

Germany's "Network for Academic Freedom": A network for Hitler's rehabilitation

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Seventy German academics founded the "Network for Academic Freedom" on February 3. Even though the organization consists merely of an empty website, a brief press release and a list of names, the mainstream media has given it widespread publicity. The "Network's founding received more recognition in the mainstream media than almost any other political event in academia in recent months," wrote the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

If the founders were remotely honest, they would name their organization the "Network for the Rehabilitation of Adolf Hitler." They seek to conceal their true aims behind a barrage of propaganda. They portray themselves, in a press release, as a persecuted minority whose "positions and opinions" have been "marginalised and morally sanctioned," and complain about "restrictions on academic freedom," which "often follow an ideological or political agenda."

In reality, the founders consist of professors who can express their opinions wherever and whenever they like. They possess access to well-financed university departments, as tenured academics cannot be fired and have unrestricted access to the media. Their network is not aimed at defending academic freedom, but rather at suppressing any criticism of their right-wing agenda.

If they are asked to provide "concrete examples" of people who have been excluded for "outsider positions," the inevitable response is Jörg Baberowski, who has developed into the leading academic voice of right-wing extremism over recent years and is also a member of the network.

It is grotesque to portray the Berlin-based historian as a victim of an attack on academic freedom. He is himself responsible for ruthlessly persecuting his critics. He has banished students from public meetings, dragged them before the courts, insulted them in the most gratuitous manner and threatened them with violence for contradicting his right-wing extremist views. A widely viewed video reveals Baberowski tearing down election flyers for the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and threatening their spokesperson, Sven Wurm, with a raised fist, declaring, "Should I smack you in the face?"

Baberowski also slanders specialists in his field when they dare to criticise him. Not even a week went by after the formation of the network before the first of them spoke out publicly. Jan Plamper, a history professor at London's Goldsmith's College, described on the blog of the *Merkur* newspaper how he was "cancelled" by Baberowski. Baberowski sought to eject Plamper from the editorship of a joint project after he expressed criticisms of Baberowski.

Public radio station Deutschlandfunk Kultur broadcast a segment on February 1 and 2 titled, "Dispute over Berlin-based historian: They are trying to silence Jörg Baberowski." It amounted to a despicable attack on the IYSSE that employed distortions, falsifications, and flat-out lies, and violated the most elementary standards of journalistic practices. The

segment was obviously prepared in coordination with the Network's founders. There was no other contemporary reason for it—the incidents it dealt with took place in many cases several years ago. The author, Sebastian Engelbrecht, previously distinguished himself as a defender of Baberowski.

Baberowski and his supporters are furious with the IYSSE, because its members were the only ones who sounded the alarm seven years ago when Baberowski claimed in *Der Spiegel* that Hitler was "not vicious."

Thanks to an intense struggle to clarify the facts, Baberowski is seen today by the vast majority of students and the public at large for what he is: a right-wing extremist professor who downplays the Wehrmacht's crimes, defends Hitler, agitates against refugees and receives praise from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), neo-Nazis and Breitbart News. When Baberowski sought to sue the student council in Bremen and the IYSSE, the courts confirmed that he could legitimately be described as a right-wing extremist.

Despite all the efforts by university managements, professors, politicians and the media to defend the right-wing extremist professor, his reputation has largely been ruined. The new Network is therefore less concerned with Baberowski as an individual than it is with the project he has sought to realise for years—Hitler's rehabilitation. It is necessary to return to the outset of the controversy with Baberowski in 2014 to understand the significance of this issue.

Baberowski defends Hitler

On February 10, 2014, *Der Spiegel* published "The Transformation of the Past," by Dirk Kurbjuweit, later translated into English as "Questions of culpability in WWI still divide German historians." The article pursued the self-proclaimed aim of "reevaluating the question of German guilt"—i.e., reevaluating Germany's crimes in both world wars—100 years after the outbreak of World War I and 75 years after the eruption of World War II.

The publication coincided with a decisive turning point in German foreign policy. One year earlier, 50 representatives from politics, academia and the media drafted a document, "New power, new responsibilities," under the aegis of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), which called for the revival of an imperialist and militarist German foreign policy. At the Munich Security Conference, held simultaneously with the *Der Spiegel* article's publication, Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and President Joachim Gauck each energetically argued for

this course.

As the IYSSE commented at the time, in an open letter to the university administration at Humboldt University, “the revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that downplays the crimes of the Nazi era.” This was the task of the *Der Spiegel* piece.

Kurbjuweit interviewed political scientist Herfried Münkler in order to downplay Germany’s responsibility for the First World War. This task was much harder to accomplish for the Second World War, because it is virtually impossible to deny that the initiative for the war came from Germany. Kurbjuweit based himself on Ernst Nolte and Baberowski on this issue.

Nolte, who has since died, triggered the so-called Historians’ Dispute (*Historikerstreit*) in 1986 with the claim that Nazism was an unfortunate but understandable reaction to Bolshevism, a claim subsequently associated with the far right. In a *Der Spiegel* interview, Nolte accused Britain and Poland of bearing joint responsibility for Hitler’s 1939 onslaught on Poland that triggered the outbreak of the Second World War. He also assigned the Jews “a share of the blame for the Gulag,” because various Bolsheviks were Jews.

Baberowski defended Nolte in 2014. “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right,” he commented in *Der Spiegel*. But he went well beyond anything Nolte stated when he said about Hitler, “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. He didn’t want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table. Stalin, on the other hand, delighted in adding to and signing off on the death lists. He was vicious. He was a psychopath.”

The Trotskyist movement already understood that Stalin was a vicious murderer when Baberowski, then a Maoist, was still defending Stalin and raising funds for the mass murderer Pol Pot, since Left Oppositionists and other socialists were Stalin’s primary victims. But to portray Hitler in a “relatively” positive light is a form of the most obscene historical falsification, comparable to Holocaust denial.

It was significant that in 2014, no one, apart from the IYSSE and Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), responded to Baberowski’s statement. In 1986, Nolte’s much vaguer formulations triggered a storm of protest, which led to his discrediting as a scholar. Today, the “Network for Academic Freedom” would welcome Nolte as an honorary member and describe him as an alleged victim of “cancel culture.”

Baberowski’s statement was not only an outright falsification of history, but also trivialised the Nazi dictatorship, since an important role in its crimes was played by Hitler’s personal cruelty.

Peter Longerich wrote in his 2015 biography of Hitler that the latter’s personality “not only (played) a role that should not be underestimated in important political decisions, but also (co-determined) the essence of his politics.” At one point, Longerich graphically describes how Hitler personally travelled to Munich during the “Röhm putsch” to issue arbitrary death sentences against former comrades-in-arms.

In his biography of Hitler, Ian Kershaw describes the savagery with which Hitler executed the leaders of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt after they had been tortured in prison and humiliated in front of the People’s Court: “The normal mode of execution for civilian capital offences in the Third Reich was beheading. But Hitler had reportedly ordered that he wanted those behind the conspiracy of July 20, 1944, ‘hanged, hung up like meat carcasses.’”

On the orders of Hitler and Goebbels, the executions were filmed and photographed. Kershaw writes, “The condemned men were led in, wearing handcuffs and prison trousers... The hanging was carried out within 20 seconds of the prisoner entering the room. Death was not, however, immediate. Sometimes it came quickly, in other cases, the agony was slow, lasting more than 20 minutes. In an added gratuitous obscenity, some of the condemned men had their trousers pulled down by their

executioners before they died. And all the time the camera whirled. The photographs and grisly film were taken to Führer Headquarters. Speer later reported seeing a pile of such photographs lying on Hitler’s map table when he visited the Wolf’s Lair on August 18.”

Baberowski, who specialises in research into violence, is well-versed in these questions. When he asserts, in spite of knowing better, “Hitler was not vicious,” it amounts to a deliberate trivialisation of Hitler and the Nazi dictatorship.

His claim that the extermination of the Jews was not discussed at Hitler’s table is also an outright falsification. There are countless extracts from the “Table discussions” recorded by Hitler in the Führer Headquarters between the summer of 1941 and early 1942 in which he angrily rails against Jews and claims that Europe will be “Jew-free” by the end of the war.

The Nazis’ greatest crime, the murder of six million Jews, was directly initiated and ordered by Hitler, as Longerich proves. He writes in the summation of his biography, “It was Hitler who took the fundamental decisions about the colonisation of the conquered areas by German and ‘Germanic’ settlers, and the persecution of the native inhabitants, and it was he who in the spring and early summer of 1942 resolved to take measures that would lead to the extermination of the European Jews during the war.”

The return of fascism

The new Network has been established to justify these unprecedented historical crimes under the fraudulent banner of “academic freedom.” The fact that 70 professors have joined shows that right-wing and fascist ideas are gaining ground among academics.

The membership list overlaps to a considerable degree with the signatories of the “Appeal for Free Spaces for Debate” last December, which was signed by right-wing extremists like Monika Maron, Vera Lengsfeld and Matthias Matussek. Alongside well known right-wingers, like Peter Hoeres, Egon Flaig and Andreas Rödter, the founders of the Network include academics who are moving rapidly to the right under the pressure of the social crisis.

Anyone who believes the return of fascism in Germany is impossible is blind. In the AfD, a right-wing extremist party is playing a major role in German politics for the first time since the Nazis. Hitler has many admirers in the ruling elite, which is now preparing his gradual rehabilitation.

Around the world, the bourgeoisie is turning ever more openly to authoritarian and fascistic forms of rule. In the United States, the oldest Western democracy, a sitting president for the first time organised an attempted coup from the White House to prevent the coming to power of his democratically elected successor. The fascist conspiracy, which extends deep into the Republican Party and the state apparatus, is continuing following Trump’s departure.

The bourgeoisie is responding to the sharp social tensions that are being further intensified by the coronavirus pandemic and the criminal policy of placing profits ahead of human lives. They fear a social rebellion and are turning, as in the 1930s, to fascist forces to suppress it.

Another factor is the massive programme of military rearmament, which is strongly opposed by the population at large. Although military spending has increased dramatically since 2014, the German ruling elite insists that this is nowhere near adequate to transform Europe and Germany into a military world power. Widespread opposition to this is also developing.

The miserable role played during the Third Reich by the university chairs, who interpreted every critical voice among students as an insult to

the authority of the state, is well known. Several joined the Nazis prior to 1933, while the rest could no longer restrain themselves when it became clear that Hitler's victory was beyond doubt. While their Jewish colleagues went into exile, hundreds of learned professors signed a written "Affirmation of Professors at Germany's Universities to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State."

In his essay "The Führer Protects the Law," the jurist Carl Schmitt justified the murder of 200 people on Hitler's orders alone during the Röhm putsch. It should be noted in passing that Baberowski dedicated his latest book, *The Endangered Leviathan*, to Carl Schmitt.

The IYSSE and the SGP have shown it is possible to effectively resist the rise of the far right. Although Baberowski has powerful supporters in politics and the media, the struggle against his positions found strong support among students and workers. Such a struggle requires the complete independence from all established parties, including the Left Party, and a socialist programme.



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