

Foreword to *Scholarship or War Propaganda? The Return of German Militarism and the Dispute at Berlin's Humboldt University*

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The subject of this book goes well beyond the conflict at Berlin's Humboldt University (HU). It is concerned with the relationship between scholarship and politics in periods of militarism, mounting international conflict and growing social tensions. It focuses on the question: Will the universities remain centres of scholarship and free criticism? Or will they once again become state-directed cadre-training centres for right-wing and militarist ideologies, as previously in German history?

History, and German history in particular, provides numerous examples of the prostitution of scholarship for reactionary political ends. The speech by Martin Heidegger on 27 May 1933 when he assumed the position of rector of Freiburg University is notorious. Under the cynical title, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," the famous philosopher argued for the subordination of the university to the *Führer* principle. Six months later, Heidegger, along with several hundred other intellectuals, submitted a written "Vow of Allegiance of the Professors of the German Universities and High Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State."

At Friedrich-Wilhelm University, as Humboldt University was then called, constitutional law Professor Carl Schmitt made a name for himself as the "crown jurist of the Third Reich." The university's institute of agricultural science and policy was heavily involved in the drafting of "Generalplan Ost," the blueprint for the war of extermination in the East.

"Gleichschaltung" [state enforced political conformism] proceeded not only in Freiburg and Berlin, but at all universities, with virtually no opposition. The publicist Sebastian Haffner, at the time a trainee at the Berlin appeals court, provided a clear picture in an autobiographical book of how the adaptation, particularly of the educated layers, took place. "The betrayal was continuous, comprehensive and without exception, from left to right," he wrote. (1)

Leon Trotsky described the political conformism at the universities in his masterful *Portrait of National Socialism*:

The immense poverty of National Socialist philosophy did not, of course, hinder the academic sciences from entering Hitler's wake with all sails unfurled, once his victory was sufficiently plain. For the majority of the professorial rabble, the years of the Weimar regime were periods of riot and alarm. Historians, economists, jurists and philosophers were lost in guesswork as to which of the contending criteria of truth was right—that is, which of the camps would turn out in the end the master of the situation. The fascist dictatorship eliminates the doubts of the Fausts and the vacillations of the Hamlets of the university rostrums. Coming out of the twilight of parliamentary relativity, knowledge once again enters into the kingdom of absolutes. Einstein has been obliged to

pitch his tent outside the boundaries of Germany. (2)

It seemed for a long time that these questions had been consigned to history. Did not the post-war German constitution guarantee freedom of speech and academic freedom? Had not the student revolt of 1968 finally swept away "the cobwebs of a thousand years from under the gowns," as one of its famous slogans claimed?

But since the German government announced the end of the period of military restraint and proclaimed the necessity for Germany once again to play a role in Europe and the world that corresponds to its size and influence, these questions have returned.

Militarism and freedom are not compatible—neither in politics nor in the sciences, and certainly not in the humanities. This is demonstrated by the experiences of the Wilhelmine Empire and the Weimar Republic. Militarism finds hardly any support within society at large, but all the more so among the elites in business, politics and the media, along with a small, privileged layer of the middle class.

The aversion among the German people to military interventions has deep roots. There is hardly a single family that has been untouched by the traumatic experiences of World War II. In school, several generations have learned about the horrific crimes perpetrated by the Nazi SS and Wehrmacht in the Second World War.

The public relations campaigns of the defence ministry and the propaganda of the media are not sufficient to overcome this deep-rooted opposition. A new narrative of the 20th century is required, a falsification of history that conceals and justifies the crimes of German imperialism. In these undertakings, Humboldt University and, above all, political scientist Herfried Münkler and historian Jörg Baberowski, play a leading role.

Münkler, who constantly expresses his views in interviews, articles, lectures, debates and books, is among the most avid proponents of a more aggressive German foreign policy. He openly advocates that Germany assume the role of Europe's hegemon, aspiring to become its "disciplinarian" rather than its "paymaster." (3) On this issue, he advises the German Army, the German government and political parties. At the same time, he is active as a historian.

Although not a specialist, Münkler has authored a 900-page tome on the First World War and denounced the historian Fritz Fischer (1908-1999), whose standard work, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1961), proved that Germany bore prime responsibility for the outbreak of World War I.

Baberowski has taken on the more difficult task of downplaying the Nazis' war crimes. He bases himself on Ernst Nolte, who provoked the "Historians' Dispute" (Historikerstreit) in 1986 and is the best-known Nazi apologist among German historians. Baberowski, in his work on

Stalinism, repeats one of Nolte's central theses: the claim that Hitler's crimes were provoked by Bolshevism and were aimed at self-defence.

In February 2014, *Der Spiegel* published an article on what it called the "contentious" question of German war guilt. Noting that 2014 marked the "100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I and the 75th of the start of World War II," the news magazine presented Münkler, Baberowski and Nolte as key witnesses for a change in historiography.

According to the article, Münkler describes Fischer's research as "outrageous, in principle," while Baberowski states that Nolte was correct and Hitler was not vicious. Quoted in the article, Nolte proclaims that the Poles and the British were partly to blame for Germany's attack on Poland, and the Jews had their "own share of the 'gulag'" because some Bolsheviks were Jews. (4)

Such historical falsifications were previously voiced only by ultra-right and fascist circles. Their promotion today is closely linked with the attempts of the German government to revive German militarism.

The article in *Der Spiegel* appeared ten days after the Munich Security Conference, where German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen announced that Germany was "too large and too important" to stay out of crisis regions and areas of conflict in the world. It was also published ten days before the coup in Kiev that brought to power a right-wing, anti-Russian regime backed by Berlin and Washington.

The Fourth International understood the connection between historical lies about the 20th Century and the efforts to make Germany once again a great military power, capable of pursuing its own global and geopolitical interests. "It can be said that the exposure and refutation of lies was the principal form of the Trotskyist movement's decades-long battle against the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution," states one of the contributions in this book. "The lie, as Trotsky once wrote, is the ideological cement that forms the foundation of bourgeois society and fills the gaps between the publicly espoused ideals of freedom and equality and the social reality of repression and inequality. The sharper the contradictions, the greater the lies." (5)

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) and its youth and student organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), organized a counter-offensive. This was not a personal campaign against Münkler and Baberowski, as they, the university administration and the media alleged.

The PSG and IYSSE placed their trust in the power of historical truth. In contrast to the representatives of post-modernism, for whom history is composed merely of subjective interpretations, narratives and representations, they were convinced that an objective examination of the history of the 20th century, the exposure of historical lies and a careful analysis of German militarism would find a resonance among students. A socialist anti-war movement—the only way to prevent the outbreak of a Third World War—cannot be developed based on superficial demagoguery and lies, but only on the basis of historical truth.

The events at Humboldt University have confirmed this Marxist view. The IYSSE organized an intensive campaign. It held public meetings that evoked great interest. It informed students with literature tables and leaflets and successfully ran candidates in the student parliament election.

The more support the campaign found, the sharper the reaction from Münkler, Baberowski and the university administration. They responded with censorship, intimidation, defamation and the mobilization of the bourgeois press. In early 2015, when social science students at Humboldt began to document and critically comment on Münkler's lectures on the *Münkler-Watch* blog, the response was a storm of denunciations in the media.

This failed to have an impact. On 11 June 2015, at the initiative of the IYSSE, the student parliament adopted a resolution by a large majority opposing the actions of the university administration, distancing itself

from the content of Münkler's and Baberowski's teachings and urging students to "express themselves politically, question authority, and, above all, with reference to the teaching content at a university, challenge tendencies that downplay inhumane German history." (6)

However, the dispute is not over and it does not concern only Humboldt University. The questions raised there and documented in this volume are of burning relevance to youth, students and broad layers of the population in Germany and around the world. The ruling elite is responding everywhere to the deepening crisis of the global financial system, the disintegration of the European Union and the growth of conflicts around the world with militarism and intensified social attacks.

This volume documents the controversy at Humboldt University since its outbreak in early 2014. We have selected and ordered the contributions not chronologically, but thematically. This minimizes unnecessary repetition, which is unavoidable in a collection of articles, letters, lectures and statements in response to unfolding events, while making it easier for the reader to concentrate on the substance of the issues involved.

The first two contributions deal with the political and historical background to the conflict at Humboldt University. The lecture "Why Do the German Elites Want War?" gives a good overview of the issues involved in this book. It was delivered by Peter Schwarz on 23 October 2014 at Humboldt University at the invitation of the IYSSE.

The lecture was preceded by a major conflict with the university administration. After an intervention by Baberowski, the use of the room was authorized for the lecture only on the condition "that prior to, during and after the meeting, members of the university will not be smeared or insulted as militarists and war-mongers on leaflets, placards, online or anywhere else." (7)

The IYSSE opposed this as an attempt at censorship. In a letter to the university administration, it declared: "As a student group at the Humboldt University, we consider it not only our right, but also our duty to oppose and condemn such views... Prof. Baberowski has used every opportunity inside and outside of academia to spread his right-wing views, while at the same time employing administrative measures to suppress contrary opinions. This recalls the darkest days of German history when opponents of war were prosecuted and criminalized." (8)

The university administration finally relented and the meeting was a great success. Some 200 people attended, including many HU students. But groups of students from other Berlin universities, intellectuals and workers also crammed into the overflowing lecture room, where every available space was occupied.

The lecture entitled "The Universities as Ideological Centres of Militarism" by Ulrich Rippert provides an historical overview of the "Gleichschaltung" at the universities during the Third Reich and the subsequent development of the campuses.

The four contributions that follow focus on Professor Herfried Münkler: on his attack on Fritz Fischer; on his book *Power in the Center*; on his call to place by the side of the "frail lady democracy" a "young, strong nephew" who "sometimes has dictatorial tendencies;" and on his advocacy of drones and poison gas.

The essay "Jörg Baberowski's Falsification of History" summarizes Baberowski's theoretical and historical views and his political record. It details the connection between his political history in the Maoist Communist League of West Germany (KBW), his irrationalist theory of history and power, his contempt for objectivity and the study of sources and his falsification of the October Revolution. It documents his efforts to relativize the crimes of the Nazis.

The carefully referenced essay disproves the accusations repeatedly raised that the IYSSE has torn citations from Baberowski out of context.

The conclusion of the main section of the volume is the lecture entitled "Socialism and Historical Truth," (9) which David North delivered in connection with the presentation of his new book, *The Russian Revolution*

and the *Unfinished Twentieth Century*, at the Leipzig Book Fair on 13 March 2015. The lecture aroused extraordinary interest. With an audience of 450, the event was among the best attended at the book fair.

In this lecture, North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, places the conflict at Humboldt University in a broader historical and international context. He describes his book, containing 15 chapters produced over the course of 20 years, as a “response to historical, theoretical and political issues that arose in the aftermath of the collapse, between 1989 and 1991, of the East European Stalinist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.”

It is no coincidence that the dispute with Baberowski at Humboldt University was ignited by the issue of Leon Trotsky. The most important Marxist opponent of Stalin, Trotsky had been the target of denunciations and historical falsification for a long time. The demonization of the Russian October Revolution, the claim that there had been no socialist alternative to Stalinism and that Stalin’s reign of terror was the inevitable product of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks rested on the slandering of Trotsky.

North’s previous book, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, was concerned with this issue. It exposed the Trotsky biography by British historian Robert Service as a “piece of hackwork” with countless factual errors, deliberate falsifications and grotesque misinterpretations. The renowned journal *American Historical Review*, along with 14 respected historians from German-speaking countries, supported this assessment.

In February 2014, Baberowski invited Service to a public colloquium at his department to present his Trotsky biography. When the PSG informed Baberowski that it would participate in the colloquium and submitted questions in writing to Service, Baberowski responded with authoritarian measures that called into question fundamental democratic rights and academic freedoms. He moved the colloquium to a secret location and, with the assistance of security staff, prevented anyone from participating who was suspected of wanting to ask critical questions. Appendix I documents this event.

Appendix II contains letters and statements through which the IYSSE fought against the suppression of freedom of opinion by the Humboldt University administration, as well as the IYSSE statement for the student parliament elections. Included in the book is only a small selection of this material. The complete collection can be found on the IYSSE web site. (10)

The university administration did everything in its power to block the IYSSE and intimidate it. Both the Institute of History and the leadership of the university published statements on their official web sites attacking the IYSSE. The Institute of History called on members of the university to not tolerate criticism of Baberowski in “the lecture halls of Humboldt University” and urged “teachers and students of Humboldt University to oppose the campaign against Professor Baberowski.” (11)

The press was also mobilized. On 1 December 2014, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article entitled “Mobbing, Trotskyist Style,” (12) which made disparaging, groundless and false attacks on the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit. The article was authored by Jürgen Kaube, chief editor for humanities. In the meantime, Kaube, who knows Baberowski personally, has become editor of the newspaper. In spite of this witch-hunt, the IYSSE was able to hold several well-attended lectures as part of its election campaign and win a seat on the student parliament.

Appendix III documents the conflict over *Münkler-Watch*. In numerous articles and statements, the *World Socialist Web Site* and IYSSE defended the bloggers against the attacks of the university and media. The contributions in this appendix speak for themselves.

We hope that this book will embolden students at Humboldt University and other universities to oppose the transformation of these institutions into tools of war propaganda and to engage with the historical issues the

book explains. It is also of great importance for workers. They must assume a leading role in the struggle against militarism and war and intervene on the side of freedom of opinion for students. The defence of elementary social rights, jobs and wages today poses political tasks that can be resolved only on the basis of an historically-grounded perspective.

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Footnotes

(1) Sebastian Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen*, Stuttgart/München 2000, p. 126

(2) Leon Trotsky, “What is National Socialism?”

(3) Herfried Münkler, *Macht in der Mitte*, Hamburg, 2015

(4) Dirk Kurbjuweit, “Questions of culpability in WWI still divide German historians,” *Der Spiegel*, 10.2.2014

(5) David North, “Socialism and Historical Truth”

(6) Resolution of the Student Parliament at Humboldt University of Berlin, 17 June 2015

(7) Letter from Humboldt University spokesman Hans-Christoph Keller to the IYSSE, 7 October 2014

(8) “IYSSE protest censorship at Humboldt University,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 9 October, 2014

(9) David North, “Socialism and Historical Truth”

(10) <http://iysse.gleichheit.de/dokumente/>

(11) Prof. Dr. Peter Burschel, Statement on the attacks on Prof. Dr. Jörg Baberowski, Humboldt University of Berlin, accessed 17 June 2015

(12) Jürgen Kaube, “Mobbing, Trotskyist Style,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 December 2014



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact