

Hands off the Documenta exhibition: No censorship of art!

Sybille Fuchs, Verena Nees
19 July 2022

The world's leading exhibition of contemporary art, Documenta in Kassel, which takes place every five years, has been attacked for its socially critical content several times in the past. Five years ago, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Hesse, the state where the exhibition takes place, even termed an obelisk dedicated to the fate of refugees "distorted art," so placing itself in the crudest manner in the Nazi tradition of opposing "degenerate art."

But this year, these attacks escalated into a hate-filled vendetta. Politicians from various parties, along with German and Israeli government officials, seconded by the major media, forced the Documenta management to cover up a huge mural by the Indonesian artists' group Taring Padi shortly after the opening of the art show and then to take it down in an aggressive "anti-Semitism" campaign.

The Hesse AfD even called for the closure of the entire Documenta. The Israeli embassy declared that some of the exhibits were reminiscent of "Goebbels' propaganda" and had "shattered ... all red lines." The executive director of the Central Council of Jews, Daniel Botmann, raged against the mural, saying it was "Jew hatred in its purest form," and called for the resignation of Documenta director Sabine Schormann (who has now, in fact, stepped down). The public prosecutor's office in Kassel intervened and declared that it was reviewing the large-scale image for criminal content. And finally, on Thursday, at the request of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the issue even became the subject of a debate in the Bundestag (federal parliament).

What is involved in this censorship? This year's Documenta is being hosted by the Indonesian curatorial collective Ruangrupa, which is considered left-wing in its home country and focuses on art by oppressed peoples and minorities in the global South. More than 1,000 artists have been invited from Trinidad, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Vietnam, among other countries.

Even before Documenta 15 opened, Ruangrupa was attacked as "anti-Semitic," in part because it also invited Palestinian artists and supporters of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. A 2020 Bundestag resolution condemned this anti-Zionist campaign, which many Jewish artists have also joined, as "anti-Semitic," amid protests from numerous cultural

figures.

At the end of May, there was a break-in at an exhibition space of the Palestinian collective The Question of Funding. The intruders caused considerable property damage and left behind writings that included the number "187," a reference to California's Penal Code for murder—i.e., a death threat.

In January, right-wing, pro-Zionist groups belonging to the so-called *Antideutschen* (Anti-Germans), such as the "Ruhrbarone," railed against the Documenta curators. In April, the facade of the Ruruhaus in Kassel—the headquarters of Ruangrupa—was covered with racist stickers apparently by the same forces. On them could be read: "Freedom instead of Islam! No compromise with barbarism! Fight Islam decisively!" Another sticker called for "Solidarity with Israel."

After Documenta opened in mid-June, accusations of supposed anti-Semitism focused on the Indonesian collective Taring Padi's "Wimmelbild" ("Hidden Object"), which covers more than a hundred square meters and is titled "People's Justice," painted on a banner of cotton fabric in the manner of Mexican murals. The painting was created back in 2002 by more than a dozen members of the artist group, which was formed in 1998, and has since been shown in several countries, including Australia, without causing offense. Upon closer inspection, however, the more than one hundred figures in the painting do include two that employ anti-Jewish stereotypes.

For example, in a row of marching soldiers or policemen, one sees a figure that is supposed to represent an Israeli soldier or policeman. This one is drawn with a pig's face, a scarf with a Star of David and a helmet with the inscription "Mossad"—the name of the notorious Israeli foreign intelligence service.

The second figure, a man in a suit and tie with shark-like teeth, a cigar in his mouth and suggested temple curls, his hat emblazoned with an SS rune, fatally resembles Nazi caricatures of Jewish capitalists.

The Taring Padi artists' collective apologized for the fact that these figures obviously caused offense in Germany because of the crimes of the Holocaust. However, it rejected the accusation of anti-Semitism. Its installation, it said, was created in 2002 as part of a campaign against militarism and violence in Indonesia. The legacy of Haji Mohamed Suharto's bloody 32-year military dictatorship, which was only overthrown in

1998, continues to have an impact today.

“All the figures depicted on the banner refer to symbolism common in Indonesia’s political context, such as the corrupt administration, military generals and their soldiers, who are symbolized as pigs, dogs and rats to criticize an exploitative capitalist system and military violence,” Taring Padi said.

In a July 7 interview with the news weekly *Die Zeit*, representatives of the collective stressed that their theme was “class, not race.” “The message of anti-militarism and anti-capitalism was very important to us,” they continued, stressing that they opposed all forms of racism and discrimination. They referred to the popular uprising that ultimately brought down the Indonesian dictatorship, “a system that cost hundreds of thousands of lives.” The massacres conducted by the Indonesian military killed millions of people, mostly Communist Party members and others on the left.

The banner was “also about Western democracies’ support for the rise of the Indonesian military dictatorship under Suharto in the context of the Cold War,” Taring Padi representatives added. The figures objected to were intended to indicate “the support of foreign military and intelligence agencies for the Suharto regime ... including, among figures from other intelligence agencies, the support of Israel.”

Indeed, the extent to which Israeli intelligence agency Mossad was involved in supporting Indonesia’s brutal Suharto dictatorship, alongside US and British intelligence agencies, has been documented. In the autumn 2019 edition of *+972 Magazine*, Israeli lawyer Eitay Mack described the ties Israel had forged with the military and anti-communist groups in Indonesia even before the overthrow of the parliamentary Sukarno government in 1965. He cites documents proving that Mossad was privy to the mass murders.

“Even though Mossad knew that Suharto’s military regime had massacred hundreds of thousands of citizens, it forged economic and security ties with the Indonesian generals,” says Eitay Mack, who is one of the advocates of a peaceful relationship between Israelis and Palestinians.

The campaign against Documenta under the slogan of “fighting anti-Semitism” is more than hypocritical.

Firstly, it is grotesque when politicians of all stripes now drape the banner of the “fight against anti-Semitism” around themselves. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian war, these same politicians have been working with outright right-wing, pro-fascist forces, such as the former Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk, who praises Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and the murderous anti-Semitic OUN as heroes, even trivializing the Holocaust. And day in, day out, the same politicians are beating the drum for delivering heavy weaponry to Ukraine, even though it has been proven that the Ukrainian army is teeming with fascist elements and right-wing mercenaries from abroad.

Secondly, freedom of opinion, invoked everywhere as the basic framework of democracy, is nullified the moment

opposition to dictatorship, exploitation and oppression is directed against the crimes of regimes with which German imperialism cooperates, such as Israel, but also the so-called Western democracies of the NATO states. Germany also maintained close political and economic relations with the Suharto dictatorship. In 1970, less than five years after the bloody massacres, the dictator was received in Germany for an official state visit. Helmut Kohl (CDU), who governed Germany from 1982 to 1998, called Suharto his “dear friend.”

If anti-Jewish stereotypes are shown in the works of a group of artists from Indonesia, then one can and should condemn this. But this requires, above all, fighting against the confusion that equates the Zionist state with Judaism and Jews. The crimes of the Holocaust are used by the Israeli capitalist regime to justify its own crimes and oppression. These affect not only the Palestinians, but also its own population.

The Israeli government does not represent the democratic and social rights of the Jewish population, which today faces exploitation, social inequality, and police oppression as in any other capitalist country. Zionist ideology is itself a racist, nationalist ideology that serves the interests of a super-rich capitalist elite in Israel and its imperialist allies. It is no accident that Israel’s government maintains excellent relations with extreme right forces.

Thirdly, the German government and the establishment parties in the Bundestag are trying to introduce political censorship in art by attacking Documenta. The state arrogates to itself the right to decide what art is permitted—or, as the AfD has already put it, what art is to be treated as “distorted.” The Documenta debate must therefore be understood as a warning. The current development of war is accompanied by increasing attacks on democratic rights.

Hands off Documenta! This demand should be raised by everyone who stands up for the defence of democratic rights. The oppression of the Palestinians, which is also rejected by large parts of the Jewish population of Israel, can ultimately only be ended in the joint struggle of Jewish and Arab workers. The defence of Jewish citizens against renewed discrimination and the crushing of anti-Semitism, like the defence of Palestinian rights, ultimately requires the mobilization of the working class worldwide against the bankrupt capitalist system that once again threatens humanity with wars and dictatorships.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact