ruling elite. There is a word for that: *Gleichschaltung*.

An extension of the attacks on the IYSSE

The attacks on “Münkler-Watch” are a continuation and intensification of the attacks on the IYSSE. In recent months the university has twice denounced the youth and student organization of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) on its official website.

In November 2014 the Department of History called on “teachers and students of Humboldt University” to “oppose” the IYSSE’s criticism of public remarks made by historian Jörg Baberowski and to no longer tolerate such criticisms “in the lecture halls of Humboldt University.”

The university published a similar statement in April 2015, which bore the signature of its president, Jan-Hendrik Olbertz. It accused the PSG and IYSSE of “vicious defamation,” “slander,” and “character assassination” directed against Jörg Baberowski, without in any way substantiating these claims.

Such an attack by the administration on a student organization that is established at the university and represented in the student parliament flies in the face of basic democratic principles.

On its flyers and in its public meetings, the IYSSE had criticized Baberowski’s efforts to rehabilitate Ernst Nolte, the most notorious apologist for National Socialism among German historians. The IYSSE denounced Baberowski’s attempts to diminish the crimes committed during the Second World War and justify new war crimes. They provided meticulous proof of these accusations.

In a February 2014 article in *Der Spiegel*, Baberowski had explicitly avowed his support for Ernst Nolte. He told the news magazine: “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right,” and: “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.”

Numerous passages can be found in Baberowski’s work that, like Nolte, portray German war crimes on the Eastern front as a reaction to Stalinist

crimes and not as a result of a planned war of annihilation. He wrote in 2007: “Stalin and his generals imposed a war of a new type on the *Wehrmacht*—which no longer protected the civilian population.”

And in a panel discussion held at the German Historical Museum in October 2014, Baberowski justified the use of methods that violate international law in a fight against jihadist groups. He said verbatim: “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.”

The IYSSE placed Baberowski’s relativization of war crimes in the context of the announcement by leading representatives of the German government that it was time to end the decades of military restraint in Germany. It wrote that “the revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that downplays the crimes of the Nazi era.”

The statement warned of the attempt to transform “Humboldt University into a center for right-wing and militaristic propaganda” and “into a German version of the Hoover Institution on the Berlin Spree river.” The Hoover Institution at Stanford University is an academic center of the political right in the United States.

On April 28 of this year, the IYSSE warned in an open letter to Humboldt University: “Under the pretext of defending the reputation of a professor, a fundamental assault on the freedom of speech and opinion is taking place.” Humboldt University was 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.”

The attack on “Münkler-Watch”

The attack on “Münkler-Watch” has vindicated this warning. The blog, as far as we know, was organized by students on their own initiative. If our criticism of Baberowski and Herfried Münkler encouraged them to do so, then we welcome this development. In any event, the blog shows that the opposition to militarism and historical falsification among students is growing, and that our persistent political work is finding a response.

That is why Münkler and the stirred up pack of journalists attack the bloggers so vehemently. They fear that the deep chasm between the political elite and the mass of the population will lead to a radicalization of students and workers, and that the opposition to war and militarism can no longer be isolated.

In our public meetings and articles, the IYSSE and the *World Socialist Web Site* have long exposed the imperialist and militarist positions represented by Münkler—his membership on the advisory board of the Security Academy, his support for authoritarian forms of rule, his downplaying of German responsibility in the First World War, his call for Germany to become the leading power and disciplinarian of Europe, his support for combat drones as supposedly humane weapons, and much more.

Similar points of criticism can be found in “Münkler-Watch.” A spokesperson for the group using the pseudonym Caro Meyer told the newspaper *Junge Welt*: “Hardly a day goes by without Mr. Münkler on the television legitimizing German dominance in the EU or arguing for its reinforcement. Or one reads in the newspaper that he would greet a foreign policy oriented toward the economic interests of the German elite, which obviously would have to be ‘flanked by the military.’ Or one listens to his ideas on the radio, adorned with chauvinist or racist stereotypes.”

Münkler and the media make particular use of the anonymity of the bloggers in order to discredit them. They claim that anonymous criticism is “cowardly” and illegitimate. This claim is so obviously false and undemocratic that it has met with opposition from journalists and in legal circles.

The bloggers themselves explain that their anonymity is necessary because their degrees, future jobs and incomes would be threatened if they revealed their identities. They write that potential employers could research their names on the internet, and professors would have “1001 opportunities to unofficially apply pressure to dissidents.” They add, “And owing to the obvious asymmetry of power, we choose the anonymity of this platform.”

This position is protected by rulings of the Federal Supreme Court. The court ruled on June 23, 2009, that “the obligation to acknowledge the name behind a specific opinion” was not consistent with the constitution. The ruling states that it would “establish the risk that an individual would decide not to voice his opinion out of fear of reprisals or other negative effects. This threat of self-censorship would run contrary to the fundamental right to freedom of expression.”

Even an editor of the FAZ opposed his editorial colleague Mönch on his Facebook page. Patrick Bahners, who headed the paper’s culture section from 2001 to 2011, defended the anonymity of the bloggers, writing: “The most important reason for anonymity is obvious: It encourages honesty and the frankness of criticism. Münkler-Watch is a case of judgement by non-equivalents. Here there are special reasons to seek the protection of anonymity, which according to classic liberal views serves the needs of the least powerful. The professor who is observed will later possibly examine the work of the observer himself.”

Bahners also disputes the accusation of “denunciation” made by the FAZ: “The open circulation of public statements cannot meet the definition of denunciation, quite apart from the fact that denunciation is a report to the authority.”

Attorney Thomas Stadler answers the accusations of the FAZ that “Münkler-Watch” constitutes a form of “censorship” on the platform “Internet-Law”: “Censorship is the state suppression of information. It is the exact opposite of a public criticism made by citizens or students... Whoever considers critical statements of opinion as censorship has already completely abandoned the realm of objective discourse.”

These few commentaries alone show the utterly reactionary and undemocratic nature of the attacks on “Münkler-Watch.” They are an obvious attempt to suppress freedom of expression and to turn Humboldt University into a tool of state war propaganda.

The predecessor of Humboldt University, the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, has a heinous history in this respect. Not only was it a hotbed for Nazi students during the Weimar Republic, it was also the site in 1933 of the first book burning as well as the institution at which the “General Plan East” was formulated—the blueprint for the Nazi war of annihilation in the East.

The campaign to suppress criticism and freedom of expression cannot be explained merely by the personalities of Münkler, Baberowski and other professors. The deeper cause is the turn to militarism with which the ruling class is reacting to the crisis of global capitalism. This extends into every pore of society and is incompatible with democracy.

For this reason the attack on the democratic rights of students is of concern to all. We call upon all students, academic staff and faculty at the Humboldt University and at universities all over Germany and around the world to oppose these attacks.

In particular, the working class must take up the defence of the democratic rights of the students. The transformation of universities into centers of war propaganda is of great importance for workers. It is part of the militarization of society as a whole that is bound up with attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact