

Germany: Humboldt University students speak on the falsification of history and lessons from Auschwitz

Our reporters
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As part of their election campaign for the Student Parliament at Humboldt University in Berlin, members and supporters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed the article “75 Years since the Liberation of Auschwitz.” They spoke with students about the attempts of right-wing ideologists to falsify the history of the Nazi dictatorship and to make right-wing extremist positions acceptable again.

Professor Jörg Baberowski, for example, who teaches East European history at the university, had already declared to *Der Spiegel* in 2014 that Hitler was “not vicious.” Now, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has quoted him saying that Hitler did not want to know about Auschwitz.

Pauline, who studies outside the Berlin city centre on the natural science campus of Humboldt University, said, “I believe we must do everything possible to ensure that something like this never happens again. I was in the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar and saw how people were locked up there. Up to six people were squeezed into a narrow bed, the conditions were unimaginable. The new arrivals were told by the Nazis that the only way out was through the chimney of the facility.

“Jews were then declared scapegoats. Now they are again looking for scapegoats for the crises that are about to break out all over the world.

“That Hitler did not want to know anything about Auschwitz is the old argument of the right-wing extremists. And today it is represented by professors at our university. I find it incomprehensible that the presidency of Humboldt University does not oppose these statements. In some English classes, examinations must now be randomized and anonymized, because otherwise it cannot be ensured that professors close to the Alternative for Germany (AfD) will evaluate their students fairly and impartially.

Ylva said, “I went to Buchenwald concentration camp when I was in the tenth grade, when we covered this in history class. It was really depressing. We went through the cellar where the corpses were temporarily stored before they were burned. I recently saw a report about people who were born there, in Buchenwald. I was very impressed by the elderly ladies who reported on their fate. My grandparents came from what was then East Prussia. I think they never really processed what happened back then.

“There are fewer and fewer contemporary witnesses who can tell us about that time. I am afraid that these questions will be played down more and more with time. I hope that will not be true. But when a politician like [AfD leader Alexander] Gauland describes the Nazi dictatorship as ‘bird shit in more than 1,000 years of successful German history,’ one has to ask oneself what Gauland thinks is ‘successful history.’ If a politician can say that without consequences, it makes me angry. This is a great embarrassment for Germany.

“There are certainly connections with our present times. Then as now, war propaganda and nationalism are being spread. I don’t think that people are evil from the bottom up. But when problems arise in a society that cannot be overcome, it is possible people turn to forces that the government’s propaganda puts before them. These parties, however, usually do not have solutions, but only present scapegoats to the population.

“I want to be more involved in the fight against the right in 2020. For example, I plan to come to your meetings regularly.”

Floris is studying philosophy and mathematics and, in addition to his studies, trains a youth football team.

“I remember a visit to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. We saw the dormitories and the assembly places and a mass grave. It was oppressive and frightening. The stories the museum directors told us were horrible. In the morning, all the inmates had to gather on a piece of meadow and line up in rank and file. Then their things were thrown into the dirt in front of them. Those who bent down afterwards were shot in the back. The others were maltreated. The whole contact with the people was extremely inhuman.

“Part of my family is Jewish. My great-great-grandfather changed the name of his family to avoid problems and not be recognized as Jewish.”

With regard to the connections between capital and fascism, Floris said, “In Auschwitz and the other concentration camps, a kind of enslavement prevailed. Every form of slavery denigrates humanity and is inhumane. Nobody should experience this kind of forced labour.”

The Bayer, BASF, and Höchst AG corporations were then part of the IG Farben industrial conglomerate, which operated its own camp, Auschwitz III.

“Under capitalism, too, people are exploited,” Floris said. “In

our society, it was often said that those who had more money should also bear more responsibility and give something back to those who were not doing so well. This is not the case de facto. The rich enjoy all the benefits of their money but shift the responsibility for their actions onto others. The financial crisis has shown this.

“Today, the right-wing are saying that refugees are threatening our jobs. I don’t see it that way. The fact is that climate change is making large parts of the world uninhabitable. These people must be able to live somewhere.

“In any case, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ was caused by the industrialised countries, through their carbon emissions, their transport and their arms exports, which are doubly unnecessary. It was created by the conditions created by the powerful and the industrialised countries in these regions—by the contrast between rich and poor, which forced many people to flee.

“I do not think that we should increase the military. I do not see why we should put more money into weapons. I see our ‘responsibility’ in world politics quite differently, for example in climate policy. Our arms exports increase the danger of war.”

Asked about Professor Baberowski’s statements in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Floris said, “I cannot imagine that Hitler did not want to know anything about Auschwitz. Every professor and every teacher at all universities and schools should have as their teaching assignment to convey the truth—to the best of their knowledge and conscience. Anyone who trivializes the crimes of the Nazis is, in my opinion, utterly ignorant of what generations of historians have researched.”

Demet had visited Auschwitz in 2008.

“I remember the barracks there very well—the children’s dolls and toys, the teeth knocked out, the belongings of the murdered people—it was shocking to see what people did to other people. I cried when I thought that children have gone through this hell, that families have been torn apart here. I understand this very well, and it brings back memories of the suffering of the Kurds, refugees and many others today.

“Auschwitz teaches us that we must stop looking for faults in the nationalities and religions of other people and, above all, that we must prevent war. It is indescribable the suffering that this causes.

“Someone with positions like those held by Professor Baberowski should not be allowed to teach at a university. Otherwise, there is a danger that young people will be manipulated. I find it extreme that such attitudes can apparently be expressed without contradiction in Germany. It seems that Germany has not learned as much from its past as leading politicians like to claim.

“With its demagogy, the AfD is pushing into a political vacuum and trying to stir up backward and xenophobic sentiments. The lurid media coverage makes this even worse. Right-wing extremist forces like the AfD then try to profit from these moods.”

Does she see a connection between capitalism and fascism?

“Absolutely. Where money can be made, there is always war. Germany has long presented itself as a country open to refugees, even though, for example, by exporting German weapons to war zones, it is itself partly responsible for the refugee movements. If, on the other hand, an immigrant makes a mistake, this is

immediately turned into a major issue. They are only looking for a reason to get them out again.”

Demet has observed the increasing right-wing terror of recent years with concern and suspicion.

“One shouldn’t be so naive as to think that the German state doesn’t know about all this. I believe that some of these crimes are deliberately allowed or encouraged, perhaps also to pursue capitalist goals. The state apparatus knows about many things and often simply tolerates it, I think. In many of these terrorist attacks the state itself has been involved.”

Elif is studying chemistry at the Adlershof campus of Humboldt University and has been studying the history of the Holocaust in depth for some time.

“I have been politically active for a number of years now and have undertaken educational trips to Italy, Poland and other countries to talk to Holocaust survivors and old partisans,” she said. “In 2019, I was in Krakow to study the Jewish history of the city, and in this context, I also visited the Auschwitz concentration camp. This experience brought everything I already knew back to life and touched me deeply.

“I see a very great danger in the shift to the right all over the world. It is frightening how little is being done against this danger, even though in many countries there is a youth movement that is becoming stronger and stronger.”

Right-wing extremist professors like Jörg Baberowski were not an isolated case, she said. “In Vienna, Hamburg and many other cities, there are large protests against professors who really take frightening positions. It is particularly important to oppose them here too and not to give them any room for their agitation.

“The whole turn to the right worldwide is outrageous. The limits of what can be said have shifted, and this is accompanied by the normalization of right-wing thinking. In my opinion, this is reflected in the terror of recent times. The attacks on public figures are a direct threat to all of us who do not conform to the misanthropic ideal of the right.

“Capitalism, racism and anti-Semitism are major problems, the connection between which must not be overlooked. Fascist movements offer simple solutions to questions which are very complex. Fascism is based on distracting from the real problems of capitalism and diverting people’s anger away from the causes and putting it on a scapegoat. Capitalism and fascism are interdependent.”



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