

# Oppose right-wing ideology at Humboldt University: An open letter to Professor Thomas Sandkühler

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality  
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*The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Humboldt University in Berlin issued the following letter protesting against attempts to suppress justified criticism of the right-wing historian Jörg Baberowski, a professor at the university. The letter documents how Baberowski is relativizing the crimes of the Nazis, agitating against refugees and promoting dictatorship and war. It has been issued in response to a public letter by Professor Thomas Sandkühler, who holds the chair of History Didactics at Humboldt, attacking the IYSSE.*

Dear Professor Sandkühler,

As members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, members of the student parliament, and students of history at Humboldt University (HU), we strongly protest against the statement you published on the official study platform for the seminar "Introduction to History Didactics," which is clearly directed against the IYSSE. In the statement, you defend extreme right-wing positions and attack our democratic right to freedom of speech.

You denounce us in the letter as "rat-catchers" and assert that an anti-war leaflet we distributed at the beginning of the semester was "a collection of outrages, allegations and distortions all aimed at silencing Professor Baberowski." You go on to accuse us of a campaign of "character assassination." You provide no evidence for these slanders, but instead seek to use your authority as a professor to intimidate and threaten students who dare raise criticisms.

The IYSSE leaflet you denounce is entitled "Scholarship, not war propaganda." [1] It opposes the transformation of universities into agencies of the German government's war preparations, and in this context it deals with the role of the chair for Eastern European History at Humboldt, Jörg Baberowski.

You are well aware that the IYSSE has proven every point of its critique by carefully citing sources and providing detailed explanations. [2] In recent years, Baberowski has emerged as a central political figure of the new right. He agitates against refugees and campaigns in favour of militarism and authoritarian forms of rule. In this process, he uses diverse media outlets to attack the chancellor from the right, denouncing her alleged "welcoming culture" for refugees. Anyone who criticises the professor and his right-wing positions is, in your opinion, seeking to "silence him." By describing our well-founded critique as "allegations and distortions," you are solidarising yourself with Baberowski's odious views. What are the real issues involved?

Our leaflet states, "Since last summer, Baberowski has used his position at HU to advance far-right positions in newspaper articles, interviews and public appearances. He agitates against the acceptance of refugees, calls for the closure of Germany's borders and claims that illegal migrants from foreign cultures are destroying the fundamentals of society. His crude theses on the origins of violence are well suited to his calls for a strong state and more police, and his justifications for dictatorial forms of rule."

Here is a very brief summary of a long series of statements made by Baberowski on this subject. As he stated in response to the rising number of violent, xenophobic attacks against refugees last September, "I think, given the problems we currently have with immigration in Germany, this is rather harmless." [3] In what political camp would you place such a statement, Mr. Sandkühler?

Baberowski's statements on the "war on terror" show even more clearly the reactionary content of his notion of violence. On this point, the IYSSE leaflet states: "In October 2014, Baberowski appealed for methods to be used in the struggle against Jihadi terrorism that violate all norms of international law. He stated, 'And if one is not prepared to take hostages, burn down villages and hang people and spread fear and terror like the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do that, then such a struggle cannot be won, then it is better to stay out of it.'"

In the panel discussion at the German Historical Museum where Baberowski made this statement, he made unmistakably clear that he is in favour of such a struggle against terrorists. He said that one had "to be clear that it will cost a lot of money and that one has to send soldiers and weapons into a power vacuum... for that, one needs the political will and the political strategy, and above all, one must say, in order for this to work, we have to go in there. And it has to be worthwhile for us. It costs money. We have to send troops in. These countries like Iraq, Syria and Libya are no longer capable of solving this problem themselves." [4]

Baberowski has repeatedly expressed similar views. The claim that violence can be combatted only with more brutal violence runs like a thread through all of his public statements. On 25 November 2015, he called in the *Eßlinger Zeitung* for the same methods to be used against terrorists as they themselves use: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." He said of the terrorist attacks in France: "I think it was fatal for Mrs. Merkel to say to the French, 'We are crying along with you.' Whoever responds like this will be dismissed by the terrorists as a weakling." [5]

**Baberowski's far-right agenda**

**Baberowski's relativising of the Nazi's crimes**

These are all positions associated with the extreme right. The most disturbing factor, however, is Baberowski's relativising of the crimes of the Nazis. In our leaflet we wrote: "Baberowski downplays the historic crimes of National Socialism. In *Der Spiegel* in early 2014, he indicated his support for the now deceased Hitler apologist Ernst Nolte and claimed Hitler was "no psychopath" and was not "vicious." In his books, he presents the war of annihilation in the east as a reaction to the violence of the Bolsheviks and denies any responsibility on the part of National Socialist ideology."

You are well acquainted with the type of apologetic viewpoints Baberowski represents because they are directly relevant to your own academic field of research. This makes your denunciation of our statements of fact as "allegations and distortions" especially deplorable.

In *Der Spiegel*, Baberowski compared Hitler positively to the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. He said, "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." [6]

Such a downplaying of Hitler's crimes is repugnant and historically absurd. In your new Hitler biography for young people [7], you repeatedly describe the vicious manner with which Hitler dealt with the disabled, political opponents and Jews. You write correctly on page 253, "It was above all older people, women and children who fell victim to the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. This crime was therefore not only vicious, but also utterly cowardly." Do you, in all seriousness, believe that Baberowski's remarks represent legitimate contributions to academic discourse?

His many other statements relativising the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship make clear that Baberowski's downplaying of Hitler is no accident. Baberowski has stated that the Nazis' war of annihilation was the response to "spaces of violence" opened up by the Soviet Union. He wrote in 2007, "Stalin and his generals imposed a new kind of war on the Wehrmacht that no longer spared the civilian population." [8]

Nazi apologists have repeatedly sought to justify the Nazis' war of annihilation as a response to the partisan war. In your book, you correctly reject such claims and place cause and effect in their appropriate relationship to each other: "Hitler welcomed Stalin's call for a partisan war. This gave the Germans in the Soviet Union a welcome opportunity 'to exterminate what stands in our way.' The dictator consequently ordered increased shootings." (p. 254) You also acknowledge that the "outlines of the war of plunder and annihilation" had already been determined in early 1941. (p. 200)

Baberowski's downplaying of the war of annihilation has also been sharply criticised by other historians. Benno Ennker, who teaches in Tübingen and St. Gallen, charged that Baberowski's book *Scorched Earth* constituted "an implicit exoneration of the Wehrmacht." Responding to Baberowski's assertion that the National Socialists could "no longer bring [the war of annihilation] under control," he wrote, "Such an exculpation—unsupported by evidence—of the ideologically planned extermination policy in the East by 'situation and circumstances' had up to now been associated only with the scandalous Polish historian Bogdan Musiał." [9]

Christoph Dieckmann from the Fritz Bauer Institute for the History and Impact of the Holocaust accused Baberowski of ignoring "the wealth of research proving the broad consensus among German leaders and the Wehrmacht leadership prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union to expose many millions of Soviet citizens to starvation within a few months." Given the wealth of research, Dieckmann wrote, Baberowski's statements appear "apologetic." [10]

Even in the right-wing Springer newspaper *Die Welt*, Alan Posener surmised after reading Baberowski's latest book, *Spaces of Violence*, "There was a time when such a diminution of the role of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust would have been a scandal in Germany. The country has

reached such a point of degeneration that Baberowski is celebrated." [11]

This is a remarkable statement that must be underscored, precisely because of the reaction of yourself and others in your academic field. There can be no doubt that Baberowski is seeking to relativise Nazi crimes. When Ernst Nolte described the Holocaust in the 1980s as an understandable reaction to the violence of Stalinism, he provoked a wave of outrage and the Historikerstreit (Historians' Dispute). Academically and politically, Nolte was rebuffed. Not long after, his only public was the far right.

You yourself published an article in 2000 critical of Ernst Nolte. At that time, you accused Horst Möller, who gave a laudatory speech on Nolte, of attempting to "make it seem as though the Historikerstreit with all of its consequences never happened and thereby restore Ernst Nolte to a position of political innocence." You correctly objected to this: "But it ought first of all to be pointed out it was not that Nolte was disqualified, but rather that he disqualified himself by continuing to support positions relativising National Socialism devoid of any empirical basis." [12]

Today, Baberowski puts forward positions that go far beyond what Nolte wrote in 1986. This is why he has vehemently defended Nolte against his critics. In the previously cited *Spiegel* article, he is quoted as saying, "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right."

If you are of the opinion that Nolte excluded himself from academic discourse with his relativising statements, how can you attack critics of Baberowski so aggressively today? In contrast to Nolte in his earlier period, Baberowski has not produced a single study of academic value. None of his books has yet been published in the English language.

In the Anglo-American world, Baberowski is known above all for his rants against refugees that have been celebrated in far-right publications such as the *Daily Stormer* and Breitbart News. On 8 December 2015, the fascistic and anti-Semitic *Daily Stormer* prominently featured Baberowski, welcoming his assertion that migration was destroying Germany's identity. [13] The German neo-fascist NPD and other far-right web sites have also applauded the professor's remarks. Baberowski is no academic, but rather a right-wing ideologue.

## Attack on democratic rights

Instead of protesting against his right-wing rants, falsification of history and relativising of the Nazis' crimes, you attack students who oppose the ideological preparations being made for new wars. This is academically dishonest and morally reprehensible.

Your claim that the IYSSE's criticism is based on "allegations and distortions" is not new. Right-wing extremists also seek to intimidate their opponents in this way. The most important line of argument used by Nolte and his defenders consisted in accusing his critics of slander. Accusations included "sloppy research and quotes taken out of context" (Michael Störmer) to "fabricated citations" (Klaus Hildebrand). (14) For his part, Nolte insisted that he had not been interpreted correctly.

When Deborah Lipstadt cited the Holocaust denier David Irving in her book *Denying the Holocaust* and referred to his defence of Hitler, Irving first sought to prevent the publisher selling the book and then initiated a libel lawsuit, which he subsequently lost. You are now using similar methods to intimidate critical students.

Again, although you know better, you assert that the IYSSE is not a "student organisation," and complain that it organises meetings "in university's rooms." Mr. Sandkühler, you know very well that the IYSSE received more than 6 percent of the vote at the last student parliament elections and thus four seats. Two of its representatives study at your own institute. The IYSSE holds weekly meetings, conducts public meetings

and participates in student initiatives. Your assertion is simply untrue.

It is utterly absurd to declare after your attacks, “Scholarly criticism of the academic and political positions of Mr. Baberowski is of course permissible; no professor at this university is immune from such criticism.”

But this is precisely the issue. Mr. Baberowski has attempted from the outset to silence the IYSSE by employing undemocratic and authoritarian measures. After he invited the Trotsky biographer Robert Service to Humboldt University for a public meeting, the IYSSE announced its intention to pose questions to the author about his book, which had been described by 14 German-speaking historians, amongst others, as a “hack work.” (15) Baberowski blocked any discussion by shifting the event to a secret location and excluded anyone he suspected of holding critical positions, including professors and students of Humboldt University.

When the IYSSE pointed out how Baberowski was seeking to downplay Nazi crimes in leaflets and at meetings, he contacted the university management to prevent the IYSSE from using rooms at the university. He later declared IYSSE members to be “crazies” and demanded that they be banned from the university. (16) It is therefore absurd for you now to accuse students of attempting to “silence” the professor.

Your disingenuous attacks are not new, Mr. Sandkühler. The Institute of History and university management at the HU gave their support to Baberowski in 2014 in statements that also slandered the IYSSE. IYSSE protest letters to the HU management disproving these slanders point by point were ignored. The student parliaments at HU and the Free University of Berlin subsequently passed resolutions by overwhelming majorities defending the IYSSE. Student representative bodies have since also protested against lectures by Baberowski in Bremen and Hamburg.

The Institute of History and HU management ultimately felt compelled to remove the statements against the IYSSE from their websites. But you are evidently intent on continuing to put students under pressure. You did not issue your statement as a private individual, but in your capacity as a professor on the learning platform for an introductory event. You are attempting to use your position to intimidate critical students.

That you are seriously seeking to package your attempt at intimidation as a defence of freedom of opinion is derisible. You yourself have written how the readiness to adapt, and unquestioning obedience made the Third Reich possible. This is certainly true of the many German academics who compliantly supported the Nazis. Fritz K. Ringer developed the concept of the “Mandarins” in his book *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community 1890-1933*.

The issue at stake is not a personal conflict with Baberowski, or, as you insinuate, to campaign for the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG). At issue are central questions of German history, which once again assume great relevance in the face of growing nationalism and xenophobia. It is about the attempt to re-evaluate and downplay the greatest crimes in the history of humanity.

Nobody is proposing you share the IYSSE’s political perspective, but your shameful attack on the IYSSE is clearly aimed at suppressing criticism of academics who downplay and relativise the crimes of the Nazi. We therefore urgently call upon you to reconsider your position and immediately remove the letter attacking the IYSSE from the website.

Yours sincerely,

Humboldt University group of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality

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Notes:

[1] “Scholarship, not war propaganda,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 18 October, 2016

[2] A detailed presentation of our criticism can be found in: Vandreier, Christoph: “Jörg Baberowskis Geschichtsfälschung,” in Schwarz, Peter (Ed): *Wissenschaft oder Kriegspropaganda*, Essen 2015, pp. 95-132

[3] “Kritik an Flüchtlingspolitik” (“Criticism of refugee policy”), 3Sat Kulturradio, 24 September, 2015

[4] “Interventionsmacht Deutschland?” (“Germany: an interventionist power?”), Schlüterhof debates at the German Historical Museum, 1 October, 2014

[5] “Das Versagen der deutschen Politik ist dramatisch” (“The failure of German policy is dramatic”), interview with Jörg Baberowski, in *Eßlinger Zeitung*, 25 November, 2015

[6] Dirk Kurbjuweit, “Culpability Question Divides Historians Today,” *Spiegel Online*, 14 February, 2014

[7] Sandkühler, Thomas: *Adolf H: Lebensweg eines Diktators, (Adolf H. Life of a Dictator)*, Hanser Literaturverlage, 2015

[8] Baberowski, Jörg, “Kriege in staatsfernen Räumen. Russland und die Sowjetunion 1905–1950,” (“Wars in spaces without states. Russia and the Soviet Union 1905-1950”), in D. Beyrau, M. Hochgeschwender, D. Langewiesche (Eds), *Formen des Krieges. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, (Forms of War from Antiquity to the Present)*, Paderborn, 2007, p. 305

[9] Ennker, Benno, (2012) “Ohne Ideologie, ohne Staat, ohne Alternative?—Fragen an Jörg Baberowski,” (“Without an ideology, without a state, without an alternative? Questions for Jörg Baberowski”) in *Osteuropa*, Vol. 62, issue 4, April 2012, p. 112

[10] Dieckmann, Christoph (2012), “Die Suche geht weiter—Stalin, der Stalinismus und das Rätsel der Gewalt,” (“The search continues: Stalin, Stalinism and the riddle of violence”), in *Osteuropa*, Vol. 62, issue 4, April 2012, p. 131

[11] Alan Posener, “Der Raum unter der Schädeldecke,” *Die Welt*, 10 January, 2016

[12] Sandkühler, Thomas, “Der falsche Weg,” (“The false path”), *Deutsche Allgemeine Sonntagsblatt*

[13] “German professor says German identity will be totally destroyed by mass immigration,” *Daily Stormer*, 8 December, 2015

[14] Cited according to Kühnl, Reinhard (Ed) *Streit ums Geschichtsbild*, Cologne, 1987 (Stürmer P63, Hildebrand P56)

[15] “Letter from historians to German publisher Surkamp on Robert Service’s biography of Trotsky,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 23 November, 2011

[16] “Münklerwatch at HU Berlin: Herfried Münkler accuses bloggers of anti-Semitic pattern,” (Herfried Münkler wirft Bloggern antisemitische Muster vor), *Tagespiegel*, 20 May, 2015



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