Anti-communist foundation backs extreme right-wing professor Baberowski

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8 April 2017

The Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany has declared its solidarity with Jörg Baberowski after the Cologne Regional Court has decided on March 15 that the Students' Union (Asta) of the University of Bremen has grounds to call the Humboldt University professor an extreme right-winger.

The statement of the Foundation, dated April 5, is signed by members of its Scientific Advisory Council, of which Baberowski is a member. It also carries the signatures of leading representatives of the Foundation, which is financed from assets taken from the former East German Stalinist ruling party, the SED, along with annual contributions from the budget of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The aim of the statement is not the defense of a colleague they allege has been misinterpreted. Rather they seek to justify political views and revisionist historical positions on Nazism deemed unacceptable just a few years ago. Three decades ago the attempt of Ernst Nolte to justify Nazism as a necessary reaction to Bolshevism was decidedly rejected in the famous "Historians' Debate." Now Baberowski and his supporters are defending conceptions which go far beyond those of Nolte.

Already the first paragraph of the Foundation's statement turns reality on its head. It describes Baberowski as the "target of an ongoing campaign of professional and personal defamation which, in addition to harming the reputation of an outstanding scholar, seeks to permanently damage the culture of debate in our country."

In fact, Baberowski's reputation as a "scholar" is very limited, especially outside Germany. He is much better known as a right-wing demagogue. Even leading politicians are not interviewed and invited to talkshows as often as the Humboldt professor. He is in demand when someone is needed to agitate against refugees, promote state violence or revive the anticommunist prejudices of the Cold War.

In contrast to Baberowski's historical work, this political role has also been recognized outside Germany. The far right American websites Breitbart News and The Daily Stormer have praised his tirades against refugees, as have German publications with close relations to the xenophobic Pegida movement and the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Criticism of his statements is not an attack on the "culture of debate in our country," but rather its indispensable prerequisite. The Foundation's accusation that Baberowski's critics are attempting to "silence his views, because they dislike them" is simply absurd. In contrast to Baberowski, who has access to every form of media outlet and who persecutes critical students with costly court cases, his critics can only resort to publishing their arguments on the Internet and in handbills.

The Foundation accuses Baberowski's critics of "discrediting professional opinions by taking quotations out of context and defaming those who hold them." This, the statement continues, "harms not only the person concerned, but all of us."

The fact is that the passages that the Cologne Court deemed to have been quoted out of context were political statements which Baberowski justified with openly ideological rather than "professional" arguments. If the signatories of the statement interpret this as a discrediting of "professional opinions" harming them all, one can only conclude that they agree with Baberowski's far-right political views.

According to the court, the Bremen Asta had taken out of context the following quote on the fight against terrorism: "And if one is not willing to take hostages, burn villages, hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict."

The Asta had indeed correctly reproduced Baberowski's words, but in the opinion of the court should also have included Baberowski's assertion: "But one should consider (a) what type of war is one prepared for, and (b) whether one can win it. And if one cannot win then one should leave it." According to the court, this statement shows that Baberowski "does not approve of applying the martial means mentioned in the passage quoted."

This line of argument is hardly likely to be accepted by a court of appeal. The phrase, "if one is not willing ... then one should leave it," is a common rhetorical formula aimed at underlining a statement.

For example, if a policeman declares, "And if one is not willing to kill, blackmail, torture and intimidate, as the mafia does, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict and one should leave it," this would clearly be understood as a call to use illegal means against the mafia, and not as a hands-off approach.

During the public discussion on the topic "Germany: an intervention force?", where Baberowski made these controversial comments, he repeatedly and explicitly spoke out in favour of military action against terrorists.

As far as Baberowski's views as a historian are concerned, he has already summarized them in February 2014 in an interview in *Der Spiegel* with Dirk Kurbjuweit. There he lined up behind the most notorious of Nazi apologists among German professors in the post-war period, the late Ernst Nolte. He said: "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right." Baberowski then compared Hitler to Stalin and stated: "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 is not a "professional opinion," but rather a monstrous

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belittlement of Nazi crimes. Hitler, the most brutal mass murderer in world history, not only spoke about the extermination of the Jews at his table, he also did so at mass meetings.

In a notorious speech given in the Berlin Sportpalast on January 30, 1942, Hitler boasted: “I already stated on September 1 in the German Reichstag—and I will refrain from over-hasty prophecies—that the war will not come to an end as the Jews imagine, with the extermination of the European and Aryan peoples; but that the result of this war will be the annihilation of Jewry. For the first time the old Jewish law will be applied: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

In his Hitler biography, the British historian Ian Kershaw shows in detail how Hitler dwelt in imaginations of violence during the weeks following the attack on the Soviet Union.

“If he could wish the German people one thing, he remarked on another occasion, it would be to have a war every fifteen or twenty years. If reproached for the loss of 200,000 lives, he would reply that he had enlarged the German nation by 2.5 million and felt justified in demanding the lives of a tenth,” Kershaw writes, citing Hitler: “Life is horrible. Coming into being, existing and passing away, there’s always a killing. Everything that is born must later die. Whether it’s through illness, accident or war, that remains the same” (Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, *Nemesis*, Penguin 2000, p. 403-404).

Thirty years ago a declaration to the effect that this mass murderer was “not vicious” would have unleashed a massive outcry, but today historians ignore it. In the same vein, no one in academic circles protested when Baberowski gave a lecture at the Humboldt University on October 27 last year in honour of the “crown jurist of the Third Reich,” Carl Schmitt.

Two years ago, the film “He’s Back” featured in Berlin’s cinemas. The film depicted Hitler returning to the German capital and finding his feet very quickly in the present day. One inevitably recalls this film when addressing these issues.

The signatories of the Foundation statement justify Baberowski’s trivialization of National Socialism with the words: “Each of us interprets the past against the background of his own scientific career based on his theoretical and methodological approach in his own way.” If he had not died in the summer of last year, Ernst Nolte would be received by these people with open arms.

A week ago, the presidium of Humboldt University had already lined up behind Baberowski. As we wrote, this was “the result of a political intervention.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* had exerted massive pressure on the HU to issue a statement in favour of Baberowski in the face of opposition inside the administration itself. The recently appointed HU President Sabine Kunst is a high-ranking social democratic politician with close links to foreign policy circles and the military.

The fact that the Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany has lined up behind Baberowski underlines the political character of this campaign. The Foundation was established in 1998 and has assets of €75 million from funds appropriated from the SED. It receives extra funding from the German chancellery’s billion-strong culture budget. It has the official mandate of studying the causes, history and consequences of the “SED dictatorship” and “keeping alive the memory of the injustice done and of its victims.”

The Trotskyist movement, embodied today in the International Committee of the Fourth International and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), was always irreconcilably opposed to the Stalinist regime of the GDR and was bitterly persecuted by it. Oskar Hippe, a leading Trotskyist who had fought against the Nazis in the Third Reich, sat in a GDR prison from 1948 to 1956.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between criticism of Stalinism from the left, which denounces the oppression of workers’ democracy and the betrayal of socialism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, and criticism from the right, which uses the crimes of Stalinism to play down the crimes of fascism and German imperialism. Baberowski and his supporters belong to the second category. At a time when interest in socialism and Marxism is growing due to the danger of war and growing social inequality, the Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany has the task of keeping anti-communism alive.

Among the signatories of the statement, there are no less than three ministers from the last GDR government headed by Lothar de Maizière (CDU), which organized the liquidation of the GDR with disastrous consequences for the working class—Markus Meckel (SPD), Rainer Eppelmann (CDU) and Gerd Poppe (Green Party). The former premier of Thuringia, Christine Lieberknecht (CDU), the CSU politician Hartmut Koschyk, who is linked to Germany’s right-wing expellees organisations, and the director of the Foundation, Anna Kaminsky, have also all signed the statement.

Kaminsky recently gave an interview to the daily *Die Welt*, which, entirely in the spirit of Nolte, began: “Communism ... was more devastating than Hitler’s racial hatred and his insane idea of ‘living space in the East’.”

Such historical revisionism can only be understood against the backdrop of the rapid worsening of the global crisis of capitalism. The US is threatening North Korea, China and Russia with war and escalating its involvement in Syria. For its part the German government has responded by a massive program of rearmament.

Two years ago, we wrote in the book “Scholarship or War Propaganda?”: “The public relations campaigns of the defence ministry and the propaganda of the media are not sufficient to overcome this deep-rooted opposition [to the return of German militarism]. A new narrative of the 20th century is required, a falsification of history that conceals and justifies the crimes of German imperialism.”

The statement by the Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany must be seen as a warning. Seventy years after the end of the National Socialist terror regime, influential sections of the German ruling class have tossed aside all inhibitions and are publicly propounding extreme right wing positions to prepare for new wars.

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