

Right-wing Zionist campaign against new director of Center for Jewish History in New York City

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The American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), headquartered in New York City, has bowed to pressure from right-wing Zionist circles, canceling two public events that were scheduled for the next few months. The cancellations are connected to a broader effort to derail the appointment of David Myers to head the Center for Jewish History (CJH), the umbrella organization of which the AJHS is a constituent part.

As reported by the *New York Times* this week, the reading of a play by Dan Fishback, as well as a separate panel to discuss the centenary of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, were both canceled after a vote by the board of the AJHS.

Playwright Fishback said his work, entitled “Rubble Rubble,” dealt with “how Jewish families are broken over the politics of Israel-Palestine.” He added, “The people who made this decision had no access to my script. This was about my beliefs.” The play reading had been originally scheduled for December 14. Fishback said he would attempt to have the reading staged elsewhere. “I want to use this as an opportunity to shed light on negative effects of silencing in the Jewish community,” he said. “This play will see the light of day one way or another.”

The panel on the Balfour Declaration, the document in which British imperialism accepted in broad terms the Zionist ambition for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, had been originally scheduled for October 26 and was canceled on barely two weeks’ notice. It apparently drew the ire of right-wing critics because it was co-sponsored by the group Jewish Voice for Peace, which opposes Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, and argues that “being Jewish and Judaism are not synonymous with Zionism

or support for Israel.”

The society’s board issued a brief statement declaring, “While the programs themselves may have merit, they do not align with the mission of the AJHS.” The vague and mealy-mouthed announcement did not elaborate on why the programs, which had originally been scheduled months earlier, had suddenly been found to be “out of alignment.”

The *Times* reported that several figures in the arts had denounced the AJHS decision. Theater director Rachel Chavkin called it “right-wing censorship.” Ofri Cnaani, who is Israeli-American, removed an installation by her in the lobby of the CJH dealing with the life of anarchist Emma Goldman.

The Center for Jewish History, founded in 2000, is composed of five largely autonomous institutions. The AJHS, founded 125 years ago, is one of four libraries/archive members, including YIVO, dealing with East European Jewish history, and the Leo Baeck Institute, focusing on German Jewish history. The AJHS archives include an original manuscript copy of Emma Lazarus’ famous 1883 poem, “The New Colossus,” which is inscribed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

David Myers, a well-known professor of history from UCLA in Los Angeles, was named to head the CJH last June. The right-wing Zionist lobby, and the Campus Watch website in particular, has since mounted a campaign demanding his removal.

Campus Watch, a web-based project of the *Middle East Forum*, was founded 15 years ago by Daniel Pipes. Pipes, who has claimed he is only publicizing and arguing against the views of his political opponents, has in fact campaigned to have academic

figures and cultural officials removed and ostracized because of their political views.

In typical McCarthyite fashion, Campus Watch campaigns against those it deems “unpatriotic.” It combines an American super-patriotism with Zionist xenophobia in relation to the Palestinian people. Opponents of the Netanyahu regime and his ultra-right backers are smeared as anti-Semites. Numerous targets have reported receiving death threats in the wake of such smear campaigns. Similar efforts have also targeted Palestinian students and campus organizations.

Myers is far from an opponent of Zionism, but in the eyes of figures like Pipes he is beyond the pale. Myers’ crimes, according to a recent article on the *Algemeiner* website by Cinnamon Stillwell, the West Coast representative of Campus Watch, include an association with J Street, the liberal Zionist lobby.

The UCLA professor of Jewish Studies, who has warned that Israel is in danger of becoming an apartheid state, is a supporter of a “two-state solution,” the proposal for a Palestinian mini-state alongside Israel, which has all but been abandoned by official circles in Israel in recent years, and by the Trump administration as well. Myers has also been accused of insufficient opposition to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, the protest campaign aimed at convincing Washington and other major capitalist governments to pressure the Israeli regime into ending its occupation of Palestinian land seized in the 1967 Six-Day War.

The attacks on Myers have provoked an angry backlash. About 500 academic figures in the field of Jewish studies, including noted Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt, have signed an online petition in defense of the UCLA professor. The petition declares that “a small group of self-appointed vigilantes has mounted a scurrilous campaign demanding Myers’ ouster, claiming without any basis, that he holds anti-Israel views. These detractors are engaging in the worst kind of McCarthyism.”

At least one of the signers of this petition, journalist Mark Oppenheimer, noted in an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* that even if Myers “thought that Israel’s founding was a mistake, or that its privileging of Jews in law and immigration policy was wrong,” that should not disqualify himself from running a scholarly center.

The WSWS has fundamental political differences with the supporters of a more liberal version of Zionism, who are well-represented in academic and intellectual circles, but have no answer to the crisis facing the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. However, the campaign against Myers, the latest in a long series by the Zionist right and by Campus Watch in particular, is a serious attack on democratic rights and academic freedom.



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