

Oppose Humboldt University's attack on freedom of speech and historical truth!

The International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site
6 April 2017

Two weeks after the district court of Cologne decided on March 15 that the Asta (student government) of the University of Bremen is allowed to describe Jörg Baberowski as a right-wing extremist, the presidium of Humboldt University (HU) has thrown its weight behind the professor. It has declared that criticism of his positions is “unacceptable,” and is threatening critics of Baberowski with severe legal sanctions.

In a “statement on the ruling of the Cologne district court,” the HU presidium asserts that the professor is “an outstanding scholar, whose integrity is beyond doubt.” Further, it says: “The scholarly statements by Jörg Baberowski—especially if taken within their contexts—are not right-wing extremist. The continuous media and personal attacks on members of Humboldt University are unacceptable.” Then it refers to another case—for which it provides no factual details—that “has also already been prosecuted criminally” on behalf of Humboldt University.

This statement is an assault on freedom of speech, and is part of a right-wing political offensive in the German media. Its central target is the Socialist Equality Party (*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, SGP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Germany, which has exposed the connection between, on the one hand, Baberowski's right-wing historical revisionism (i.e., the relativization of the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime) and anti-immigrant demagoguery, and, on the other hand, the growing state-sponsored campaign for a revival of German militarism. Last week, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany's leading conservative newspaper, published two attacks on the SGP, including one on its front page. It expressed concern over the “powerful influence” exerted by the SGP's opposition to the “transformation of universities into ideological centers of militarism.”

In an attempt to mislead public opinion, the HU presidium is trying to portray Baberowski as the victim of an assault on free speech and academic freedom. This line of argument is utterly fraudulent. Baberowski is not a beleaguered scholar who is being persecuted for his scientific labors. He is, in fact, a right-wing political activist with a widely publicized reactionary political agenda. Baberowski is able to call upon the protection of an apparently limitless network of friends in high places. Despite his undistinguished scholarly opus, Baberowski is the subject of endless public tributes as Germany's preeminent historian. He appears on talk shows, gives interviews and writes newspaper articles that legitimize the hatred of refugees, advocate the ruthless deployment of state violence, and relativize the crimes of the Nazis.

On the internet, the connection between Baberowski's name and the German and American far-right scene is on plain display for everyone to see. After the ruling, he was defended by the right-wing radical magazine *Compact*, the far-right weekly *Junge Freiheit* (Young Freedom) and various right-wing radical blogs, including *Politically Incorrect*. The right-extremist American web sites *Breitbart News* and the *Daily Stormer* (a modern version of the anti-Semitic Nazi smear sheet “Der Stürmer”) have celebrated Baberowski for his campaign against refugees.

The HU presidium falsely claims that the Cologne ruling allows Baberowski to be called a “right-wing extremist” only because his accusers are protected by “constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech.” In fact, the ruling states that Baberowski's positions provide “a sufficient starting point” for describing him as a right-wing extremist. The court acknowledged that the criticism put forward by Bremen students of statements by Baberowski is not defamatory “because the required reference to relevant objective facts is present.”

Furthermore, Baberowski did not sue the Asta of Bremen because his “scholarly” statements were allegedly taken out of context, but, rather, because the students had criticized his campaign against refugees and his cold-blooded advocacy of military violence. The right-wing court's secondary ruling—which asserted that Baberowski had been quoted out of context—is a judicial scandal. The Cologne court, known to be among the most conservative in Germany, bent over backwards to provide an exculpatory explanation of Baberowski's inflammatory statements. In their legitimate selection of passages from statements by Baberowski, the Bremen students did not falsify the content of his remarks. The speeches by Baberowski, *especially* when read in their entirety, leave no doubt about his far-right politics.

Baberowski's academic career and his political activities are inextricably linked. He does not distinguish between his public political positions and his “scholarly statements.” He includes on his official Humboldt University web site a list of all of his polemical statements on political issues. Baberowski lists no less than 101 radio appearances, 39 TV appearances and 32 newspaper interviews.

One issue constantly present in Baberowski's public statements is his campaign against refugees, which has included bitter attacks on Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Chancellor Angela Merkel. He wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “The integration of several million people in a short time interrupts the continuity of our traditions (*Überlieferungszusammenhang*), on which we base ourselves and which sustain a society and provide it with consistency.”

Baberowski's attacks on immigrants have made him a favorite in the right-wing press beyond the borders of Germany. Two extreme right-wing US publications—*Breitbart News* and the neo-Nazi web site, the *Daily Stormer*—have quoted Baberowski. American Nazis have no doubt at all about the meaning of the professor's statements.

He also writes a monthly column for the *Basler Zeitung*, which belongs to the media empire of the Swiss right-wing anti-immigrant chauvinist, Christoph Blocher. Baberowski's arguments mirror those of the German far-right party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), which he defends against the “groundless accusation” that fascists were among its parliamentary deputies. Baberowski glorifies, in the name of the struggle against terrorism, the ruthless application of state violence against terrorists. Using the brutal language that is characteristic of the extreme right, he has written: “Indifference is only another word for cowardice. If someone does not understand any other language than violence, then he

should feel it.”

Baberowski’s right-wing political diatribes cannot be separated from his work as a historian.

His academic *curriculum vitae* includes an interview published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in February 2014, in which Baberowski declared: “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.” This statement is clear enough, and no amount of apologetic sophistries can disguise its monstrous meaning.

In the same interview, Baberowski defended the late Ernst Nolte, the most notorious apologist for Nazi crimes among the German post-war professors. Referring to the famous “Struggle of Historians” (*Historikerstreit*) of the late 1980s, in which leading German historians denounced Nolte’s justification of Nazi crimes, Baberowski stated: “Historically speaking, he was right.”

The relativization of Nazi crimes runs like a red thread through Baberowski’s work. He denies that the Nazi regime waged a consciously planned *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of extermination) against the Soviet Union. Baberowski, following Nolte’s line of argument, presents the actions of the Wehrmacht against the Soviet Union—which included the genocidal extermination of the Jews and the mass killings directed against the civilian population—as a reaction to the resistance of the Red Army and the attacks of partisan forces.

The defense of Baberowski by Humboldt University is all the more extraordinary given the fact that his academic writings have been sharply attacked by well-known German historians for playing down of the crimes of the Nazis.

Dr. Benno Ennker, who teaches in Tübingen and St. Gallen, criticized Baberowski’s book *Verbrannte Erde* for its “implicit exoneration of the Wehrmacht.” Regarding Baberowski’s assertion that the Nazis were simply unable to bring their war of annihilation “under control,” Ennker wrote: “Such a—completely unsubstantiated—exculpation of the ideologically planned policy of annihilation in the East by reference to ‘situations and circumstances,’ has hitherto only been attempted by the Polish sensationalist [right-wing] historian Bogdan Musial.”

Christoph Dieckmann from the Fritz Bauer Institute, a Center on the History and Impact of the Holocaust, accused Baberowski of failing to recognize the “general state of research, which proves a far-reaching consensus of the German leadership and the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht, prior to the assault on the Soviet Union, to subject many millions of Soviet citizens to death by starvation within a few months.” In light of this state of research, Baberowski’s arguments appear, in Dieckmann’s words, to be “apologetic.”

To be blunt, the term “apologetic” is a polite academic way of saying that Baberowski is advancing a lying excuse for the crimes of the Nazis. The claim that the Third Reich did not plan a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union flies in the face of everything that has been established by scholars throughout the world. The American historian Stephen G. Fritz has summed up the results of decades of research: “From the outset, the war against the Soviet Union was planned as a war of annihilation, with the full knowledge and complicity of the Wehrmacht leadership.” The title of Professor Fritz’s 640-page work, published by the University Press of Kentucky in 2011, is *Ostkrieg: Hitler’s War of Extermination in the East*.

As for the claim that Hitler “was not vicious,” is this a remark that sane people should lower themselves to argue with? One can only wonder what Mr. Baberowski’s standard of acceptable human conduct is.

But the presidium of the most important university of the German capital now declares it “unacceptable” that Baberowski’s right-wing and historically revisionist positions be criticized and condemned. No matter how provocative and repulsive his statements, they must be interpreted in a light most favorable to Baberowski. He must be held above reproach.

Thus, Humboldt University declares that “media and personal attacks on members of Humboldt University” will no longer be tolerated. Hence, anyone who denounces Baberowski’s assertion that “Hitler was not vicious” will have to reckon with severe legal sanctions. If such a statement cannot be criticized, and its author publically denounced, then we are truly living in a Dostoyevskian world where “All is permitted.”

Turning reality on its head, Humboldt University points an accusing finger at Baberowski’s critics and attempts to discredit their actions: “There is no place for violence and extremism at the Humboldt University of Berlin.” This is a cynical, hypocritical and dishonest statement. Baberowski is free to incite hatred against immigrants, but those who write essays and hold lectures opposing him are associated with “violence and extremism.”

The Humboldt University administration does not provide a single example of “violence” being threatened, let alone used, by Baberowski’s critics. The IYSSE has discussed his right-wing positions at numerous meetings, which have been attended by hundreds of students, and not a single incident has ever occurred. Baberowski, whose own writing reveal an unhealthy obsession with violence, has used vile language against IYSSE members and publicly demanded that the “cranks” be thrown out of the university.

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The fact that the HU presidium declares Baberowski to be above criticism is the result of a political intervention. After the Cologne ruling, which many media outlets evaluated as a “partial success” for the Asta of Bremen, right-wing political and media circles launched a massive campaign in defense of Baberowski.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the most prominent German conservative daily, which supported Nolte in the 1980s, has pressured Humboldt University to publicly defend Baberowski, despite opposition to the professor within the university administration itself. The newspaper complained about the allegedly too restrained “statement of solidarity for Baberowski” on March 27. In response to this criticism, the president of Humboldt University, Sabine Kunst, promised that there would be “a statement on the ruling by the Cologne district court.”

Kunst is a high-ranking figure in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). She was the minister of science in the state of Brandenburg from 2011 to 2016, and she maintains close relations to the foreign policy establishment and the German military. Kunst defends the right-wing professor not in the interests of a “free and independent scholarly exchange,” but, rather, for political reasons.

Within the ruling Grand Coalition, the SPD plays a leading role in demanding an aggressive great-power policy despite the resistance of the population. Former Foreign Minister and now President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has called for Germany to play a military role in Europe and internationally that corresponds to its economic power and influence.

The official closing of the ranks between the HU presidium and Baberowski, which is aimed at suppressing criticism of right-wing extremist standpoints, can only be explained within the context of a sharp shift to the right in ruling circles. In the field of domestic policy, both the SPD and sections of the Left Party are also adapting to, and even participating in, chauvinist campaigns against refugees. Baberowski is seen as an ally in this reactionary orientation.

Moreover, the effort to reestablish Germany as a major and active military power requires that the German population overcome its hostility to war, which is rooted in the tragic and bloody experiences of the 20th century. Thus, history has to be rewritten, and the crimes of German imperialism have to be whitewashed. In this foul and duplicitous project, Baberowski is playing an important role.

After the fall of the Third Reich and before committing suicide to evade the hangman’s noose, Hermann Goering infamously declared that within

one hundred years statues would again be mounted in Germany to honor the memory of the Fuehrer. Twenty-eight years still remain for Goering's horrifying prophesy to be fulfilled. But already, in 2017, the leadership of a German university has declared that whether the worst mass murderer in world history was "vicious" is a matter for legitimate—to use the terminology of the presidium—"argumentative dispute."

Neither Frau Kunst nor the members of the Presidium of Humboldt University are sympathetic to Hitler. But once again, as in the early 1930s, the duplicity of the Social Democrats and the well-known cowardice of the German academic mandarins are playing a shameful role. Whatever their intentions, their actions are clearing the way for the political resurgence of the extreme right and, yes, even the historical rehabilitation of Hitler.

Humboldt University's presentation of its endorsement of Baberowski as a defense of academic freedom is a despicable lie. The university's statement is an intellectually unprincipled, deceitful and cowardly capitulation to the revival of German militarism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, and out-and-out pro-Nazi apologetics.

It should be noted that Jörg Baberowski's academic work had, until recently, attracted no significant attention outside of Germany. However, his latest work, *Verbrannte Erde*, has been published in English (as *Scorched Earth*) by Yale University Press, in collaboration with the viciously anti-communist Hoover Institution. Prior to the English-language release of this book, Baberowski was invited to participate in summer workshops at the Hoover Institution in 2007, 2013 and 2014.

The International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* endorses the protest of the German SGP and the IYSSE against the measures taken by the Humboldt University presidium. It is *unacceptable* that at the same university where Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was planned, criticism of apologetics for Nazi crimes and anti-immigrant demagoguery is declared illegal. It is high time for serious and principled historians in Germany and internationally to condemn Humboldt University's statement in support of Jörg Baberowski.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International have no intention of yielding to reactionary efforts to rewrite history and whitewash the crimes of the Nazis. We encourage and support the efforts of the German Trotskyists—who are the political heirs of a long and heroic history of struggle against Nazism—to educate students and the broadest sections of the working class in the lessons of history. In this fight, our German comrades should be able to count on the principled support of all progressive forces.



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