

Open letter from the IYSSE to the president of Humboldt University in Berlin

22 April 2017

In an interview with the daily Süddeutsche Zeitung, Sabine Kunst, the president of Humboldt University in Berlin, has sharply attacked students for criticizing right-wing professor Jörg Baberowski. We are publishing here an Open Letter by Sven Wurm, the spokesman for the IYSSE at Humboldt University. He rejects Kunst's accusations and explains the social and political issues behind the dispute with Baberowski.

Dear Ms. Kunst,

We are outraged by your interview that appeared in the 18 April edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In it, you present Humboldt University professors Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler as the victims of a defamation campaign and denounce students at your own university for engaging critically with these professors.

While you mention no names, your denunciation is primarily directed against the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which is represented in the student parliament by four members. The IYSSE has criticised Baberowski and Münkler's right-wing views at well-attended public meetings, in leaflets and in articles that have been published on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

You do not utter a word about the content of our criticism in your interview. Instead, you resort to allegations and false assertions. You state that "accusations are being spread that are not substantiated by arguments," that "campaigns are being organised that are incompatible with controversies at universities," and that there is "no possibility for those accused to defend themselves with the methods of scholarly debate." You compare our arguments with "fake news," describe them as a "shit storm," and claim, "The defamations are coming from a source where no discussion is tolerated."

You know very well, Ms. Kunst, that this is not true. Over the past three years, the IYSSE has addressed letters to the university administration on no less than six occasions. We have complained of attempts to restrict our right to freedom of opinion and of attacks by Professor Baberowski on me personally. In these letters, we have carefully explained our differences with Baberowski and Münkler, with reference to sources.

You never answered these letters or acknowledged their receipt. So don't claim now that it is we who are avoiding a debate with arguments.

We wrote our first letter to your predecessor, Professor Olbertz, on 22 February, 2014. We protested Baberowski's use of security personnel to block students and professors from attending a public colloquium because they wanted to ask critical questions of Robert Service. Amongst those locked out was Mario Kessler, a professor at Potsdam University. Baberowski had invited his British colleague, Service, to Humboldt University to present his discredited biography of Leon Trotsky.

Service's Trotsky biography had been condemned by the leading US journal *American Historical Review* and the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board David North. Fourteen German-speaking historians, in a letter to Suhrkamp Verlag, had denounced the book as a "piece of hack work." Among the letter's signatories were the late Hermann Weber, the head of the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of Vienna Oliver Rathkolb, and the head of the German Resistance Memorial Center Peter Steinbach. Do you also want to accuse these renowned historians of refusing to engage in scholarly debate?

Supporters of Baberowski and members of his staff were always allowed to speak at length at the meetings held by the IYSSE at Humboldt. Nobody was prevented from expressing his or her opinion. At one meeting, two professors from the faculty of history, Michael Wildt and Hannes Grandits, participated in the discussion. Although no agreement was reached, there was an intensive and serious debate.

Moreover, all articles critical of Münkler and Baberowski that we have published on the *World Socialist Web Site* remain accessible and can be reviewed by anyone. Some even appeared in the form of a book *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* published in the summer of 2015.

Your accusation that the critics of Baberowski "simply made claims and then avoided all debate" lacks any factual basis. And the attempt to portray Baberowski as the victim of a "campaign" against which he cannot defend himself is utterly absurd.

Professor Baberowski has at his disposal a well-funded department and enjoys virtually unlimited access to the radio, television and newspapers. As far as we can tell, hardly anyone apart from the IYSSE and the *World Socialist Web Site* has thus far criticised his provocative historical and political statements. This criticism has found support among students—not only in Berlin, but also in Bremen, Hamburg and other cities.

Baberowski responded to this by taking the Bremen students to court. It is unprecedented for a professor to sue students for criticising statements he has made in public. It is your task as president of Humboldt University to prevent such attempts to intimidate students. But you are not living up to your responsibility. When, on February 12 this year, I complained in a letter to you that Prof. Baberowski had insulted and threatened me personally, you neither answered my letter nor opened up an investigation.

Although he lives in Berlin, Baberowski sued the Bremen students in a Cologne court that is notorious for its restrictive interpretation of press freedom. Despite this, he lost on an important point. The court permitted the Bremen students to call him a right-wing extremist on the grounds that there exists a "sufficient starting point" for this. The ruling made it explicitly clear that the students' criticism of the professor was not a "smear," because "the required reference to

relevant detail is present.”

Right-wing media outlets, led by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, responded by unleashing a campaign defending Baberowski and attacking the IYSSE. The presidium of Humboldt University released a statement, signed by you, which declared “media attacks”—i.e., public criticism—of Baberowski to be “unacceptable” and indirectly threatened legal consequences.

So in reality it is you who are denigrating and suppressing freedom of opinion. What you falsely portray as a defence of “scholarly debate” is a modern form of “Gleichschaltung” [the suppression of anti-Nazi views during the Third Reich]. You want to determine what can and cannot be said at universities and what rules should apply. In this regard, you have no respect for the opinions of students or their democratic rights.

The content of the dispute with Baberowski concerns issues of great societal importance. At issue is the attempt to reevaluate Hitler’s role and the crimes of Germany during the two world wars without permitting any criticism of this to be raised. You do not utter a single word about this. However, Baberowski’s downplaying of the Nazis was at the center of our criticism from the outset. In February 2014, he stated in *Der Spiegel*, “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.”

Imagine if a leading German politician—let us say, Chancellor Angela Merkel—said something like this. It would become the subject of headlines in the press around the world the next day and be interpreted as a defence of Nazi crimes. When President Donald Trump’s spokesman Sean Spicer recently asserted that Hitler never used chemical weapons during the Second World War, it provoked international outrage. But when a professor of Humboldt University makes such a statement, he ought to be spared any criticism! Politicians who say something similar in the future will be able to base themselves on the “renowned, outstanding scholar” (your words) who said the same thing.

We did not tear Baberowski’s comment about Hitler out of context. It was part of an article entitled “A Past that Won’t Pass,” which, according to its author, Dirk Kurbjuweit, dealt with the question, “How much guilt has Germany acquired throughout its history?” Baberowski explicitly expressed his support in the article for Ernst Nolte, who triggered the Historians Dispute (Historikerstreit) in 1986 by downplaying National Socialism. Baberowski informed the author that he already sided with Nolte when he was a student. “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right,” Baberowski said.

Nolte’s thesis—that although the Nazis’ crimes were regrettable, they were understandable given the threat posed by Bolshevism—runs like a red thread through Baberowski’s work. Among other things, he claims that the Nazis’ war of annihilation in the East was imposed upon them by Stalin and his generals, and that fascist ideology played no role in it. We have documented this in detail.

We do not need to explain to you, Ms. Kunst, that the political right in Germany has long pursued the goal of relativising Hitler’s crimes in one way or another.

In the first two decades after the war, professors who had taught under the Nazis continued to dominate the lecture halls and blocked an examination of the Nazis’ crimes. In the 1960s, the student movement played an important role in forcing German society to confront the monstrous and historically unprecedented crimes of the Nazis. The election of Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former Nazi Party

member, to the position of German chancellor provoked particular outrage and opposition. The famous slap in the face Beate Klarsfeld gave to Kiesinger in 1968 met with broad public sympathy.

Ever since, the right wing has sought revenge. Ernst Nolte was only the most well known among many who sought to downplay the Nazis’ crimes. One year prior to the Historians Dispute, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl visited an SS cemetery in Bitburg with US President Ronald Reagan, which became an international scandal.

But while Nolte was isolated in the Historians Dispute, Baberowski’s theses, which go much further, enjoy support today in academic and political circles. You know as well as we do, Ms. Kunst, that this is linked to the efforts to transform Germany once again into a major military power.

In your effort to suppress criticism of Baberowski’s right-wing positions, you have influential allies. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which gave Nolte a platform in the Historians Dispute, *Die Welt* and *Cicero* magazine have all published slanderous articles against the IYSSE in recent days. The Berlin Alternative for Germany (AfD) and right-wing publications such as *Junge Freiheit*, *Compact* and *Politically Incorrect*, as well as *Breitbart News* and the *Daily Stormer* in the US, have backed Baberowski. Even though you claim otherwise, they view him as one of their own, as a right-wing extremist.

One only needs to read the comments posted under the articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Welt* and *Die Zeit* to see the right-wing filth that is being stirred up. They are full of expressions of relief that the German guilt complex is finally being overcome and one can once again be proud of the past. The statement of far-right AfD member Bernd Höcke, who posted links to Baberowski’s articles on his Facebook page, appears moderate by comparison.

Your attempt to present Baberowski as a “renowned academic scholar” does not impress us. In a country that has produced many renowned historians, nobody seriously interested in historical issues can be impressed by Baberowski’s thin and subjective opus, based as it is on warmed-up anticommunist clichés from the Cold War era. Even *Die Zeit*, which in a miserable article attempts to justify Baberowski, admits that in Baberowski’s interpretation of history “anti-Semitism, racial hatred, historical constellations [sink] into insignificance.”

We are not interested in Baberowski as an individual. We want to prevent Humboldt University from becoming, as it did in the past, a state-directed training ground for right-wing and militarist ideologies. We will therefore neither be intimidated, nor permit our criticisms to be restricted. We have always openly stated our opinions and are more than willing to debate them publicly. But we are not prepared to accept censorship and the restriction of freedom of opinion, and we will mobilise support for this both inside and outside the university.

Respectfully yours,

Sven Wurm, for the Humboldt University chapter of the IYSSE



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