

German student newspaper “Unauf” defends far-right violence against students

The IYSSE at Humboldt University
16 March 2020

In the end of January, right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski physically assaulted Sven Wurm, spokesman for the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Humboldt University in Berlin, because Wurm caught him in the act of tearing down IYSSE election placards and destroying them. “Should I smack you in the face?” he threatened Wurm and another student who had stepped in to defend his colleague.

University management not only refused to condemn the assault, which was documented on video, but also supported the right-wing activist Baberowski. The student newspaper *Unauf* has now followed suit. The publication, which describes itself as the “independent student newspaper at Humboldt University,” is in fact financed by university management and has consistently followed its line in conflicts with student representative bodies over the years.

In a piece headlined “The myth of the right-wing extremist professor,” an author by the name of Jan Alexander Casper seeks to justify Baberowski’s attack and his destruction of election material as understandable. In order to achieve this, the scribbler resorts to grotesque exaggerations, filthy lies and absurd distortions.

Baberowski is not merely a “renowned historian in his field,” but also a “larger-than-life luminary in his field,” according to Casper. By contrast, Wurm, the student attacked by Baberowski, behaved “shabbily.” University management, he continues, should therefore consider imposing penalties on him and the IYSSE!

Casper’s embarrassing and stupid ramblings would hardly be worth talking about were it not for the fact that they justify the position of university management and the German government, which is to defend a violent attack by one of the country’s leading far-right ideologues on a political opponent. Casper’s central contention is that Baberowski was provoked into carrying out the attack by the IYSSE because the group described Baberowski on placards and at meetings as a “right-wing extremist.” This was “a campaign of character assassination,” wrote Casper.

Casper knows full well that Baberowski is a right-wing extremist ideologue and agitator, and that his attack on Wurm was directed against students who criticise his positions. He is forced to admit that by founding his “right-wing salon,” Baberowski “voluntarily entered the dubious company of Nazis and the ‘New Right.’” In addition, Baberowski advocates the “standpoint known as the Nolte thesis, that the explosion of violence by the ‘Third Reich’ in Central and Eastern Europe would have been improbable, if not inconceivable, without the campaign of terror carried out by the Soviets that preceded it.”

It is true that Baberowski is the most well-known Nazi apologist among German professors, and a self-declared supporter of the anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi historian Ernst Nolte. Nolte argued in the 1980s that the Holocaust was an understandable reaction by the Nazis to the violence of the Soviet Union and was sharply criticised for his positions in the “Historians’ Dispute.” Following his de facto expulsion from academic

life, he interacted almost exclusively with far right and openly fascistic forces.

Baberowski not only defends Nolte, but goes well beyond his positions. In *Der Spiegel* in February 2014, Baberowski compared the Holocaust with shootings in Russia in 1918, commenting, “It was essentially the same thing: killing on an industrial scale.” To justify his support for Nolte, Baberowski added, “Hitler was not a psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. He did not want to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.” In January, he told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper that Hitler did not want to know anything about Auschwitz.

Casper seeks to downplay these statements, drawn from the arsenal of Holocaust deniers, by describing them merely as “controversial theses” that in no way justify calling Baberowski a “right-wing extremist.” On the contrary, whoever does so is conducting a “campaign of character assassination.” And the IYSSE used almost all means of “disinformation,” Casper claimed.

If the only issue involved here were a shoddy article in an insignificant student newspaper written in the style of the far right, which complains about a “campaign of character assassination” and “attacks on freedom of speech” whenever one of their own is criticised, it could be ignored. But the reality is much too serious for that.

Seventy-five years after the collapse of the Third Reich, a far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), dictates German politics. The agitation against refugees, the advocacy of militarism, and the downplaying of the Nazis’ crimes—i.e., everything for which Baberowski stands—have already led to deadly consequences, as shown by the recent terrorist attacks on refugees and immigrants. Casper’s false narrative, which is aimed at whitewashing Baberowski and university management, must therefore be sharply rejected and dissected in detail.

On Baberowski’s notorious statements in support of war and brutal military violence, Casper accuses the IYSSE of playing around by “distorting the meaning of citations taken from a podium discussion at the German Historical Museum.”

Casper fails to provide the date or content of the citations whose meaning was allegedly distorted, but he is apparently referring to a discussion that took place on October 1, 2014, under the title “Germany: an interventionist power?” at the German Historical Museum. During the discussion, Baberowski stated, “If one is not willing to take hostages, burn villages, hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict and it is better to keep out altogether.”

During the same discussion and in numerous other publications, Baberowski explained that he does not oppose such interventions, but welcomes them. And to emerge victorious, the methods of the terrorists and ultimately of the war of annihilation have to be employed. Summarising his position in an interview with the *Esslinger Zeitung*, Baberowski said, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

In another attempt to prove his claim that the IYSSE carried out a

“campaign of disinformation and character assassination,” Casper refers to a “false story, according to which Baberowski described attacks on refugee centres in Germany a few years ago as ‘relatively harmless.’”

Casper writes, “As the *Tagesspiegel* reported in 2017, the IYSSE and others repeatedly grossly distorted Baberowski by leaving out important parts of his statement. According to the *Tagesspiegel*, Baberowski said in his full statement that the arson attacks were bad enough, but given the problems Germany has with immigration, they were relatively harmless: thank God nobody has yet been killed.”

Once again, Casper provides no dates or sources to back up his claims. The reason is obvious. In fact, the *Tagesspiegel* reported in detail in 2017 about the legal dispute between Baberowski and the student council at Bremen University. A reading of the newspaper’s articles from that time—including “Student council can call professor ‘right-wing extremist’” and “Legal dispute over being right-wing: Humboldt professor loses battle with Bremen student council”—makes clear that the accusations against Baberowski for agitating against refugees and advocating brutal imperialist violence were not part of a disinformation campaign or “false stories,” but involved the correct citation of his statements and a legitimate evaluation of them.

After Baberowski lost on all points against the Bremen student council at the Cologne court of appeals on June 1, 2017, the *Tagesspiegel* reported in an article on June 5, “History professor Jörg Baberowski from Berlin’s Humboldt University has failed in his attempt to ban left-wing student critics from making certain critical statements about him. The Bremen student council can once again say that Baberowski spreads shocking theses that glorify violence, trivialises the burning and besieging of refugee centres as a natural response from concerned citizens, confronts people with explicit hatred, advocates racism and presents right-wing extremist positions.”

The *Tagesspiegel* also reported that the court had explicitly confirmed that Baberowski’s statements had not been torn out of context and were therefore not distorted in their meaning. “Even when Baberowski’s full statements are cited,” the court’s legal spokesman said, “potentially no other meaning is being expressed.” Baberowski’s lawyer had, after “these explanations ... no longer insisted on the prohibition order.” “Baberowski will have to pay all legal costs associated with the proceedings,” the newspaper reported.

Casper is aware of the outcome of the court case, and even refers to detailed articles about it, but falsifies their content so as to uphold the false narrative pushed by Baberowski and university management that the citations amount to “false presentations,” “character assassination” and “disinformation.” Baberowski has not only attempted to silence criticism from the Bremen student council by taking legal action. He has sought to sue other critics as well and has failed miserably every time. He failed in his effort to prohibit the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) from calling him a “falsifier of history” due to his trivialisation of the Nazis’ crimes.

It is clear that Casper is not working as a serious journalist, but as a political appendage of far-right forces. He not only embraces Baberowski’s positions disproved in court as his own, but also denounces anyone who dares to describe his idol accurately, as a right-wing extremist. Moreover, he justifies Baberowski’s violent outbursts against students.

Writing in the style of right-wing conspiracy theorists, Casper presents the entirely speculative thesis that the IYSSE is not concerned with combatting right-wing ideology and right-wing extremism, but rather wants to settle scores with Baberowski and is therefore launching “ad hominem” attacks on him.

David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, published “enraged articles against Baberowski on almost a daily

basis” in 2014 because Baberowski excluded him from a seminar with the Trotsky biographer Robert Service, writes Casper. The IYSSE group at Humboldt University seized on this campaign because North is their “high priest” and because they hoped to gain publicity.

Casper serves up his ramblings, lies and gross insults, which correspond entirely with Baberowski’s far-right positions, over the course of four paragraphs without even mentioning the far-reaching academic and political issues at stake with the Service seminar.

Service had authored a biography of Trotsky with the stated goal of discrediting the Russian revolutionary with lies and distortions. In the renowned *American Historical Review*, historian Bertrand M. Patenaude agreed with the critique made of it by North in his book *In Defence of Leon Trotsky*. Patenaude wrote in his review essay that North’s description of Service’s biography as “a piece of hack work” was “entirely justified.”

Fourteen respected historians wrote a letter to the publisher and owner of Suhrkamp Publishing, Mrs. Ulla Unseld-Berkewicz, protesting against the publication of a German-language edition of Service’s Trotsky biography by the prestigious publishing house. The signatories included the now late Prof. Hermann Weber, the doyen of communist and Stalinist research in Germany; Prof. Oliver Rathkolb, director of the Institute of Contemporary History at Vienna University; and Peter Steinbach, head of scholarship for the Centre for the Commemoration of the German Resistance. They described Service’s biography as a “pasquil” which “resorts to the formulas associated with Stalinist propaganda,” and pointed to its anti-Semitic undertones.

Baberowski invited Service to HU with the aim of rehabilitating the proven falsifier of history. The IYSSE announced publicly at the time that it intended to participate in the seminar, and even submitted nine questions to Service and Baberowski in preparation. However, Baberowski wanted to suppress all academic discussion. He officially cancelled the seminar, secretly relocated it to another building, and excluded not just North, but several students and the Potsdam professor Mario Kessler, one of the signatories of the Suhrkamp letter. When a participant, in spite of all of the security measures, pointed out that Service resorted to anti-Semitism, Baberowski told him to shut up.

North did not write articles “on almost a daily basis” following the seminar. Instead, the IYSSE at Humboldt University addressed an open letter to university management which was met with considerable interest. We protested in the letter against the suppression of the discussion and made clear what was at stake.

Referring to the previously mentioned *Spiegel* article, which revealingly appeared the same week as the Service seminar, we wrote, “Baberowski is utilizing his position at the university to advance the notorious right-wing conceptions of Ernst Nolte, who for three decades has been associated with writings that seek to relativize and diminish the significance of Nazi crimes.”

We assessed the invitation to the falsifier of history Service in this context, noting, “Service’s mendacious hack work fits into this picture. In order to lessen the guilt of the Nazis, the Russian October Revolution is denounced as a criminal act, and Trotsky, the most important Marxist opponent of Stalin, is demonized.”

We then explained the relationship between the falsification of history and the return of German militarism and fascism, writing, “The attempts to establish a historically false narrative come at a critical point in German history. Such efforts should be seen in the context of recent statements by President Joachim Gauck and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier that it is now time to end decades of military restraint in Germany. The revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that downplays the crimes of the Nazi era.”

We continued, “A specific policy requires specific means. Baberowski’s behaviour on February 12 has shown that such a revision of

history can be achieved only through intimidation and the suppression of dissent.”

We stated, “Baberowski’s attack on basic democratic rights and academic freedom serves the aim ... to transform the Humboldt University into a centre for right-wing and militaristic propaganda.” We emphasised that this did not correspond to the desire of students, who want “the university to remain a centre of scientific and academic discourse, rather than a right-wing think tank that muzzles all critical opinions.”

Since then, our assessment has not only been dramatically confirmed. The IYSSE’s offensive against Baberowski and other right-wing historians, which we view as part of a fight against the return of German militarism, has also enormously strengthened the influence of the IYSSE and its socialist perspective in opposition to capitalism, fascism and war.

Casper angrily admits, “Over the years, the IYSSE has not only managed to create the impression that a right-wing extremist conspiracy and the ideological preparations for a new German militarism are taking place with the involvement of Baberowski and of course Herfried Münkler. They have also managed to portray themselves as the only bulwark against this alleged threat. The most important representatives of the IYSSE in Berlin, Katja Rippert and Sven Wurm, could therefore be assured of large audiences at public meetings on these themes, as well as votes in student parliament elections.”

Casper was particularly enraged by the fact that the IYSSE played an important role in blocking the establishment of Baberowski’s centre for research on dictatorships. “Last summer, Baberowski failed in his effort to set up an interdisciplinary centre for research on dictatorships, which was slandered in advance with considerable effort by the IYSSE as a right-leaning quasi think tank,” he writes.

With our principled opposition to fascism and militarism, we have not only won considerable support from students at HU, but also student representative bodies from across Germany. Student councils in Bremen, Hamburg, Lüneburg, Magdeburg and Potsdam, as well as those at the Free University and Technical University in Berlin, have declared their solidarity with the IYSSE’s struggle against right-wing ideology. However, according to Casper, the students and their representatives merely “allowed themselves to be taken in by the IYSSE’s outrage logic.”

Casper and the *Unauf* newspaper could not have made their standpoint clearer. They are responding to opposition among students by denouncing them and apologising for and justifying the violence used by a right-wing extremist to intimidate them.

This clear partisanship for Baberowski and university management comes as no surprise and is bound up with real financial and political interests. Unlike other student newspapers, *Unauf* is not financed through sales to students or support from the student council, but is kept afloat by a “group of friends” made up of businesses, university management and the media. It is distributed free of charge across the entire university campus. The newspaper regularly receives money from university management, as well as from the BMW Foundation of former Nazi Party member Herbert Quandt, who made his wealth through forced labour. Other financial backers include the Berlin police and the Friede-Springer Foundation.

For his part, Casper, who functions as “editor-in-chief,” has frequently paid tribute to his donors and supported the scandalous positions adopted by university management. When management sought, at the request of the AfD in the Berlin state Senate, to force the publication of the names of all students active in the student council over recent years, Casper launched an attack on the student council in an *Unauf* article. He accused the students of defending themselves against management by “sweeping aside evidence-based criticism and contradictory opinions within the democratic spectrum with references to a threat from right-wing extremists.”

Casper, who like university president Sabine Kunst is a member of the Social Democrats (SPD), is now going even further by defending violence against students that serves to enforce the right-wing agenda of university management. To sum up the conclusion of his treatise: whoever exposes the agitation against refugees, trivialisation of the Nazis’ crimes, and the drumbeat for war deserves to have their election placards torn down and to be targeted for violent attack.

Casper is of course too cowardly to acknowledge this and remarks cynically at the end of his article that there is “so much more to be done against real right-wing extremists.” The reality is that his scribbles have made him a leading propagandist for the “real right-wing extremist” Baberowski and the right-wing conspiracy at Humboldt University against his student critics.



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