

The German weekly *Die Zeit*, Jörg Baberowski and the Historians Dispute

Christoph Vandreier
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In its latest edition, the German political weekly *Die Zeit* devotes an entire page to the dispute with Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski, who, according to the recent ruling of a regional court in Cologne, can be described as a right-wing extremist.

While conservative papers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt* reacted to the judgment with vicious smear campaigns against Baberowski's critics without ever contacting them, the author of the article in *Die Zeit*, Mariam Lau, not only spoke to Baberowski, but also with two representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), including this author.

Nevertheless—or perhaps because of this—her article clearly reveals the political shift to the right in the media and the academic world. Political and historical views that evoked sharp denunciations three decades ago are now accepted and defended.

On 11 July, 1986, *Die Zeit* published the response from the philosopher Jürgen Habermas to Ernst Nolte, who, in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, had played down the role of National Socialism (Nazism) and thus opened up the *Historikerstreit* (Historians Dispute).

Habermas accused Nolte of reducing “the extermination of the Jews to merely the unfortunate result of an understandable reaction to what Hitler would have perceived as an existential threat.” Habermas explained that according to Nolte, the Nazi crimes had lost “their singularity in that they are at least comprehensible as the response to Bolshevik threats of annihilation.”

The *Historikerstreit*, in which many other historians participated, ended with Nolte's complete defeat. His academic reputation was demolished and thereafter he moved almost exclusively in far-right circles.

Three decades later, Jörg Baberowski has put forward positions that go far beyond those of Nolte at the time—and is met with understanding and support in *Die Zeit*.

Lau writes that in Baberowski's view of history, “anti-Semitism, racial hatred, historical constellations [sink] into insignificance.” From this she concludes, “If it can happen anywhere, anytime, the Germans do not bear any special guilt. Then, the murder of the European Jews is not a unique event.”

Lau takes no offense at the obvious parallel of this position to Nolte's views in the *Historikerstreit*. And she is well aware of Baberowski's defence of Nolte and its historical significance. She also knows that the trivialization of Nazi crimes runs like a thread through Baberowski's work.

In the one-and-a-half hours during which I spoke to Ms. Lau on these issues, I had the opportunity to present her with some of

Baberowski's positions. I also gave her a copy of the book *Scholarship or war propaganda?* in which these issues are discussed in detail.

Already at the meeting, which took place in a crowded student cafe near Humboldt University, I was shocked by the lack of concern with which Ms. Lau responded to the issues. It was soon very clear that she approached the interview with a predetermined position and had no interest in conducting a serious discussion on the political and historical points of contention.

I showed her the article “World War I Guilt: Culpability Question Divides Historians Today,” which was published in February of 2014 by the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. In it, Baberowski is cited as the chief witness for the revision of the history of National Socialism (Nazism), and is quoted as saying: “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.” To support his thesis, Baberowski adds, “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.”

In the face of this monstrous falsification of history, while every sane person would at least pause to draw breath, Ms. Lau was completely unimpressed, and even tried to justify Baberowski. And when I made her aware that Baberowski had written that the war against the civilian population on the Eastern Front had been forced on the Wehrmacht (Hitler's Armed Forces) by the Red Army, Ms. Lau responded with indifference.

Instead, she kept trying to steer the conversation toward private anecdotes and reinterpret the fundamental political conflicts at Humboldt University as personal skirmishes. Eighteen months ago in *Die Zeit*, Lau had justified her own “reactionary” positions—her advocacy of the deportation of refugees and her “full support for the 2003 Iraq war”—by citing her relationship with her father, Bahman Nirumand, who had played an important role in the student movement.

Now she is trying to make the deplorable positions of Baberowski palatable by employing a well-known soft focus approach.

In the article, she does not address a single one of the quotes I had given her because they do not fit into her narrative. In fact, in the more than 2,000-word article, she cites just 14 words from our one-and-a-half-hour conversation.

Instead, she presents Baberowski's theory of violence and history as the result of his efforts to understand “the Nazi past of his own family.” In this process he had a falling out with his father and joined a Maoist sect, only finally to reconcile himself with his father.

Lau writes that Baberowski's dispute with his father, who during the war, as a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA—Storm Troopers), had brutally killed American soldiers, was “a key to the central

question that runs throughout all his work: How does someone who is not an evil person become a violent perpetrator? What happens to people when they enter the ‘space of violence’ (Raum der Gewalt)?”

Baberowski’s reactionary theory of violence is thus glorified as an attempt “to understand the father” and “shelter” him, and the relativization of the Holocaust is interpreted as a kind of collateral damage from the coming to grips with his family history. It is worth noting that this is not about a father who had been severely traumatized by his actions in the war. On the contrary, the SA man is described as “a cheerful Rhinelander,” who presented himself as a victim and played down his brutal acts as “clay pigeon shooting.”

Lau herself discusses the relationship between Baberowski’s trivialization of Nazi crimes and his theory of violence, which she summarises with the words: “It is not ideology that enables excesses of violence. In the end, one cannot explain them. They are always latent as a possibility, today no less than 70 or 200 years ago.” She adds, quoting Baberowski, “Man is not what he becomes, he has always been complete.”

This religious and abstruse notion precludes any possible social and historical development by human beings. Advanced by a professor of history, it appears to be a rejection of the subject of his own studies. In reality, this irrationalism is a core component of reactionary theory. Violence and wars are justified by the supposedly immutable violence of Man. The moral distinction between murderer and victim is blurred.

The relationship between such a crude and reactionary worldview and the relativization of Nazi crimes was already discussed in the 1980s in the Historians Dispute. The historian Hans Mommsen, an opponent of Nolte, wrote in 1986 in the *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, that the revisionist historians refer to a “conditio humana,” a violent and basic human condition, “to classify those who draw the obligation from the Nazi experience to change the social foundations that contributed to making the ‘Holocaust’ possible as unrealistic ‘optimists,’ while more realistic thinkers are satisfied with the insight ‘that the genocide he (Hitler) put into effect was not the first and was not the last,’ as if after the experience of high incomprehensible horror, it could be business as usual on the world historical agenda.”

That positions rejected by Mommsen are cheerfully published again today without even discussing their deeply reactionary nature is in itself an expression of the intellectual decline that gained momentum with the reunification of Germany in 1990. Lau’s lack of concern is typical of a milieu whose political horizon ends with their own immediate interests. For them, the study of the unimaginable crimes of German imperialism has become an annoying obstacle.

For this reason, Lau mentions only a few words of the criticism of the IYSSE and attempts to discredit it by dishonest means. For example, she calls the IYSSE a “tiny” and “obscure” group, and puts its work on a par with Baberowski’s youthful activities in the Communist League of West Germany (KBW). In reality, the contrast could not be greater.

Baberowski joined this Maoist group a quarter century after Khrushchev’s secret speech had destroyed any remaining doubts regarding the crimes of Stalin. He glorified not only Stalin and Mao, but, by his own admission, collected money for the Cambodian butcher Pol Pot.

In contrast, the IYSSE stands in the tradition of the Trotskyist movement, whose members risked their lives in the struggle against Stalinism. In Germany, no one had so emphatically warned of the danger of Nazism before 1933 as Leon Trotsky, who tirelessly

criticized the policies of the Stalinist Communist Party because it rejected a united front with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) against the Nazis, enabling Hitler to come to power by dividing the working class.

But for today’s hacks, addressing these serious historical issues, working through the crimes of the Nazis—even basic intellectual honesty—are considered obstacles to success.

The fact that *Die Zeit* now supports revisionist views it had rejected vehemently during the Historians Dispute is directly related to the return of Germany to aggressive Great Power politics and militarism. To overcome the inherent resistance to this development in broad layers of the population, the historical crimes of German imperialism must be played down.

Die Zeit, which is close to the SPD (former SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was one of its editors from 1983 until his death in 2015), has played a leading role in this revival of militarism from the start.

In 2013, its editor, Jochen Bittner, was involved in drafting the strategy paper “New power, new responsibility,” a kind of blueprint for a more aggressive German foreign policy. In the *New York Times* in 2013, Bittner complained about the Germans’ lack of enthusiasm for war. A “comfortable and self-righteous foreign policy stance that the Germans have cultivated for 70 years” and a “too deeply ingrained pacifism” threatened to undermine the ability of “Europe’s unrivalled superpower, its largest economy and its most powerful political force ... to consider military intervention,” he warned.

Die Zeit co-editor Josef Joffe, who, like Bittner, belongs to numerous transatlantic think tanks, also ranks among the hawks on the question of war. In 2003, he supported the Iraq war, and he advocated a massive war effort in Syria in 2011.

“Whoever wants to bring down the Assad dictatorship, or at least paralyze it,” he wrote at the time in *Die Zeit*, “must destroy the power supply, communications facilities, factories and bridges as in Serbia; better yet, refineries, gasoline storage facilities, airfields and ports. And, with or without precision weapons, he must accept thousands of civilian deaths.”



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