Berlin's Humboldt University attempts to suppress student criticism of Jörg Baberowski

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19 April 2017

The administrative presidium of Humboldt University has instructed security personnel to stop students from distributing leaflets opposing the institution's declaration that public criticism of Professor Jörg Baberowski is "unacceptable."

The intervention of the university's security personnel occurred last Wednesday and Thursday. Members and supporters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality were handing out a leaflet that condemned the presidium's statement as an attack on freedom of speech.

The university's defense of Baberowski comes just one month after a finding by the District Court in Cologne that the professor could be described as a "right-wing extremist."

In response to a request by the IYSSE for an explanation of the actions taken by security personnel, a representative of the department of public relations stated: "No political activities should take place here at all."

This act is a fundamental assault on the freedom of opinion of all students. Humboldt University President Sabine Kunst, a well-connected Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician, is claiming the power to determine what can and cannot be said at the university. The actions of the Humboldt administration are aimed at turning universities into authoritarian institutions.

Numerous schools in Germany still bear the names of Sophie and Hans Scholl, members of the White Rose resistance movement who were executed in 1943 because they wrote and distributed leaflets opposing the Nazi regime. The reference to the Scholl siblings is particularly appropriate because criticism of Baberowski has centered on his apologetic attitude toward the Nazi regime. In an interview published in *Der Spiegel* in February 2014, Baberowski declared: "Hitler was not a psychopath. He was not vicious. He did not want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table."

Baberowski also stated that the late Professor Ernst Nolte, the leading academic apologist for Nazism in postwar Germany, was unjustly criticized.

Baberowski's relativizing of Hitler's crimes is grounded on the claim, which is wildly popular in extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi circles, both in Germany and internationally, that the actions of the Third Reich were a regrettable, but understandable, response to the threat posed by Soviet Bolshevism.

He extends his apologetics to the conduct of the German army (*Wehrmacht*) during its invasion of the Soviet Union, denying that it consciously and deliberately waged a war of extermination. The *Wehrmacht* merely responded to the actions of the Soviet resistance: "Stalin and his generals imposed a new kind of war on the Wehrmacht which no longer spared the civilian population," he wrote in 2007.

In his 2012 book, *Scorched Earth*, Baberowski further developed his apologetic argument. Arguing that fascist ideology and anti-Semitism played no role in the mass killings organized by the German army, he wrote, "Hitler's soldiers did not wage an ideological war, but were rather fighting a war whose dynamics they could not escape."

These are positions that Humboldt University now declares to be above criticism. The claim of Sabine Kunst—and all the major newspapers in Germany, which have sprung to Baberowski's defense—that Baberowski is a simple scholar who has been subjected to a brutal left-wing political attack—is absurd on its face. Baberowski's relativization of Nazi crimes has the most far-reaching political implications.

One has only to pose the following question: What would be the political implications of a leading German politician—or, for that matter, a political figure in any major country—declaring: "Hitler was not vicious. He did not want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table."

In fact, whatever Baberowski's intentions—and there is no reason to believe that he does not understand the political implications of his statements—he is providing a fraudulent, pseudo-scholarly cover for the rehabilitation of the Third Reich and its leader. Right-wing politicians can legitimize their defense of Hitler by prefacing their apologetics with the phrase: "As the great historian Jörg Baberowski has

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explained to us so eloquently, Hitler was not vicious."

It is no accident that politicians from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and several right-wing publications have declared their solidarity with Baberowski.

Against the backdrop of a growing clamor by leading German politicians and the media for a vast expansion of the country's military operations, Baberowski has emerged as a spokesman for tough-minded realists. Germany, the argument goes, must get over the moral burden imposed by outdated guilt feelings over the events of the 1930s and 1940s.

At one public meeting, Baberowski declared: "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, and one should stay out of it." Later, Baberowski claimed that his words were quoted out of context. But no one in the audience believed for a moment that they were listening to an antiwar message from a pacifist. Baberowski's meaning was clear enough: When Germany launches a military action, it must do whatever is necessary to win.

Baberowski also emerged during the refugee crisis as a right-wing opponent of the admission of refugees into Germany. He is constantly in the public eye, whether in articles and interviews or on talk shows, attacking the German government from the right and agitating against refugees in the style of the AfD. For this, he has won praise from Breitbart News, the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer* and a slew of other right-wing publications such as *Junge Freiheit*, the magazine *Compact* and the blog *Politically Incorrect*.

The current defense of Baberowski by the university has taken the form of a series of hysterical denunciations in the bourgeois press of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International) and the IYSSE. The leading bourgeois daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [FAZ], has published several articles, including one on its front page, warning of the "powerful influence" of the WSWS on public opinion in Germany.

Thirty years ago, during the famous "Historians Dispute"—among the most important intellectual events in post-World War II Germany—the FAZ provided a platform for Ernst Nolte's Nazi apologetics. It has been among the leading voices calling for an acceleration of the revival of German militarism. The FAZ defends Baberowski because it shares his right-wing positions. Germany's return to an aggressive imperialist policy based on military power requires the relativization of the Nazis' crimes.

The same political considerations motivate Humboldt University President Kunst. The SPD, of which she is a member, is playing a leading role in reviving German militarism. It was none other than Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who was then the foreign minister and is now the German president, who was one of the first to demand an "end to military restraint" in 2014.

It must be noted that this effort to suppress criticism of Baberowski is taking place in a city that is ruled by a Red-Red-Green [SPD, Left Party, Green Party] coalition government. Sabine Kunst could not have come to the defense of Baberowski without being assured of the Berlin government's political support. This is a further substantiation of the connection between the defense of Baberowski and the efforts of all the bourgeois parties (including the Left Party and the Greens) to legitimize the revival of militarism.

The *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* and the IYSSE will not be intimidated by censorship or threats from the university administration. In the face of the right-wing campaign defending Baberowski, the support for the IYSSE among students continues to grow at Humboldt University and throughout Germany. The readership of the German-language section of the *World Socialist Web Site* has been growing rapidly.

It is *unacceptable*, to the German working class and youth, that at the very university where Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was planned, it is no longer permissible to criticize positions that justify the Nazis' crimes, promote a revival of militarism and instigate hatred of persecuted refugees.

We therefore call upon students, workers and youth to protest against Humboldt University's attempt to muzzle free speech.

Letters of protest can be sent directly to the president of the HU Sabine Kunst: praesidentin@hu-berlin.de, with a copy to iysse@gleichheit.de.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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