

# The Documenta 15 exhibition and the false accusations of anti-Semitism

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On July 16, Sabine Schormann, managing director and CEO of Documenta 15, the world's leading exhibition of contemporary art, resigned under massive political pressure. Previously, accusations of anti-Semitism against the art exhibition in Kassel had come to a head.

Accusations had already been raised before the opening of Documenta, hosted this year by the Indonesian artists' collective Ruangrupa, which, in addition to making general criticisms of colonialism, is also critical of the Israeli government's Palestinian policy.

The accusations of anti-Semitism reached hurricane force when the exhibition briefly featured a huge, 20-year-old banner by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi, directed against the social conditions in Indonesia shaped by the Suharto dictatorship.

Among hundreds of figures and scenes on the banner, critics found two displaying anti-Semitic tropes. In a row of marching soldiers or policemen, one figure bears a pig's face, a scarf with a Star of David and a helmet with the words "Mossad"—reference to the notorious Israeli foreign intelligence agency's involvement in Suharto's 1965 coup, which killed between 400,000 and 1 million, including Communists and students critical of the government.

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

The curators and the artists themselves apologized several times and distanced themselves from anti-Semitism. They made clear that the banner was created from the perspective of the traumatic experience with the Suharto dictatorship. Its effect in Germany, which was responsible for the Holocaust, had not been clear to them. The offending banner was first partially covered and shortly after completely removed.

But the campaign against the exhibition, its management and the Documenta supervisory board continued unabated. The removed work, as well as several others dealing with the oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli government, served as a pretext to raise the charge of anti-Semitism against the entire exhibition. There were calls for those responsible to be recalled, for the exhibition to be "cleaned up," or even for it to be closed altogether.

That anti-Semitism exists in Germany is beyond doubt. Last year, the Federal Interior Ministry recorded 3,027 anti-Semitic crimes, 84 percent of which it attributed to right-wing perpetrators. But criticism of the Israeli government's Palestinian policy is not

anti-Semitism. One can only consistently combat anti-Semitism by rejecting all forms of oppression.

The campaign against Documenta is not about anti-Semitism, but about banning all criticism of war and militarism, colonial oppression, and exploitation. At a time when Germany—in the words of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz—wants to become a "geopolitical player" again, no such criticism is to be tolerated, not even through the means of art.

This is not the first time that cultural events and institutions have been silenced under the false pretext of anti-Semitism. Others in the crosshairs include the Ruhrtriennale music and arts festival and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. In Britain, similar claims of "anti-Semitism" have assisted in the process of purging the Labour Party of left-wing elements and transforming it into a second edition of the reactionary Tory Party.

Since January, there have been accusations of anti-Semitism against the Ruangrupa curatorial team, a break-in at their exhibition space and even death threats. Consequently, Documenta managing director Sabine Schormann tried for a long time to protect the artists and the artistic direction, and with it the Ruangrupa collective experiment of not allowing hierarchies in art. She was concerned with showing the committed art of artist collectives, especially from the Southern Hemisphere, and rejecting any form of censorship.

Schormann explained that she considered an intervention by the exhibition management in the competencies of the curators as a step towards censorship. She said that artists' concerns about not being welcome in Germany were justified. On the Documenta website, she wrote, "We focused on educating and acting in the spirit of Documenta fifteen."

The demand that external experts "with decision-making powers" review the exhibition, raised again after the removal of the Taring Padi banner, had "put enormous strain on the relationship of trust with Ruangrupa and the artists," Schormann explained.

But the pressure from political circles and the media grew. Claudia Roth (Green Party), federal government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, announced through her spokesperson that Ms. Schormann's statements and accounts of the events of the past months were "wide of the mark" and that the culture commissioner was "very surprised and alienated" by Schormann's statements.

Accordingly, Roth welcomed the decision of the Documenta

supervisory board to force Schormann to resign: “It is right and necessary that now a reappraisal can take place of how it was possible for anti-Semitic imagery to be exhibited, as well as to draw the necessary consequences for the art exhibition,” she told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Members of the Bundestag (federal parliament) from all parties welcomed Sabine Schormann’s resignation. It is significant that the Alternative for Germany (AfD)—a party that maintains close ties to neo-Nazi networks, trivializes the Nazi regime and counts numerous anti-Semites in its ranks—was particularly vocal about this, especially in Hesse, the state which hosts the exhibition.

The cultural policy spokesman for the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, Marc Jongen, called for the “overdue resignation of the Documenta director” to be followed by “the resignation of Culture Commissioner Roth” when it comes to dealing with the events. The AfD parliamentary group in the Hesse state parliament had previously demanded the closure of Documenta and the cancellation of funding for the renowned international art exhibition.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) cultural policy spokesman in the Bundestag, Helge Lindh, described the termination of Schormann’s employment contract in the *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper as an “overdue liberation from a vicious circle of mismanagement and miscommunication.”

Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) member of parliament Linda Teuteberg, “responsible for Jewish life,” followed suit and made clear that this was not about art, the “Documenta anti-Semitism scandal makes an announcement and points beyond the art show: Israel-related anti-Semitism, like every manifestation of anti-Semitism, is unacceptable, as are trivializations with reference to the ‘global South,’” she said.

Green Party member of the Bundestag Marlene Schönberger also called for an “examination of the artworks.”

The federal government’s anti-Semitism commissioner, Felix Klein, demanded that “the necessary structural consequences be drawn for the future. Anti-Semitism must not be accepted in any form in cultural life, no matter where the cultural workers come from. The BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] resolution of the Bundestag should be the binding guideline in the future for the use of public funds in cultural promotion.”

The Bundestag resolution against the BDS campaign does not serve to combat anti-Semitism, but to suppress freedom of expression. It was therefore publicly condemned by 30 leading German cultural institutions and more than 1,000 artists from Germany, Israel and around the world.

The Bundestag resolution calls for denying public space and financial support to organizations and individuals who sympathize with the goals of BDS or have any connection to BDS. Numerous critics of Israel’s Palestine policy are affected.

As the WSWS wrote, “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.”

The attacks on Documenta are not about anti-Semitism, but

rather involve the suppression of disliked art and opinions. This same process is evident in the poisonous debate surrounding the Hijacking Memory conference held a month ago at the House of World Cultures (HWK) in Berlin, which explored Holocaust memory and its political instrumentalization.

Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum and one of the three organizers of the conference, noted there, “No Jewish person, anywhere, will doubt the real danger of anti-Semitism.” But the “instrumentalization of the accusation of anti-Semitism” was “cynically used for nationalist purposes,” she said.

Co-organizer Emily Dische-Becker, who also worked on the Documenta concept, told the *Berliner Zeitung*, “We have observed that right-wing actors internationally, but also in Germany, are appropriating the commemoration of the Holocaust to conduct nationalist, xenophobic, right-wing populist politics.”

After that, a similar campaign as in the case of Documenta broke out. Green Party politician Volker Beck questioned state funding for the HWK. *Die Welt* ran the headline, “House of Cultures: a think tank of the new anti-Semitism.” The executive director of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Daniel Botmann, also joined in, accusing the HKW, the Einstein Forum and the Centre for Research on Anti-Semitism (ZfA) of anti-Semitic tendencies.

Once again, the far-right AfD spoke out most clearly about what was at stake. It demanded that “post-colonialism” should no longer be the yardstick of “our cultural and remembrance policies” because it was “inherently anti-Semitic.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* disagrees with theories of post-colonialism that attribute colonial oppression to psychological and cultural factors rather than to the imperialist division of the world by monopolistic banks and corporations. But the point at stake is the banning of any criticism of colonial and imperialist oppression.

The political parties that today condemn Documenta for being anti-Semitic have themselves a long history of imperialist crimes and are preparing new ones.

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union) maintained close relations with Indonesian dictator and mass murderer Suharto, whom he called his “friend.” Christian Social Union chairman Franz-Josef Strauß maintained close relations with Chilean dictator Pinochet. Social Democratic Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Green Party Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock appeared in Berlin just last week alongside the Butcher of Cairo, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whom they celebrated as a new ally in the fight against climate change.

Anti-Semitism served the Nazis as a means of directing the rage of petty-bourgeois strata of the population threatened with social ruin against the Jews. Socialists, on the other hand, fought the poison of anti-Semitism in the strongest possible terms. Now, the mendacious “anti-Semitism campaign” is being used to criminalize anyone who speaks out against oppression and militarism.



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