

An attack on democratic rights: Sociologist Andrej Holm fired from Humboldt University

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Last week, the President of Berlin's Humboldt University, Sabine Kunst, announced the firing of sociologist Andrej Holm.

On January 16, Holm was forced to resign from his recently-appointed position as State Housing Secretary in the Berlin Senate, two days after Mayor Michael Müller (Social Democratic Party, SPD) called for his removal. The reason given was that Holm had provided false information about his brief association with the Ministry for State Security (MfS, Stasi) in the GDR (East Germany), and that this had disqualified him.

That Holm was briefly active with the Stasi has been public knowledge for years. He freely admitted in an interview with the *tageszeitung* in December 2007 that in September 1989, at the age of 18, he began basic training in the MfS's "Guard Regiment Felix Dzierzynski." He explained at the time that, under the influence of his parents who both worked for the MfS, he decided at a young age "to pursue a long-term career there." He had hoped to pursue civil journalism studies at Leipzig University while at the same time completing his Stasi training. This never came to be, however. In January 1990, demonstrators stormed Stasi headquarters in Berlin, and the work of the secret service was made obsolete.

Among students at HU, Holm enjoyed a good reputation as an urban sociologist and left-wing activist on behalf of tenants. Following the announcement of his planned dismissal, hundreds of students occupied the Institute for Social Sciences where Holm taught until recently.

In 2004, following his studies in social sciences during the 1990s, Holm wrote his thesis on questions of urban sociology at Humboldt University. In 2005, he was engaged as a research associate at HU. At that time, he indicated in a personnel questionnaire that he had not been a full-time employee of the Ministry for State Security in the GDR, something which is now being used against him.

Holm has been privately active in several neighborhood and tenant initiatives. At the suggestion of Left Party Senator Katrin Lompscher, the independent Holm was named State Housing Secretary by the new Berlin Senate of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party at the beginning of December 2016.

After Holm's appointment, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) began an anti-communist smear campaign. The FDP faction chair in the House of Representatives, Sebastian Czaja, requested an official condemnation of the appointment. On the web site of the

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, blogger "Don Alphonse" wrote that "anyone with such an ideologically solidified point of view together with his questionable self-exculpation has no place in politics."

HU President Kunst explained in a detailed statement last Wednesday that she had not fired Holm because of his Stasi activities, but rather due to his public handling of the matter. She accused him of "deception with regard to his biography and repeatedly holding to the argument of gaps in his memory [...] The false information, the absence of remorse and his insistence on 'memory gaps' have led me to decide on terminating his employment," she wrote.

Holm repudiated the allegation that he deliberately deceived anyone about his activities in the Stasi. Six weeks after he began basic training, he was moved to a typing pool, he explained last December in a public discussion meeting. He had considered this a part of his training, bound up with his Stasi-arranged journalism studies. Because he still believed himself to be in training, he did not consider himself to be a full-time employee. He was therefore being truthful in 2005 when he reported to HU that in his military service with the Guard Regiment he had not been a full-time employee.

When, after reviewing his MfS files, he later learned that he was already classified as a full-time employee at the time of his training, he corrected his information with HU and the Berlin Senate, Holm said in a statement from mid-December.

The staff council of HU has until January 31 to comment on the matter. Holm has announced that he wants to take legal action against the decision.

An attack on democratic rights

The planned dismissal of Holm from Humboldt University is an attack on fundamental democratic rights.

The political independent Holm may have been appointed to the Berlin state government by the Left Party to use his reputation as a left-wing scholar to cover for their right-wing politics. But the issue here is not defending his politics or downplaying the role of the Stasi. It is simply unacceptable that a faculty member of a university should be fired because he was briefly employed for a

state organ of the GDR 26 years ago, especially when that work has nothing to do with his academic work.

In West German universities and state apparatuses, almost all of the implicated officials from the Nazi period were permitted to resume their employment after the Second World War without ever being held accountable or prosecuted for their work in the Third Reich. Numerous professors directly involved in the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union seamlessly continued their careers in West Germany after the war.

Even if one were to judge the matter solely by current criteria, one would have to ask: Are prospective employees of HU, for example, asked whether they ever worked for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and helped to organize the development of the extreme right?

In an article for the *tageszeitung*, Berlin media lawyer Johannes Eisenberg, who believes Holm has a good chance of defending himself legally and retaining his position, illustrated the absurdity of the accusations with an example. Suppose, wrote Eisenberg, that during his time with the MfS Holm had committed a murder and was convicted under juvenile law. He would have been released on good behavior in 1994, and the charges would have been expunged from his record 10 years later. He would not have been obligated to inform HU about them when hired.

The attack on Holm is especially striking when one considers it in relation to political developments at the university in recent years. At Humboldt University, right-wing professors can agitate against refugees at will, relativize the crimes of the Nazis (Jörg Baberowski) and declare Germany the future “Task Master” of Europe (Herfried Münkler). When students protest such views, the university leadership and its institutions come to the defense of the professors. However, when a lecturer admired by his students because of his critical views is found to have worked for the Stasi for a few months a quarter century ago and provided confused information about it, he is fired at the first opportunity.

The firing of Holm is all the more remarkable when considering the transformation of HU after the end of the GDR in 1990. In some cases, high-ranking former officers of the Wehrmacht (the armed forces in Nazi Germany) were summoned to Berlin to phase out their preceding academic work. In the early 1990s, economist Wilhelm Krelle, in his capacity as founding dean, oversaw the building of an economics department and the firing of almost all the GDR scholars active there. “No Marxist will set foot over the threshold of this house so long as I have the say here,” he declared in one notorious dictum.

After Krelle was to be awarded an honorary doctorate from HU, students investigated his past. They found that Krelle had been active in the campaigns of the Wehrmacht in Greece and Africa, and that beginning in August 1944 he had served as a commando in the Waffen-SS in France.

A committee appointed by HU produced a report in 1996 that essentially confirmed the accusations against Krelle. He was permitted to receive his honorary doctorate anyway. The committee based its decision on the fact that while Krelle commanded the 16,000-man SS mechanized infantry division “Götz von Berlichingen” until the last days of the war, he had never himself been a member of the SS. The “lack of remorse” for

which Sabine Kunst now criticizes Andrej Holm was in the case of Krelle no reason for the withdrawal of his honorary doctorate.

Opposition among students

There is growing opposition among students at HU to the planned firing of Holm. Shortly after notice of termination was given, some 200 students occupied the Institute for Social Science where Holm taught. The institute has now been occupied for more than a week. On Wednesday evening, the student parliament discussed a resolution in defense of Holm.

During the debate, several representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke in defense of Holm and placed his firing in the context of the rightward political turn at HU. A lecturer considered to be left-wing by many students was fired while the university leadership stands behind right-wing professors like Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler.

What HU President Kunst said of the firing of Holm is “in reality the rationale to enable a shift to the right,” said Katja, a representative of the IYSSE in the student parliament. Since coming into office, Kunst has made clear her political affiliations. First, she confronted the faculty with cost-cutting measures of 8 percent in personnel costs. With this alone she made clear her hostility to the interests of students. At the second to last session of the Academic Senate, Kunst also defended advertisements for the German military at HU, even though a large majority of the student parliament had rejected them. Now she wants to dismiss Holm even though he is well known for his lectures and is admired by students.

The student parliament and the general assembly of students that took place on short notice last Thursday at HU have both adopted resolutions against the planned firing of Holm.



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