

# Berlin's Jewish Museum director Peter Schäfer forced to resign

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The resignation last June of the director of Berlin's Jewish Museum, Peter Schäfer, triggered a worldwide storm of indignation. Schäfer was forced to resign following an intensive campaign alleging he was guilty of anti-Semitism. More than 400 Jewish academics and professionals, including from the US, Israel and Germany, declared their solidarity with Schäfer in a statement rejecting the "false accusations." Among the signatories were relatives of Holocaust victims.

Schäfer has made "an extremely important contribution to the revival of Jewish life in Germany in post-war decades and in the fight against anti-Semitism," the statement read. It called for a "public apology" from those who had spread lies about Schäfer and the Jewish Museum.

An open letter from 45 Talmud scholars, initiated by Ishay Rosen Zvi of Tel Aviv University, lamented "growing censorship and restriction of freedom of speech" in Germany. Other comments compared the crackdown on the Jewish Museum with the McCarthy era in America during the Cold War, when blacklists were drawn up of leftist intellectuals and artists.

Schäfer, 75, is Catholic by faith and is esteemed by scholars worldwide as a Talmud scholar and professor of Judaism. He resigned on June 14 following a vicious campaign of hatred launched against the Jewish Museum. The museum is one of the largest Jewish museums in Europe and attracts around 700,000 visitors annually.

Under Schäfer's management the museum had sought to encourage cultural exchanges between Jews and Arabs, which included supporting the rights of the Palestinian people. In response, ultra-right Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused him of "anti-Israeli" and "anti-Semitic" views. Netanyahu's accusations were supported by the Israeli Embassy, US Ambassador Richard Grenell, the Central Council of Jews, the *Jüdische Allgemeine* newspaper, other papers such as *Die Welt* and federal politicians, in particular Volker Beck from the Green Party.

Particular criticism was raised against the museum's special exhibition "Welcome to Jerusalem," which ended on May 1 of this year. The exhibition portrayed the history of the city from a Jewish, Christian and Muslim point of view and not just from the official Israeli standpoint. Hate commentaries increased

when the museum gave the Iranian cultural attache Seyed Ali Moujani a guided tour of the exhibition and discussed with him a possible photo exhibition on Iranian Jews of the 19th and 20th centuries. The *Jüdische Allgemeine* deplored such a "visit from the mullahs."

Netanyahu had already intervened at the beginning of the exhibition last December, demanding the German government close it down and stop funding the museum and other "anti-Israel organisations." At the time, Germany cultural commissioner Monika Grütters (CDU) rejected this demand as unwarranted political interference.

The campaign against the museum did not let up. The final trigger for Peter Schäfer's resignation was a charge that the museum supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. This refers to a tweet from the press section of the museum which drew attention to an article in the *taz* newspaper dealing with a protest by 240 Jewish and Israeli scientists against a resolution of the German parliament on 17 May. The resolution condemns the BDS movement founded by Palestinian and Jewish intellectuals and artists, and declares it to be anti-Semitic.

The motion was introduced by a cross party consortium consisting of the Christian Democratic Union CDU, Christian Social Union CSU, Social Democratic Party SPD, Free Democratic Party, FDP and the Greens, and was approved by a large majority. It goes even further than an earlier resolution from 2018 and equates any criticisms of Israel's brutal occupation and war policy with hostility towards Jews. The motion was not only directed at the BDS movement but also against other individuals and organisations. The State of Israel is to be regarded as a "Jewish collective," it states, whose security is "part of the *raison d'être* of our country."

The Jewish academics opposing this motion write that "mixing together the BDS and anti-Semitism does not promote the urgent struggle against anti-Semitism." Rather, the "struggle against anti-Semitism" is being "instrumentalised [...] to provide cover for the policy of the Israeli government, which is responsible for grave abuses of human rights and is ruining the chances for peace."

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)—the very same party that harbours hard line anti-Semites and defenders of the

Nazi dictatorship in its ranks—has taken a particularly aggressive stance against the Jewish Museum. Notoriously, AfD chairman Alexander Gauland described the Holocaust as a piece of “bird shit in the over thousand years of successful German history.”

For the past year the “Anti-Semitism commissioner” of the AfD, Beatrix von Storch, has put forward a succession of parliamentary motions accusing the Jewish Museum of providing a platform for Muslim “Jew-haters.” Her alleged concern for “hatred against Jews” is belied by her own family tree: her maternal grandfather, Count Schwerin von Krosigk, was Finance Minister under the Nazis until 1945, and in this capacity was responsible for the property stolen from the Jewish community. In 1949 he was charged as a war criminal in the Wilhelmstraße trial.

Beatrix von Storch and other AfD officials are now welcome visitors in Israeli government circles and receive favourable treatment in the Israeli media. As the WSWS commented last December, Netanyahu’s government is currently rolling out the red carpet for European right-wing extremists. Among those welcomed with open arms in Jerusalem in recent months have been Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

There is political affinity between the racist policies of European right-wing extremists and the current policies of the Israeli government. The “National State Law” passed by the Knesset last summer anchors Jewish supremacy and discrimination against Palestinians as the legal basis of the state.

The Bundestag’s decision against BDS and the campaign against the Jewish Museum demonstrate that such far-right positions are also growing in Germany. The Left Party is also involved in the campaign to silence those critical of Israeli policy. On May 17, it filed its own motion in the Bundestag against the BDS movement—a motion barely differing from the proposals of the governing parties and the AfD, which also submitted its own motion for tactical reasons.

In reality, with its resolution of May 17, Germany’s ruling grand coalition has adopted the policy of the AfD. It is utilising the resolution to undermine the democratic right of freedom of expression and association and repress leftist organisations and individuals.

This was previously demonstrated by the case of the Palestinian journalist Khaled Barakat, who has Canadian citizenship and has lived in Germany for the past four years. Barakat had planned to speak on Donald Trump’s Middle East policy at the Sudanese community center in Berlin-Schöneberg on June 22, when he and his companion were stopped by police at the exit of a subway. The police handed him an eight-page document, which banned him from speaking at the meeting and also revoked his residency permit. Apparently, Germany’s intelligence agencies had informed the immigration authorities about the meeting in Berlin.

Barakat was accused of being an official of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), an accusation he denies. Moreover, the PFLP is not banned in Germany. In a speech last year Barakat declared his support for the BDS campaign. “If you do not subordinate yourself one hundred percent to the official Israeli discourse, if you refuse to accept racism, colonialism and occupation,” Barakat said in an interview with the paper *Junge Welt*, “then you’re branded a terrorist, a savage, a barbarian, or an anti-Semite.”

Of particular concern is the fact that the accusations of “anti-Semitism” are directed especially against left-wing and liberal Jews who reject all forms of racism. At the end of May, the Bank für Gemeinschaft annulled the account of the *Jüdische Stimme für einen gerechten Frieden in Nahost* (Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East), a leftist union of Jewish intellectuals in Berlin.

The bank has “become an instrument of anti-democratic groups seeking to silence any form of solidarity with the Palestinians’ struggle for freedom,” the *Jüdische Stimme* stated, and announced it was exploring the possibilities of a lawsuit. “The bank fails to differentiate between the Israeli government, the Israeli public and the Jewish people.” It is “hardly the task of a bank to become the thought police of its customers.”

All of these developments illustrate how the campaign against the BDS moment paves the way for genuine anti-Semitism, which has roots going back to the Middle Ages. In its modern form, however, it developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and was then adopted and further radicalised by the Nazis as an explicit means of attacking the socialist workers’ movement. Equating Jews with the evils of modern capitalism provided the populist cement for racist and nationalist parties, which vehemently rejected class struggle and socialist internationalism. It was no coincidence that Hitler identified “international Jewry” with both “Bolshevism” and finance capital.

Today’s right-wing extremism is mainly directed against Muslims and Islam. But anti-Semitism also lurks in the genes of today’s far right parties, even though their leaders may make pilgrimages to Israel. Once one scratches the surface, the brown background of such parties comes to light.

The *World Socialist Web Site* strongly condemns the censorship of BDS supporters and liberal and left-wing Jews. Those who genuinely seek to fight anti-Semitism must join the struggle to unify the international working class against war, oppression and its root cause, capitalism.



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