

May Day 2017

The Growth of German Militarism and the Rewriting of History

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This speech was delivered by Sven Wurm, Spokesman for the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Humboldt University), to the 2017 International May Day Online Rally, held on April 30.

In order to wage new imperialist wars and commit fresh crimes, history must be rewritten, and the criminal role of German imperialism minimised and denied. A few days ago, the journal of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers published an interview with an historian, who drew the following comparison between Stalin and Hitler:

“I’ve compared Hitler to Stalin. Stalin was a psychopath, Hitler was not. Stalin enjoyed violence, Hitler did not. Hitler knew what he was doing. He was a pencil pusher who did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds.”

Already in 2014, the same person had told Germany’s most widely read weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*: “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious. He did not want to talk about the extermination of Jews at his table.”

The author in both cases is Jörg Baberowski, who holds the chair of Eastern European history at Humboldt University in Berlin.

For anyone hearing this, the purpose of these remarks is perfectly clear: it is an attempt to play down the crimes of the Nazis and rehabilitate Hitler. Everyone knows of the abominable crimes committed by the Nazis, and is well aware that Hitler “enjoyed violence.”

For almost seventy years, many in Germany and internationally believed it was impossible to rehabilitate the Nazis. The wounds left by the dreadful memory of World War II, the attack on Poland, the war of extermination against the Soviet Union, and the

Holocaust, in which six million Jews died, ran too deep.

However, as the ruling class in Germany once again dreams of world power and aims to bring Europe under its hegemony and compete with the US, the spirits of the past inevitably return. In order to wage new imperialist wars and commit fresh crimes, history must be rewritten and the criminal role of German imperialism in the 20th century must be minimised and denied.

The political scientist Herfried Münkler, who also teaches at Humboldt University, summed up this goal in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in early 2014: “There can hardly be a responsible policy operating in Europe when one has the idea: It was all our fault. With regard to 1914, that is a legend... We tilt foreign policy toward the notion: because we are historically guilty, we are not permitted to participate in foreign policy anywhere...”

Only a few weeks later, the then German president, Gauck, and the German government proclaimed the “end of military restraint” at the 2014 Munich Security Conference, and declared that Germany now had to defend its interests more decisively, all over the world, including militarily. This policy has already been put into practice in the form of the right-wing coup in Ukraine, NATO’s military offensive against Russia, and the wars in Mali, Syria and Iraq.

What is now being prepared behind the backs of the population, however, goes much further. The defence budget is to be almost doubled and the Bundeswehr massively rearmed. Internal documents from the Defence Ministry refer to the enlargement of the army, navy and air force. In the media there is discussion on

the reintroduction of conscription and Germany acquiring its own nuclear weapons.

It is remarkable that, apart from the ICFI, no one has challenged this development. There has been no outcry in the media. There has been no criticism on the part of alleged leftist parties and organizations, which otherwise like to boast of their “antifascist” credentials. On the contrary: the Left Party and the Greens have been an integral part of the return of German militarism from the very beginning, and even organized joint meetings with Münkler and Baberowski. The entire establishment has shifted far to the right and thus strengthened extreme right-wing and fascist forces, such as Pegida and the AfD.

Only the ICFI and the SEP have taken these developments, and the revision of history, seriously. We have linked them directly to the return of German militarism. We stated that the bourgeoisie needed a new historical narrative to overcome the broad hostility to militarism and war. We refused to bury our heads in the sand in the hope that the rewriting of history would have no effect if sufficient numbers of people just closed their eyes and ears.

Our stance has met with considerable interest among students at the universities and among workers and pupils. At many well-attended meetings, we have warned of the return of German militarism and the political implications of rehabilitating the Nazis.

We have opposed numerous attempts to suppress our criticisms. When the HU administration declared that we would only receive a room for a meeting on the condition that we refrained from criticizing professors, we organized a campaign against this censorship, won broad support among students and finally got a room without any conditions.

Two years ago, under the title “Scholarship or War Propaganda?” we published a book detailing the attempts to revise history at Humboldt University, the return of German militarism and the subsequent controversy.

Support for the IYSSE has continued to grow. We have been elected to the student parliament for the past three years—each time with a better result than the year before. This year, the IYSSE received more votes than the student groups of the CDU, the Greens and the Left Party. We have introduced important resolutions defending the right to criticize right-wing professors,

and have won the support of the student parliament.

In the meantime, students from other German universities have taken up our criticisms. Student bodies at a number of universities in and outside Berlin have expressed their support for the work of the IYSSE, condemned Baberowski and supported us against the attacks of the university administration. Three days ago, the HU student parliament passed a resolution, by a large majority, calling on the university administration to publicly revoke its support for Baberowski and take a stand against his right-wing positions.

The events at Humboldt University contain important political lessons. As if under a microscope, one can observe what is taking place today in capitalist society in every country: a small but influential stratum at the top is seeking to impose its agenda of war, dictatorship and social counterrevolution against the vast majority of the population—against the working class and youth.

Opposition to this development is enormous. It finds, however, no expression in the existing parties and organizations. The intervention of the IYSSE has brought this opposition to the surface and is providing it with a political perspective. Even our most determined opponents recognize this. In a vile attack on the IYSSE and the WSWS, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was forced to concede that we are having “a very powerful impact.”

As was the case in the 1930s, today it is also only the Trotskyists who comprehend the real danger of war, who warn against it and formulate a revolutionary perspective to oppose war. The defence of historical truth plays an important role in the political education of a new generation of socialist workers and youth. We call upon all our listeners to draw the lessons from this struggle and participate in the construction of our party.



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