

Sebastian Kempkens in *Uni Spiegel*: Gutter journalism in the service of German imperialism

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Germany)
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Students at Berlin's Humboldt University who have criticised the militarist positions of the university's professors are being subjected to a vicious campaign in the media. The latest recruit to this campaign is Sebastian Kempkens, the editor of *Uni Spiegel*, the university magazine of *Der Spiegel*.

In his article, "The Stalkers," Kempkens abandons the most minimal standards of journalism. The 27-year-old author deploys distortions, lies and insults to defame students.

The background to Kempken's article is the growing criticism of professors—including Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski—who are using their academic posts to advance a definite political agenda. Hardly a day goes by in which one of them does not appear on the radio, television or in the press to advocate a more aggressive German foreign policy.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Humboldt University has detailed how Baberowski has downplayed the crimes of the Nazis, while Münkler campaigns to make Germany Europe's "disciplinarian." On the Münkler Watch blog, the professor's militarist views have been sharply criticised by other students at Humboldt.

Kempkens attacks this entirely legitimate and necessary critique in a thoroughly dishonest manner. His article, which was also published in *Spiegel Online*, begins with a vulgar tirade of insults. Without comment, he allows Baberowski to describe his critics as "idiots" and "crazies." Kempkens claims that the critique of the professors is "often intellectually feeble," without giving a shred of evidence to back up these statements. He describes the IYSSE as a "conspiratorial bunch" and a "sect." Kempkens reports Baberowski's claim that among students they have the support of "perhaps 0.1 percent."

Kempkens makes all of these statements despite knowing better. He was informed that in June the student parliament firmly backed the IYSSE and Münkler Watch by an overwhelming majority, even explicitly calling upon students to "combat tendencies which downplay Germany's inhumane history." One month later, the student parliament at the Free University of Berlin unanimously adopted the resolution passed at Humboldt.

Prior to the vote at Humboldt, 3 student representative councils, including the representative council for history, issued a statement condemning the media propaganda campaign against the IYSSE and Münkler Watch. The IYSSE won a seat in the student

parliament in January and organised a series of meetings at Humboldt University last year with hundreds of participants.

The growing support for the IYSSE is a result of its principled struggle against the reemergence of German militarism and the ideological campaign in the universities.

Kempkens never addresses the issues involved in the dispute at Humboldt University. All of the direct and indirect quotations which he attributes to the spokesman of the IYSSE (Germany), Christoph Vandreier, are made up. They are the pure fiction aimed at supplementing his fairy tale.

Kempkens interviewed Vandreier for an hour and was therefore well informed about the IYSSE's stance. The WSWS has an audio recording of the entire interview. None of the alleged citations are to be found on it. Baberowski's work was never described as "research," and neither did Vandreier at any point describe the professor as "a kind of fascist," as Kempkens claims.

Even the most elementary information provided to Kempkens in verbal and written form is falsified. Thus, Vandreier is transformed from the spokesman for the international youth organisation the IYSSE, in Germany, into a "spokesman of the Berlin student group," so that Kempkens can subsequently launch a character assassination.

In fact, in his discussion with Kempkens, Vandreier provided extensive detail on the way that Baberowski has worked to rehabilitate the reactionary theses of the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte and downplay the crimes of National Socialism. He supplied Kempkens with texts to demonstrate how these criticisms were shared by renowned historians in academic journals. Vandreier also made clear that what was involved was not a personal conflict with Baberowski, but the struggle against the falsification of history and the growing danger of war.

For his part Kempkens withheld all of this information from his readers. Instead, he resorts to baseless insults and accuses the IYSSE of tearing citations out of context. To supposedly support this claim, he used a remark by Baberowski, who accused the IYSSE of lying—in particular, with regard to Baberowski's statement regarding the readiness to "burn down villages."

In contrast to Kempkens, the IYSSE has always used citations correctly and in context. Baberowski made the statement about burning down villages word for word at a panel discussion last October at the German Historical Museum (DHM) in Berlin. The

discussion was recorded by the organisers and published online.

Baberowski spoke out in favour of German military intervention in the Middle East. In this context, he declared: “And if one is not prepared to take hostages, burn down villages and hang people to spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one isn’t prepared for that, then one will not win such a conflict, then one should stay out of it.”

This barbaric opinion—which violates international law—was cited and criticised by the IYSSE. Kempkens received the link to the audio from the IYSSE and could therefore have easily checked the facts.

At times, Kempkens’ attempts to discredit the IYSSE and Münkler Watch assume an absurd character. The IYSSE would “regularly stalk Baberowski with recording equipment and a camera,” he asserts, and “frequently shoots photos.”

In fact, the IYSSE has to date published two photos of Baberowski. This is also easy to verify. Both were taken at public events where Baberowski appeared and in one case moderated. The journalistic documentation of a public discussion is described by Kempkens in all seriousness as “stalking.” Obviously this graduate of the German journalist school has utterly misunderstood the essence of his profession.

Kempkens is pursuing a clear political agenda in hurling insults and filth at students critical of Baberowski and Münkler. He is attacking press freedom and the freedom to exchange opinions at universities. Students who criticise their professors on blogs are creating, in his opinion, an “online pillory.” Those who critically document public events are harassing the speakers. And whoever criticises the downplaying of National Socialism is “making a mountain out of a molehill.” The IYSSE’s criticisms of Baberowski do not justify authoring articles and holding public meetings, he bluntly writes.

According to Kempkens’ anti-democratic view, students are obviously only allowed to speak in awe and with cap in hand about their professors.

Kempkens is of course free to adopt the reactionary positions of Baberowski and Münkler, to describe the crimes of National Socialism as a “molehill,” and to argue in favour of the necessity of new wars. But as a journalist he must at least stick to minimal standards in his reporting. His screed is not only in violation of the press code, which commits journalists to truthfulness and due diligence, but all human decency.

The boundless vulgarity of Kempkens’ attacks is a reflection of the deep fear among media pundits over the mounting opposition to war and social cuts. They are worried that any genuine citation and every objective account could puncture their propaganda bubble. *Der Spiegel* in particular has become an appendage of the German government over recent years, propounding anti-Russian agitation as well as the chauvinist campaign against the Greek population. A glance at its recent front page, featuring a racist caricature of a Greek, exemplifies this.

The era in which former *Spiegel* editor Rudolf Augstein went to prison in the name of press freedom and ultimately prevailed against then-Defence Minister Franz-Josef Strauß have long since passed. The extremely sharp international conflicts, the return of German militarism and the brutal social attacks throughout Europe

have deeply polarised society. While the elites in politics, business and the media are closing ranks to enforce these policies, opposition in the population is growing. According to a poll by *Die Zeit*, 60 percent of the population in Germany has little or no trust in the media’s coverage.

In his interview with Kempkens, Vandreier dealt with this issue in detail, but it was not cited. “What is taking place here at the university is an expression of a development throughout society,” he said. “We are experiencing the return of German militarism. At the same time, we see huge opposition within the population. The majority is against foreign interventions, against rearmament, against war and so on. That is why the imposition of the war policy and militarism is connected with the undermining of democratic rights, and this is having an impact here at the university.”

It also finds expression in Kempkens’ approach. The brazenness with which he places himself in the service of German great power politics, throwing all journalistic ethics overboard, sheds light on the petty-bourgeois layer to which he belongs. In the interest of his career, he is ready to resort to the most outrageous lies and crude attacks. At the same time, he takes every opportunity to flatter professors or authority figures.

Kempkens studied history and political science at Humboldt University under Herfried Münkler among others. It must have been in Münkler’s lectures that he appropriated the demeanour of Diederich Heßling in Heinrich Mann’s famous “Man of Straw”: “On the headmaster’s birthday, flowers were placed on the desk and the blackboard. Diederich actually decorated the cane.”

The character of Heßling epitomises the authoritarian personality of the German petty-bourgeois, who proved indispensable for Wilhelmenian militarism. Thinking only of his own advancement, he internalises the power of the rulers, bows to his superiors and stamps even more brutally on those below. The fanatic adulation of the authorities is combined with fierce aggressiveness. The novel ends with a fiery war speech by Heßling, who had in fact avoided military service.

One must possess similar characteristics to be able to distort legitimate and necessary criticisms in such a dishonest manner and smear them with filth as Kempkens does in his tract. This kind of unscrupulous and unprincipled hack work is once again required in order to impose Germany’s aggressive foreign policy.



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