

Why did Princeton University provide funding for the German right-wing extremist Jörg Baberowski?

David North
22 February 2020

Nearly one year ago, on April 3, 2019, I sent a letter to Professor Deborah Kaple concerning a Princeton University seminar on the subject of “Dictatorships in Transition” to which she had invited Professor Jörg Baberowski of Humboldt University in Berlin. Kaple, who played a leading role in the organization of this event, was at the time sharing with Baberowski a \$300,000 research grant awarded by Princeton.

I wrote:

In the organization of the seminar/conference and the organization of a joint research project, was Princeton University aware that Professor Baberowski is among the most prominent right-wing revisionist historians in Germany? He is an outspoken proponent of the views of the late Professor Ernst Nolte, whose relativization of Nazi crimes triggered the famous “Historikerstreit” of the late 1980s.

Baberowski is also a leading opponent of the immigration policies of Chancellor Merkel. His extreme right-wing views on the subject have served to legitimize the xenophobia of the neo-fascist *Alternative für Deutschland*. Baberowski’s pronouncements on immigration have been featured regularly in *Breitbart News* and, even more ominously, the *Daily Stormer*, the leading American Nazi web site...

I would be interested to know whether you, or any of those who participated in the recent seminar/conference, are familiar with the controversies surrounding Professor Baberowski’s views. The issue here is not simply a matter of Professor Baberowski’s private political opinions. Rather, his defense of Ernst Nolte, who spent the last three decades of his life justifying Nazi crimes, is an integral part of Baberowski’s historical-theoretical project. Central to the Nolte-Baberowski conception is the claim that Nazi barbarism, including the Holocaust, was a response forced upon the Hitler regime by the Soviet Union. It is difficult to imagine that the extreme right-wing character and dangerous implications of Professor Baberowski’s views—which, it should be added, involve to no small extent the falsification of the historical record—passed unnoticed by scholars participating in the recent seminar/conference. Were Professor Baberowski’s views challenged at any point during the seminar/conference?

Professor Kaple did not acknowledge receipt of my letter, let alone reply to the questions that I raised. Neither Kaple nor the university explained the purpose of its collaboration with and financial support for a person politically allied with the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and whose public activities—such as his denunciation of immigrants and justification of Nazi crimes—have played a significant role in fostering an intellectual climate that legitimizes the resurgence of fascism in Germany. A report on the seminar’s agenda and proceedings has not been published, nor has there been an explanation of the scholarly aims and purpose of the “Dictatorships in Transition” project.

Given the dangerous political situation in Germany, Professor Kaple and Princeton University owe its students, the scholarly community and the broader public an accounting of its collaboration with Baberowski. The rapidly growing political influence of the AfD and the explosion of anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant violence, exemplified most recently in the murder of nine people in Hanau on February 19, has made all too clear the implications of Baberowski’s anti-immigrant statements. When it granted Baberowski a six-figure research grant and invited him to Princeton, why had it chosen to overlook his apologies for Hitler and incendiary claims that immigrants were depriving Europeans of “everything dear” to them? In my letter of April 3, I had provided Kaple with links to the articles in Breitbart and the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer which cited Baberowski’s anti-immigrant tirades and also to the article in *Der Spiegel* in which he sought to absolve Hitler of responsibility for the Holocaust.

Since the publication of my letter last April, new and troubling information has emerged about another participant at last year’s Princeton seminar.

Mr. Baberowski was accompanied by Fabian Thunemann, who holds the position of research assistant at the Humboldt University Institute for East European Studies.

According to an online report dated December 19, 1998, an individual identified as Fabian Thunemann participated prominently in a demonstration in Hanover organized by the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland). This demonstration had been called to protest an exhibition exposing war crimes committed by the Nazi army between 1939 and 1945.

While the report states that 170 Nazis participated in the demonstration, Fabian Thunemann and his brother Lukas are among only eight neo-Nazis who are specifically identified. This would indicate that the two men were prominent right-wing extremists and

well known to the anti-fascists who were monitoring neo-Nazi activities. Others named in this report were individuals who subsequently have been implicated in major incidents of right-wing violence.

Seeking to substantiate this report, Sven Wurm, a graduate student at the Institute of East European History and an elected member of Humboldt University's student parliament, sent a letter in December 2019 to the university administration asking whether the Fabian Thunemann named in the 1998 report was the same individual working under Baberowski's direction.

The university spokesman, Hans-Christoph Keller, replied, with calculated ambiguity, that he had no information on the matter.

Mr. Wurm sent a second letter in January 2020 to Mr. Keller and to the university president, Sabine Kunst, in which he requested an unambiguous reply to his question. He wrote:

This is a very serious matter. So I must ask: Has the university management made any effort or does it intend to make any effort to determine whether Mr. Thunemann, who is currently working in the department of Eastern European history, is the same Thunemann referred to in the report on neo-Nazi activities in Hanover? It shouldn't be difficult for you to determine whether this report is true or not.

Mr. Keller replied for a second time in a transparently evasive manner:

On matters relating to personnel, Humboldt University may for legal reasons refuse to provide information to third parties. We ask for your understanding.

The university's refusal to provide a direct answer leaves little doubt that the Fabian Thunemann identified as a neo-Nazi demonstrator and the Fabian Thunemann who participated along with Baberowski at the Princeton University seminar are one and the same.

Of course, if Professor Kaple harbors doubts as to whether the neo-Nazi Fabian Thunemann identified in the 1998 report is the same man who participated in her seminar, Princeton should contact Humboldt University and Mr. Thunemann and demand that they clarify the matter with an unambiguous answer.

There is a disturbing sequel to Mr. Wurm's inquiries. On January 30, 2020, while campaigning for a seat in the student parliament, Wurm encountered Baberowski in the act of illegally ripping his election posters from the wall where they had been legitimately posted. This vandalism openly violated the strictures against interference by the university staff in student activities. Baberowski was clearly incensed by Wurm's leading role in opposing the growth of AfD influence and his efforts to determine whether the Institute of East European History, which the professor directs, was providing a safe haven for neo-Nazis. When Wurm asked Baberowski to stop vandalizing the campaign material, the latter physically assaulted him. This entire incident was recorded on video and posted on YouTube, where it has been viewed more than 22,000 times.

Any Princeton professor who violently attacked a student in the manner recorded in this video would be immediately suspended from

the university, lose his or her job, and, most likely, face criminal charges. But in the present political environment in Germany, so great is the influence wielded by the AfD that the university has indicated that it does not even intend to deliver a reprimand to Baberowski. The president of the university, Sabine Kunst, declared that she sympathized "on a human level" with Baberowski's actions. Kunst's fear of offending Baberowski testifies to his close connections to powerful right-wing networks. These connections have been documented in an authoritative study of the extreme right in Germany. Just a few days after assaulting Sven Wurm, Baberowski shared a platform with the Minister of Education in the coalition government, which has sought to placate the AfD by adopting substantial portions of its extreme right-wing program.

Princeton's invitation to Baberowski provided him with a heightened level of international prestige that is not warranted by his intellectually fraudulent efforts to advance pro-Nazi historical revisionism, exemplified in his claim that "Hitler was not vicious," and, more recently, his assertion that "Hitler did not want to know anything about Auschwitz."

Moreover, given Baberowski's fascistic politics and contempt for democratic rights, the subject of the Kaple-Baberowski research project—the study of "Dictatorships in Transition"—is both dubious and suspicious. Baberowski's efforts to obtain funding for a similar project, which bore the provocative title "Dictatorship as Alternative," was rejected by the Academic Senate (*Akademischer Senat*) at Humboldt University, where the professor's right-wing extremist views are well known. Independent outside experts assigned by the university to audit his application for funding subjected his project to devastating criticism.

At a time when Nazism is experiencing a resurgence in Germany, where right-wing political assassinations and other acts of homicidal violence are becoming commonplace, Princeton's financial support for and collaboration with the likes of Baberowski have been intellectually irresponsible and politically reprehensible.

Princeton has yet to clarify the nature of its relationship with Jörg Baberowski. Is it ongoing? The allocation of \$300,000 for a research project is a significant expenditure of financial resources. What is the scope of this project? For what, precisely, is the money being used? What control does Baberowski have over the disbursement of funds? What is Fabian Thunemann's role in this project?

Finally, Princeton should explain why it believes Baberowski's efforts to construct a contemporary justification for dictatorship, similar to that which existed in Chile under General Pinochet, are relevant to present-day political conditions in the United States and internationally.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact