

Jörg Baberowski insists that Hitler was “not vicious”

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In a lengthy interview with the journal *Forschung & Lehre (Research & Teaching)*, published by the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers, Jörg Baberowski insists that “Hitler was not vicious.” The right-wing historian from Berlin’s Humboldt University said this previously in an interview with the weekly *Der Spiegel* published three years ago.

The interviewer asks, “Statements from you are shared by far-right platforms such as those of the NPD [German National Democratic Party] and Breitbart. Does that not cast doubt on the way you expressed yourself?” Baberowski replies, “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 an armchair perpetrator (Schreibtischtäter), who did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds. This does not make his deeds morally better, but worse. Nobody can really misunderstand what I mean.”

Indeed, this is a statement that nobody can misunderstand. The assertion that Hitler was an “armchair perpetrator” who “did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds” and did not “enjoy violence” is a monstrous trivialisation of the worst crimes committed in the history of mankind. This justification of the Nazi regime explains why Breitbart News, the NPD and other neo-Nazi publications support Baberowski.

The fact that Baberowski compares Hitler to Stalin in order to exonerate the former does not alter the apotheotic character of his statement. On the contrary, it confirms that Baberowski follows the argument of the German revisionist historian Ernst Nolte, whom he has defended in the past. In 1986, Nolte claimed that the crimes of the Nazis were an understandable response to Bolshevism. Nolte later became a doyen of the far-right.

Baberowski’s exoneration of Hitler makes clear that he is not a genuine historian, but rather an extreme right-wing ideologue. Recent research on National Socialism, based on extensive and reliable source material, has substantiated the extent of Hitler’s personal participation in the crimes of the regime inseparably linked to his name. This is elaborated in a number of Hitler biographies by well known historians that have appeared since the turn of the century. They completely disprove Baberowski’s presentation of an “armchair perpetrator” who “did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds.”

In his more than 1,000-page biography of the Nazi leader, published in 2015, Peter Longerich stresses that Hitler was not simply a “catalyst” of historical processes. “Rather, he shaped them in an extremely independent and very personal manner by channelling, amplifying and bundling existing forces and energies, mobilizing unused potential, and brutally exploiting the weakness or passivity of his opponents before destroying them.” What comes to light is “less a man fulfilling a program or an ideologue, but first and foremost an unscrupulous and proactive politician.” [1]

This is a very different picture from that of an armchair perpetrator issuing decrees and instructions in the quiet of his office, thoroughly impervious to the consequences of his actions.

Longerich describes the fanatical anti-Semitism, the criminal energy and the personal vindictiveness with which Hitler planned and implemented the monstrous crimes of his regime.

In the summer of 1934, Hitler personally travelled to Bad Wiessee to lead the arrest of SA leaders, who were subsequently shot on his orders. On the pretext that SA leader Ernst Röhm had planned a coup, Hitler liquidated over a hundred rivals from within and without the NSDAP [Nazi Party], personally ticking off their names from lists. Among the victims were his predecessor as Reich chancellor, Kurt von Schleicher, and his wife, as well as other opponents with whom he settled old accounts, including some who were no longer politically active.

The initiatives for the euthanasia program, the war of annihilation in the East and the Holocaust all stemmed from Hitler himself. In executing these crimes, Hitler worked closely with two key figures, SS chief Heinrich Himmler and his closest collaborator, Reinhard Heydrich, with whom he maintained almost daily contact.

Longerich writes: “Immediately after the start of the war, Hitler launched a radical racist policy: he made the fundamental decision to subject Poland to a brutal policy of Germanization; on his initiative a first attempt was made to deport Jews from the ‘Greater German Reich’ to a death zone in Poland; in the Reich, he initiated the systematic assassination of patients in mental asylums, which resulted in the deaths of more than 70,000 people by the summer of 1941.” [2]

It was also Hitler, according to Longerich, who “made the decisions in the spring and early summer of 1942 that resulted in the murder of all European Jews during the war.” [3]

In his Hitler biography of 2013, Volker Ullrich also refers to the “Röhm-Putsch” [4], and describes how Hitler, in the course of the slaughter, fell into downright ecstasy, a kind of exceptional psychological condition in which he was capable of any sort of brutal violence. To the end of his life he maintained the capacity to work himself up into a rage of violence, only to appear affable a short time afterwards—typical characteristics of a psychopath.

The best answer to Baberowski’s revision of history is given by Ian Kershaw in the epilogue of his well known Hitler biography. He summarizes Hitler’s role as follows:

Never in history has such ruination—physical and moral—been associated with the name of one man... Hitler’s name justifiably stands for all time as that of the chief instigator of the most profound collapse of civilization in modern times. The extreme form of personal rule which an ill-educated beerhall demagogue and racist bigot, a narcissistic, megalomaniac, self-styled national saviour was allowed to acquire in a modern, economically advanced and cultured land, known for its philosophers and poets, was absolutely decisive in the terrible unfolding of events in those fateful twelve years.

Hitler was the main author of a war leaving over 50 million dead and millions more grieving their lost ones and trying to put their shattered lives together again. Hitler was the chief inspiration of a genocide the like of which the world had never known, rightly to be viewed in coming times as a defining episode of the twentieth century.” [5]

Now the department head of the most prestigious university in the German capital reaffirms in the official journal of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers that the very same man, Adolf Hitler, was not vicious and did not want to know the bloody consequences of his deeds. As if this is not enough, Baberowski is supported and defended by the presidium of Humboldt University, many professors and the overwhelming majority of the German media.

The dispute with Baberowski has now been going on for three years. In February 2014, he declared in *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.” [6] When the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and its youth organization, the IYSSE, protested against this in articles and public meetings, winning support from students and workers, a political storm erupted.

The university administration sought, unsuccessfully, to stifle any criticism of Baberowski. The media, led by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, organized a veritable witch-hunt in the spring of 2015. It presented Baberowski and his colleague Herfried Münkler, who had also been criticized, as victims of slander and bullying.

Shortly afterwards, Baberowski emerged as a political figurehead for the new right. In numerous articles, talk shows and interviews he agitated against refugees and campaigned for an authoritarian state. When in March this year the Cologne District Court (where Baberowski had sued the Bremen University student association) ruled that the professor could be described as a “right-wing extremist,” his defenders stepped up their campaign.

In an official statement, the presidium of Humboldt University declared all criticism of Baberowski to be “unacceptable.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* rained down lies and slanders on the SGP and the IYSSE. It described criticism of Baberowski’s far-right opinions as “character assassination,” which threatened the “university as a place for free discourse and scientific dispute, intellectual thought experiments and free speech without censorship,” as well as the “constitutionally guaranteed freedom of science.” The daily *Die Welt*, the magazine *Cicero* and other media outlets adopted the same line.

In all of the sound and fury directed against the SGP and the IYSSE, none of Baberowski’s defenders mentioned the book (*Scholarship or War Propaganda*) and the numerous articles that had been published carefully documenting and analyzing his far-right positions. Not one of them addressed the arguments raised by the SGP and IYSSE. None of the material published by the SGP and the *World Socialist Web Site* constituted personal attacks on Baberowski. The criticisms were directed exclusively to statements he has written or made in public appearances. It is Baberowski and his followers who attempt to suppress and ban the exposure of historical falsifications that trivialise Hitler’s crimes and to pave the way for his rehabilitation.

The campaign against the IYSSE is a reaction to the considerable response it has received from students. Student associations (AStas) in Bremen, Hamburg, Lüneburg and Heidelberg, as well as the student parliament of the Free University in Berlin, have protested against Baberowski’s right-wing extremist positions. At the end of April, the Humboldt University student parliament passed a motion by an overwhelming majority calling upon the university administration to “publicly withdraw its statements of solidarity with Professor

Baberowski.”

In his interview with *Forschung & Lehre*, Baberowski now goes even further in his attempts to exonerate Hitler. The fact that a magazine that, according to its own description, is addressed to “professors and scientists” and sent out to more than 30,000 members of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers, prints such a whitewash of Hitler without comment is a scandal. Previously one associated such statements only with far-right publications.

Moreover, the interview with Baberowski is conducted at a level that has no place in an academic journal. It has more in common with the type of hate speech found on right-wing Internet forums than with factual debate. Baberowski reaffirms his right-wing extremist views, does not address a single word in response to the arguments of his critics, and slanders them in a manner typical of the far right.

He denounces the SGP as a “sect” and “psycho-terror group” that moves with “criminal energy” against him. He claims that the SGP published a leaflet “on which my head and a swastika were to be seen,” connects the SGP to “threats of murder” and attacks on his house, and accuses it of using false names in order to avoid public discussion. These are open lies without a shred of evidence to support them. In fact, the IYSSE has organised public discussions with hundreds of participants who were able to speak freely, including defenders of Baberowski.

Other allegations Baberowski makes are simply absurd. On the one hand, he asserts that the SGP and the IYSSE consist of “five insignificant persons whom no one takes seriously,” while on the other hand he accuses them of excluding him (a prominent figure who has the widest access to the media and is regularly featured on TV, radio and in the newspapers) from “public discourse.”

In 1986, when Ernst Nolte sought to exonerate National Socialism by claiming that Hitler’s crimes had been provoked by Bolshevism, he unleashed what became known as the Historians’ Debate. Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Hans Mommsen and many other renowned academics intervened to oppose his position. Nolte lost the debate and was discredited as a historian for the rest of his life. Today, Baberowski’s arguments, which go much further than Nolte’s, either win support or are met with silence. How can this be explained?

It is evident that major political and social processes are at work. The trivialization of Hitler’s crimes is closely linked to the resurgence of German great power politics and militarism, which find increasing support not only in traditionally conservative, but also in formerly liberal academic circles.

The ruling class in Germany cannot return to a policy of war and militarism without whitewashing its historical crimes and reviving the political traditions that have played such a devastating role in German history—nationalism, racism and the suppression of opposition. This is why the organ of the Association of University Professors and Lecturers and conservative daily newspapers provide a platform for Baberowski to promote his far-right opinions while slandering his critics.

Similar developments are taking place in other spheres of society. The neo-Nazi terror cell in the German army (Bundeswehr) that has been uncovered in recent days could thrive and remain undetected for such a long time only because the glorification of Nazism and the Wehrmacht (the military under Hitler) is widespread in the army and supported and encouraged by senior officers.

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Notes

[1] Peter Longerich, *Hitler*, Pantheon Edition, April 2017, pp. 11-12 (translated from German)

[2] Ibid. p. 1009

[3] Ibid. p. 1011

[4] Volker Ullrich, *Adolf Hitler. Die Jahre des Aufstiegs 1889–1939. Biographie, Band 1*, Frankfurt am Main, 2013

[5] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945, Nemesis*, Penguin, 2000, p. 841

[6] "Culpability Question Divides Historians Today," Spiegel Online, February 14, 2014



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