

German Green Party-aligned newspaper defends far-right Professor Baberowski

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)
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The *Tageszeitung*, widely referred to as *taz*, a daily close to the German Green Party, devoted its weekend edition to a frontal attack on the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). In an article prominently featured on the front page, and extending over three full pages inside, long-time *taz* Editor Sabine Seifert declares that the IYSSE's criticism of the far-right historian Jörg Baberowski poses a threat to "open debate" and "freedom of expression" at universities.

Even the title of the *taz* article, "This man must be silenced," is absurd. All major media outlets in Germany have put themselves at the disposal of Baberowski, who teaches Eastern European history at Berlin's Humboldt University. There is hardly another professor who appears in public so often. He publishes a regular column in the *Basler Zeitung*, frequently writes for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, lectures on broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk* and other media and participates in numerous podium discussions. He verbally abuses his student critics, has them thrown out of the lectures, demands they be expelled from the university or pursues them with legal complaints.

But for *taz*, freedom of expression is not endangered by Baberowski but by the IYSSE, which has publicly criticized his right-wing views and received support from student bodies in numerous cities and universities—a fact that *taz* conceals. If one follows Seifert's arguments, then Baberowski stands above all criticism. She provides him and other right-wing ideologues with a free pass.

Baberowski is notorious for his propaganda against refugees, his justification for violence, his trivialising of National Socialism (Nazism) and his anti-communist falsification of the Russian Revolution. *Taz* has itself repeatedly critically reported Baberowski's right-wing politics.

But now, the house organ of the former 1968 protest generation and wealthy urban middle class has discovered its heart for the far-right professor. Baberowski is virtually glorified by Seifert. She describes him as a sensitive and self-critical man, who often feels misunderstood, suffers criticism and complains "that there are no longer any discussions, no more disputes at the university."

She enthusiastically portrays his lecture on hermeneutics and history, which the "slim man with the dark metal glasses" holds on "a sunny October morning" in an old lecture hall imbued with "the spirit of Humboldt himself," which awakens the slumbering ideals of a pure education. "Jörg Baberowski's sentences are clear, understandable, beautiful, they are sentences to write down, sentences that unleash something," the *taz* author gushes.

This has absolutely nothing to do with the real Baberowski. His right-wing views are well documented. On September 14, 2015, he

attracted nationwide attention when he ranted in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* against the "talk of a welcoming culture." He justified this with the racist argument that the integration of several million people "breaks the tradition in which we stand and which gives a society stability and consistency." That was just one of many public statements that fuelled the anti-immigrant campaigns of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Even Seifert had to admit that Baberowski regularly writes in the *Basler Zeitung* of right-wing populist Christoph Blocher, and "often retweets people like the publicist Roland Tichy," who "call themselves 'liberal-conservative,' others would say: hard right." But this does not diminish her admiration for the right-wing professor.

Neither is Seifert bothered by the fact that courts in Cologne and Hamburg, where Baberowski had sued the Bremen Asta (Students Union) and the Sozialistischer Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), granted them the right to call him a "right-wing extremist" and "falsifier of history." "He has to live with that since then," she writes laconically. And this even though one of the founders of *taz*, the Berlin lawyer Johannes Eisenberg, defended the Bremen Asta and the SGP against Baberowski and had reported on the outcome of the trial in *taz*.

Baberowski and his colleague, the political scientist Herfried Münkler, have played a central ideological role in the reorientation of German foreign policy in recent years. In February 2014, leading representatives of the German government announced at the Munich Security Conference that the period of military restraint was over, that Germany had to again play a role in Europe and in the world that corresponded to its size and its influence.

Ten days later, newsweekly *Der Spiegel* published an article by Dirk Kurbjuweit titled "World War I Guilt: Culpability Question Divides Historians", posing the question of "German guilt" in the First and Second World Wars. The task of the article was to develop "a new narrative of the 20th century ...a falsification of history that conceals and justifies the crimes of German imperialism," as we wrote.

As star witness for the reassessment of "German guilt," *Der Spiegel* placed Baberowski and Münkler next to the then-still-living Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte. Their reputations as professors at Humboldt University were meant to legitimize the rewriting of history. Münkler had written a book about the First World War glossing over Germany's responsibility for the war. Baberowski faced the more difficult task of downplaying the war crimes of the Nazis. In the *Spiegel* article, he defended Ernst Nolte, who had triggered the "historians dispute" in 1986 with the thesis that National Socialism (Nazism) was a legitimate reaction to Bolshevism.

This thesis runs through Baberowski's own work like a red thread.

For example, in the essay “Kriege in staatsfernen Räumen” (“Wars in areas without state control”) in 2007, he explained that the carefully planned war of extermination in the East had been forced upon the Wehrmacht (German Army) by the Soviet Union: “Stalin and his generals forced the Wehrmacht into a new type of war that did not spare the civilian population.” In his book “Verbrannte Erde” (“Scorched Earth”), he claims, “The cruel action of the Wehrmacht ... could not be explained at all by reference to ideological convictions. Hitler’s soldiers did not conduct a war of ideology, but a war whose dynamics they could not escape.”

In *Der Spiegel*, Baberowski finally defended Hitler himself. “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,” he said. *Taz* mentions this briefly, but immediately minimises it as “a statement of Baberowski comprehensible only in context,” and then changes the subject. But the context in which Baberowski trivialises Hitler is unmistakable. It is about playing down the crimes of the Nazis to justify the return of German militarism.

These outrageous theses, which were hitherto known only from neo-fascist circles, remained uncontested. Only the IYSSE and the SGP protested against them. The ruling circles reacted very nervously to these protests. The Humboldt University Presidium backed Baberowski in a public statement, saying criticism of him was “unacceptable” and threatening his critics with prosecution—a real attack on freedom of expression!

As the criticism of Baberowski and Münkler spread the following year, the media unleashed an angry campaign. The leading role was taken on by conservative papers such as *Cicero* and the *FAZ*, which denounced the IYSSE as a “Trotskyist mob.” But supposedly more liberal papers like the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* also joined in. Only in *taz*, *Tagesanzeiger* and the *Frankfurter Rundschau* did occasional critical contributions appear.

Particularly noteworthy is the article “The Self-Presentation of a Right-winger” by Andreas Fischer-Lescano, which was published on June 11, 2017 in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. The renowned Bremen law professor said of Baberowski that “his scientific oeuvre and day-to-day political remarks [turn] into an amalgam of extreme right-wing criticism, which is interspersed with historical revisionist and nationalist motives.”

In April of last year, leading representatives of the German state governments met with Ben Gomes, Google’s VP for engineering, to discuss a new search, or rather, censorship algorithm. Three weeks later, Google announced it had introduced new measures against supposed “fake news.” Since then, the critique of the *World Socialist Web Site* about Baberowski no longer appears in Google search results.

The fact that *taz* has now joined the defenders of Baberowski is an alarm signal. In this, Seifert employs a particularly dishonest method. She avoids directly quoting Baberowski’s numerous far-right extremist and historical revisionist statements and the IYSSE’s criticisms, and instead relies on general and utterly hypocritical considerations about “freedom of expression.”

The decision of the *taz* editorial team to make Baberowski’s defence the central theme of their weekend edition can only be understood against the backdrop of current political changes in Germany. Seifert’s article appeared on the same weekend that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) membership agreed by a two-thirds majority vote on a new edition of the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). This will be the most right-wing

German government since the end of the Second World War. Central to the coalition agreement is a massive stepping-up of the powers of the state at home and upgrade of Germany’s military capabilities abroad, combined with austerity measures at home.

Both the Green Party and the Left Party have welcomed the vote by the SPD. There is no longer any opposition from the middle class parties that had previously claimed to oppose German militarism. The official leader of the opposition in the Bundestag (parliament) is now the far-right AfD, hated by many young people, workers and also readers of *taz*. The *taz* editorial board, which is close to the Greens, is outraged that we are providing political expression to this opposition to the grand coalition and to the AfD. Hence the attack on the IYSSE.

Seifert speaks for those layers of the middle class that are rapidly shifting to the right in the face of increasing social polarization. The 1968 protest movement, which gave birth to *taz* and the Greens, was heavily influenced by outrage at the crimes of the Nazis, which had been hushed up and swept under the carpet in the post-war Adenauer era. Even in the historians’ dispute of the 1980s, Nolte completely isolated himself with his apology for the Nazis.

This is now being changed. Seifert’s article contains a remarkable sentence. She quotes Baberowski, who claims that he has not voted for a long time. “Left, liberal or conservative, that no longer speaks to him,” she writes and then asks, “Is that not true for many people? That political certainties, affiliations dissolve, especially in the face of a morally consolidating New or Identitarian Right?”

What is moral about the New Right, which is again stirring up the ideological filth of the past? Clearly, Seifert here speaks of herself and her peers, who, in face of the rise of the AfD, are throwing their political beliefs overboard and aligning their “moral” compass with the right. Reading the article by this supposedly sophisticated person, who writes so nicely about hermeneutics, Baberowski and “classical sculptures, Frederician architecture and the spirit of Humboldt,” one instinctively gets an inkling of why so many German petty bourgeois went over to the Nazis before and especially after 1933.

The IYSSE is convinced that the overwhelming majority of the youth and the working class, as well as many readers of *taz*, reject this genuflection to the right.

We call on workers and young people opposed to war, austerity, and the whitewashing of the crimes of German imperialism to submit letters to the *taz* editorial board protesting their promotion of Baberowski! We urge them to read and support the *World Socialist Web Site*, the online newspaper of the Fourth International, and to join the IYSSE and the SGP and build a socialist opposition to the grand coalition government!



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