

# Right-wing press in Germany steps up attacks on pianist Igor Levit

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After Germany's leading liberal daily, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), felt compelled, in the face of public outrage, to apologise for an anti-Semitic article it had published against Igor Levit, right-wing media outlets published new attacks on the world renowned pianist.

In recent days, *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) have all published articles defending the SZ's classical music critic Helmut Mauro and denouncing the SZ for capitulating to public opinion.

Last Wednesday, the editor-in-chief of *Die Welt*, the flagship publication of the Springer publishing house, intervened in the controversy. In a militarist and outraged tone, Ulf Poschardt declared a "culture war." He accused the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* editors of having bowed before "the first violins of the Jacobin orchestra" and the "Twitter brigade of a new left-wing thought police."

Poschardt went on to call Levit a "Twitter inciter" who enjoys "branding, attacking and doing away with undesirable, alternative, challenging positions that go beyond the left 'liberal' mainstream." Due to the SZ's apology, according to Poschardt, Levit had been "declared to be an untouchable person." Meanwhile, "open season" was being declared on "right-wing figures who dare to contradict."

On Wednesday evening, the conservative FAZ weighed in. Jan Brachmann accused Levit of "problematic rhetorical strategies" because he had declared that Alternative for Germany (AfD) members had forfeited their right to be human. He accused the SZ editors of behaving "irresponsibly" because they withdrew their "protection" from the author of the attack on Levit. "They did not bow to the pressure of the arguments, but to the sheer mass of people," Brachmann wrote.

The NZZ struck a similar tone, complaining that the SZ had thrown itself at Levit's feet.

This campaign is aimed at making anti-Semitism

socially acceptable once again and suppressing all opposition to the dangerous rise of the far-right in Germany.

It began on Friday, 16 October, when Mauro, a writer for the cultural supplement in the SZ, bitterly attacked Levit. In a repugnant amalgam, laced with anti-Semitic allusions, Mauro claimed that Levit had achieved fame not through his musical talent, but by using Twitter to promote his career with political attacks on the far-right. Mauro referred to Levit's "denunciation of Nazis" and accused him of the "vehement exclusion of those who allegedly and actually hold different views."

Referring to Levit, who comes from a Jewish family, Mauro warned of an "ideology of victimhood" and "downright emotional excesses." He wrote, "There seems to be a right to hate and slander justified by the victim's morality." Entirely within the spirit of the far right, which blusters about a "dictatorship of well-meaning people," Mauro complained that on Twitter "a new armchair judiciary" is developing.

The initial defence of the article by the SZ editorial board, as well as the articles in *Die Welt*, FAZ and NZZ, reveal that the line of these leading media outlets does not differ from that of the far right AfD.

Levit has long been in the AfD's crosshairs because he calls the fascists by their real name and describes them as a "Nazi party" on social media. After Levit was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his musical activities during the coronavirus pandemic, the AfD intensified its agitation.

Levit is not only a musician, but "appears in public above all as a political activist with far-left views," wrote AfD parliamentary group leader Alice Weidel in an open letter to German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

As is so often the case, the right-wing extremists claim that their attacks have nothing to do with anti-Semitism or the hatred of Jews. Anna Schneider of the NZZ writes that

the initial SZ article “takes no prisoners in a polemic with the Jewish pianist,” and ridicules his political tweets as a “comical hobby.” Then she asks, “Is that anti-Semitism?” She writes that Mauro’s article is poorly written and “lacking in artistry,” but concludes, “But anti-Semitic? No, this text certainly is not.”

Mauro’s article is, in fact, anti-Semitic, and that is why it is being defended by the right-wing media. The anti-Semitic references and metaphors are aimed at encouraging the right-wing extremist cliques in the political establishment, media and state apparatus to intervene more strongly and confidently.

Carolyn Emcke is one among many who recognized the anti-Semitic connotations of the article. She is a holder of the Peace Prize of the German Association of Publishers and Booksellers.

In a guest comment for the SZ, she points out that the headline of the piece, “Igor Levit is tired,” makes fun of the exhaustion of a Jew who expresses his weariness and desperation on the day of an anti-Semitic attack in Hamburg. Emcke writes that it is “as if there is not a party in parliament that propagates revisionist, Volkish and anti-Semitic convictions, as if the right-wing extremist terrorism of the NSU (National Socialist Underground) never occurred, nor the far-right terrorist attack on the synagogue in Halle, in which two people were killed, as if there are not repeatedly reasons for Jews to mourn.”

She goes on to say that if one reads the “violent polemic” with Levit in an “historical context,” one is “immediately struck by formulations that recall classic anti-Semitic associations and clichés.” The article, she explains, criticised his “disjointed playing” and “theatrical pathos.”

Based on the praise Mauro extends to another pianist, Daniil Trifonov, one can surmise it is being “denied that Levit has real emotion and real art.” Emcke continues, “The ‘inauthentic’ and ‘ungenuine’ stock character is a well-known feature of historic anti-Semitic stereotypes (especially thanks to Richard Wagner).”

The “resounding manner” in which Levit’s alleged friendship “with the right journalists and multipliers” is described also implies the old motif of the all-powerful Jewish lobby, adds Emcke.

The fact that *Die Welt*, FAZ, NZZ and initially the SZ defended this anti-Semitic article can be explained only by the deepening crisis of capitalist society. The ruling elite is effectively at war with the population, its policies facing powerful opposition. The policy of “herd immunity,” i.e., the deliberate mass infection of the

population, along with mass layoffs in industry and the growth of militarism can be imposed only by authoritarian and ultimately fascist means.

This is why the AfD is being feted and why right-wing extremist networks in the state apparatus are being built up and protected. This is also why journalists are declaring a culture war and defending racism and anti-Semitism.

Already in the case of the right-wing extremist historian Jörg Baberowski, the major media outlets denounced his critics for attacking “freedom of speech.” Baberowski’s trivialisation of the Nazis’ crimes, agitation against refugees and calls for violent wars were defended, while his critics were slandered. These same newspapers are now using the same outrageous distortion to attack critics of Mauro’s article as opponents of “freedom of speech.”

The attack on Igor Levit also has a broader cultural component. The 33-year-old is among the greatest contemporary pianists. Two years ago, he recorded all 32 Beethoven sonatas and showed in a podcast series with numerous fascinating examples how Beethoven, who was born 250 years ago, remains contemporary in our own time. Under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, he performed 52 so-called “Twitter concerts,” which were streamed from his apartment in Berlin and watched by hundreds of thousands of people.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a Perspective column on the attack on Levit, “Levit has become the target of the right not just because of his political stance. His efforts to make the works of Beethoven and other composers accessible to broad layers of the population and thereby increase interest in culture as a whole are viewed by the ruling class not just with suspicion, but considered a threat.”

The public backlash to the attacks on Igor Levit shows that the rightward lurch of official politics and the media is broadly opposed within the population.



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