

German cultural institutions oppose government's anti-BDS resolution aimed at quashing criticism of Israel

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On December 9, 30 leading German cultural institutions issued a statement opposing a resolution directed against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement passed by the German parliament (Bundestag) a year and a half ago. More than 1,000 artists from Germany, Israel and around the world have lent their support to the statement.

The Bundestag resolution “Resolutely confronting the BDS movement—combating anti-Semitism” was put forward by the parliamentary groups of Germany’s governing grand coalition of the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD), together with the opposition parties Free Democratic Party and the Greens. The resolution accused the BDS of anti-Semitism.

Modelled on the movement against apartheid in South Africa, BDS calls for a boycott of Israel and demands, among other things, an end to the occupation of Arab lands, the demolition of the wall around the occupied territories, legal equality for Jews and Arabs and the right of return for Palestinian refugees, as agreed in UN Resolution 194.

The Bundestag’s condemnation of BDS served to denounce and suppress as “anti-Semitic” any criticism of the policies of the Israeli government, which is at the centre of imperialist preparations for war in the Middle East. The Bundestag resolution demanded the withholding of any public spaces and financial support to organisations and individuals with any sort of connection to BDS, or who sympathise with its aims. This meant, de facto, the suppression of any criticism of the foreign policy of the German government, which, despite occasional tactical differences, pursues its own imperialist goals in the Middle East in close cooperation with Israel—one of the most important markets for Germany’s arms industries.

It is highly significant that the Bundestag resolution also received support from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which plays down the crimes of the Nazis and tolerates numerous anti-Semites and neo-Nazis in its ranks. When it came to the vote, the AfD faction abstained only because it had put forward its own, even harsher motion, calling for a ban on BDS. The Left Party also introduced its own motion, which condemned BDS in the same manner as the government motion but included a few phrases about reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians.

The December statement by the cultural institutions now makes clear that the real aim of the all-party Bundestag resolution was not to combat anti-Semitism, but rather to suppress freedom of expression. Since the passing of the Bundestag resolution, numerous artists and intellectuals, including Jews, have been disinvited from scheduled

events or boycotted because they criticise the policies of the Israeli government or defend the rights of Palestinians.

A key part of the statement by cultural institutions reads: “In the name of this resolution, significant voices and critical positions are being suppressed on the basis of false accusations of anti-Semitism.” The cultural institutions formed a working group titled “Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit,” in whose name they published their declaration. The name refers to the clause dealing with the freedom of art and science enshrined in Article 5 (3) of Germany’s Basic Law.

The cultural initiative was supported by internationally renowned institutions such as the Berliner Festspiele, the Deutsches Theater Berlin and the Alliance of International Production Houses, academic institutions such as the Einstein Forum Potsdam, the Berlin College of Science, the Centre for Research on Anti-Semitism at the Technical University of Berlin, as well as state-related organisations such as the Goethe-Institute, the Federal Cultural Foundation, the Humboldt Forum Foundation and Berlin’s House of World Culture.

The latter organisations fear that the suppression of all criticism of Israel will endanger their work in other countries, but the main driving force of the declaration is the concern that suppressing critical views plays into the hands of right-wing, authoritarian tendencies and stifles the freedom of culture.

“The common fight against anti-Semitism, racism, right-wing extremism and any form of violent religious fundamentalism is at the heart of our initiative,” the statement reads. Germany’s historical responsibility should “not lead to a blanket moral or political delegitimation of other historical experiences of violence and oppression. Confrontation and debate must be possible, especially in publicly funded cultural and discursive spaces.”

The declaration ends with the statement that a society open to the world and that permits public discourse and dissent is the basis “which allows the arts and sciences to continue to exercise their own function: i.e. critical reflection on the social order and an opening up to alternative world concepts.”

As an example of the negative consequences of the Bundestag resolution, the declaration cites the case of the Cameroonian historian and political researcher Achille Mbembe. Mbembe was invited to give the opening speech to this year’s Ruhrtriennale but was then confronted with a wave of accusations of anti-Semitism after he described the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a form of colonialism and compared it to the apartheid policy of South Africa. The artistic director of the Ruhrtriennale refused to turn down his invitation and the administration of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia cancelled

the meeting in the meantime, citing the coronavirus pandemic.

Mbembe is only one of many who have been accused and censored as a result of the Bundestag resolution. Artists who have been accused of anti-Semitism include the London-based author Kamila Shamsie, who was stripped of the Nelly Sachs Prize by the city of Dortmund, and the rapper Tali Kweli, whose invitation to participate at the Open Source Festival in Düsseldorf was withdrawn. The most recent and notable case involved Israeli students at Berlin's Weißensee Art Academy, who were prevented from carrying out a series of meetings critical of Zionism by the university administration.

There have been previous cases of attempts to suppress the BDS. On December 13, 2017, Munich's city council banned by a large majority any meetings in municipal premises that "deal with, support, follow or promote" the BDS. A motion opposing this ban was initially rejected by Germany's Administrative Court. Following an appeal, Germany's Higher Administrative Court justified the plaintiff's motion in November 2020.

In 2018, the director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Peter Schäfer, was forced to resign after holding a podium discussion with the Jewish philosopher and feminist Judith Butler and the anti-Zionist professor Micha Brumlik. More than 400 Jewish scholars, mainly from the United States, Israel and Germany, protested against Schäfer's resignation, which came in the wake of huge political pressure from the Israeli embassy. Brumlik criticized the accusations against Schäfer as a sign of the decline in left-liberal cultural circles, likening it to a new form of McCarthyism directed against all those "suspected of some sort of support for the BDS."

The artistic director of the Berliner Festspiele, Thomas Oberender, who signed the declaration against the government's BDS resolution, said in practice it led to "revoking invitations to artists and scholars who have worked in Germany for many years and whose work has never violated the values of our Basic Law."

Hartmut Dorgerloh, the general director of the Humboldt Forum Foundation in Berlin, pointed to the growing influence of far-right radicalism in German public life and declared, "We are living at a time when rational behaviour is being disregarded at the highest political level. [...] a time when critical positions toward the Israeli government are equated with anti-Semitism, while nationalist and openly racist forces gain momentum."

The American philosopher Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum Potsdam for the past 20 years, told Deutschlandfunk radio that as a Jew she reacted angrily when no reference was made of the broad range of Jewish discussion worldwide, but instead only very conservative voices could be heard. Criticism of the Israeli government must be possible, she said: "According to the logic of the BDS resolution, neither Albert Einstein nor Hannah Arendt would be allowed to give a lecture in Germany because, although they supported the state of Israel, they were both very critical of the unjust treatment of the Palestinians."

The accusation of anti-Semitism against leftists and intellectuals plays into the hands of right-wing radicals and fascists—such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Rodrigo Duterte and the AfD—who identify with the racist policies of the Israeli government and have been greeted jubilantly as state guests in Jerusalem. In Germany, the number of anti-Semitic crimes by far-right radicals increased sharply last year and more and more cases of anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi tendencies have been uncovered in the German police and the armed forces. At the same time, accusations of anti-Semitism are levelled against any leftist who criticises the

policies of the far-right Israeli government.

The German government and its anti-Semitism commissioner, Felix Klein, have sharply rejected the statement by cultural activists. The German government repeated its mantra that the State of Israel's right to exist was non-negotiable. A spokesman for the Foreign Office said that its officials had ruled out any cooperation with the BDS movement before the resolution was passed and had refrained from supporting any means which could promote the BDS. The CDU faction of Leipzig City Council is seeking to take action against the director of the city's annual Documentary Film Festival (DOK), who signed the statement by cultural bodies.

The basis for this slanderous campaign is the definition of anti-Semitism laid down by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which is enshrined in the Bundestag's BDS resolution and bluntly criminalises political criticism of the state of Israel.

Internationally, the accusation of anti-Semitism is being used to persecute even the mildest critics of Israel. In the UK, former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was suspended temporarily and tens of thousands of his supporters purged from the party on drummed-up charges of anti-Semitism.

BDS co-founder and well-known Palestinian politician Omar Barghouti was denied entry to the US where he was scheduled to give a lecture at Harvard University, while the Netanyahu government denied entry to US members of Congress Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. The Israeli state has drafted an extensive blacklist of individuals who are denied entry to the country due to links to BDS.

Anti-Semitism, i.e., the racial hatred of Jews, is an ideology associated with the extreme right. In Germany, it assumed the most pernicious, murderous form with the Holocaust. But in other countries, it also serves the ruling class as a means of deflecting the anger of mostly petty-bourgeois layers of the population threatened with social decline by directing them against the Jewish part of the population. Socialists, on the other hand, have always fiercely fought against the poison of anti-Semitism and repeatedly opposed all forms of discrimination against Jews.

The denunciation of left-wing criticism of the reactionary, anti-democratic policies of the Israeli government as anti-Semitic, alongside the political campaign to denigrate Islam, reflects the rightward shift of the ruling class. Domestically, it is aimed at criminalising those critical of the government and, in terms of foreign policy, justifying militarism and oppression in the Middle East and other parts of the world.



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