

# African Book Festival in Germany and the attack on Mohamedou Ould Slahi—another case of political censorship

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A pernicious form of political censorship is developing in German cultural circles and in the media. Progressive artists and critics of the establishment are being falsely accused of antisemitism and then mercilessly persecuted. Germany's Ministry of Culture headed by Claudia Roth (Green Party) is increasingly being transformed into a Ministry for Censorship.

A particularly outrageous case has occurred in regard to the country's small but renowned African Book Festival, due to take place in Berlin for the fifth time at the end of August. In January, the Mauritanian writer and former Guantánamo prisoner, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, was invited to act as curator for the festival, but was then removed by festival management, following a smear campaign in the press and on social media.

Slahi's first novel, *The Actual True Story of Ahmed and Zarga*, is due to be published in Germany and this was considered an appropriate time to invite Slahi. The festival's homepage says: "This timeless novel, poetic and subtle, tells the story of a Bedouin family's struggle for survival in the midst of a changing world. It raises vital questions of global responsibility."

After Slahi's appointment in January a massive smear campaign against him and the festival management broke out in the media.

A press release from the festival management in March stated: "The Peace Prize winner, human rights activist and writer Mohamedou Ould Slahi Houbeini has been subjected to serious but unsubstantiated accusations in the German press and public in recent weeks, which have since led to numerous attacks against the festival itself."

As a result, the organisers "considered it right to end the collaboration with Mohamedou Ould Slahi Houbeini as artistic director and develop the 2023 programme based on the [InterKontinental non-profit] association." This step was expressly welcomed by Roth's Ministry of Culture. Slahi, on the other hand, responded quite correctly by stating that his removal was "a black day for free speech in Germany."

The decision to censor the author did not come as a complete surprise. Slahi is much more than a gifted author writing about his Mauritanian Bedouin homeland. He was, according to a statistic of the detention centre, the "most tortured man in Guantánamo." He was imprisoned for 14 years in the notorious US prison camp in Cuba after investigators declared he was one of the masterminds of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Despite a relentless series of interrogations, including by German foreign intelligence (BND) agents, intensive torture in various secret prisons, more than a decade of imprisonment at Guantánamo and forced confessions made by himself and fellow prisoners, no evidence could be produced to convict him.

US military judge Lt. Col. Stuart Couch at Guantánamo refused to try Slahi because of the lack of evidence in March 2010 and a US federal judge ordered his release. This order was then blocked following a US government appeal and he was only finally deported to his home country Mauritania in October 2016.

A feature film, *The Mauritanian*, with Jodie Foster as his lawyer, and an in-depth documentary by journalist John Goetz about his case, *In Search of Monsters* (original German title, *Slahi und seine Folterer—Das Leben nach Guantanamo*), have received numerous awards. The Goetz documentary was shown on the German ARD channel in January and is still available in the channel's media library. Slahi's account of the torture prison, *The Guantánamo Diary*, became an international bestseller. Goetz, who accompanied Slahi for many years, made clear in an interview with Deutschlandfunk Kultur: "The accusations go back ages. There is no reason to discuss them again now."

Since the media cannot refer to a conviction in the US in their campaign against Slahi, they concentrated their fire on remarks he made that were critical of the Israeli state. His appointment as curator was an act of "German hostility to Israel," declared the *Jüdische Allgemeine*: "Obviously there still remains his [Slahi's] massive hatred of the Jewish state. The Mauritanian-born [Slahi] Houbeini likes to cover this up with anti-Semitic insinuations such as: Israel commits 'ethnic cleansing' or is an 'apartheid state' through and through."

Alan Posner commented in the daily *Die Welt*, "An Israel-hater should not be allowed to run a book festival." Writer Ronya Othmann asked in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagzeitung*: "Could you spit any more clearly in the face of the victims of Islamism?" Whoever engages an Islamist as curator mocks the victims of ISIS, she accused the organisers.

Not to be left out in this series of vituperations is *tageszeitung* journalist Andreas Fanizadeh, who previously smeared the documenta 15 art festival. His McCarthyite article essentially re-listed everything contained in the false statements obtained under torture in Guantánamo. Since Fanizadeh has to

admit that even the US investigators considered them inconclusive, he resorts to vague and blanket denunciations. Slahi's "role as an Islamist perpetrator in Afghanistan or elsewhere" remained unclear, he claims.

At the same time, Fanizadeh denounces the African Book Festival, declaring it has completely ignored the question of Slahi's "own historical stance," presented the former Al-Qaeda fighter exclusively as a victim of Western justice and praised his writings as a "means of retaliation against censorship and oppression," while excluding those "oppressed by Islamists in Iran or Afghanistan."

Even Sonja Zekri, who presents the issue somewhat more cautiously in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, does not take an unequivocal stand against censorship. She reports that festival director Stefanie Hirsbrunner had suggested to Slahi on several occasions that he voluntarily resign from the post of curator.

Slahi explained, "But that would have been a confession, I couldn't do that." He had given "millions of interviews" since his release after the years of imprisonment in Guantánamo, including one in the WSWS, in which he declared he was neither racist nor anti-Semitic: "That is against my values." Regarding his time with Al Qaeda, he says: "Of course, I was a stupid boy who went to Afghanistan."

As for his trips to Afghanistan and his vow to fight for Al Qaeda, none of the critics have bothered to elaborate on the circumstances of that time.

Slahi was born in 1970 in the northwest African country of Mauritania. In 1988, thanks to a scholarship for highly gifted students, he came to Germany, where he studied electrical engineering in Duisburg. During that time, he became involved in Islamist circles. Influenced by calls from Abdallah Azzam, a confidant of Osama bin Laden, who called for volunteers to "fight the communists" in Afghanistan, Slahi was recruited at a Bonn information office of the Afghan Mujahideen, from which Al Qaeda emerged. At that time, the organisation was not considered an enemy of the West. On the contrary, it was supported by the US and West Germany in their campaign against the Soviet Union!

After the fall of the Afghan central government, Slahi returned to Germany in 1992 and declared he no longer had any links to Al Qaeda. He later spent some time in Montreal, where he worked as an electrical engineer. Slahi was arrested and interrogated successively by authorities from different countries—Canada, Mauritania, the US and Senegal—but each time was released due to lack of evidence. Finally, in November 2001, he was asked to voluntarily report to a police station in Nouakchott, Mauritania, which he did. He was then arrested and accused of involvement in the September attacks in the US.

The fact that these accusations did not hold up in any US court, even a military one, does not prevent German journalists from continuing to pillory him as an Islamist, Israel-hater and Al Qaeda supporter. This throws considerable light on the depravity of the established media, which feel less obliged to the truth than abiding to Germany's "reason of state" and are not afraid to demonise as "antisemite" anyone who dares to criticise the oppression of Palestinians by the state of Israel.

Such accusations of "antisemitism" have nothing to do with a

defence of Israel's Jewish population, which is being trampled on by the Israeli government, as the recent demonstrations against dictatorial measures show. Instead, they serve as a means to censor art and culture and undermine the fundamental right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Often, as in the case of Roger Waters, such defamation goes hand in hand with denigrating any criticism of the role of NATO powers in the Ukraine war while glorifying Western militarism.

Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, a dangerous, anti-democratic development has gained momentum. The dismissal and denunciation of Russian or Eastern European artists and musicians such as conductor Valery Gergiev, opera singer Anna Netrebko, concertmaster Lorenz Nasturica-Herschcowici—to name but a few—have been followed by censorship measures such as the banning of Russian flags in Germany at the celebrations of the liberation from National Socialism on May 8 and 9, attacks on the Documenta art exhibition, and ongoing attempts by Green politicians to roll back Russian influence at the Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, which keeps alive the memory of the crimes of German imperialism during World War II. In addition, an anti-war meeting organised by the IYSSE in the Protestant Student Community in Frankfurt was cancelled at short notice and could only take place after international protests.

The recent attempts of censorship are so numerous that they can only be understood as ideological preparations for war and the mass censoring of political opposition, while NATO, the US and, more and more openly, the German government escalate the Ukraine war and seek to expand it into all-out war against Russia.

The WSWS vehemently opposes all attempts at political censorship and firmly rejects the attacks on Mohamedou Ould Slahi and his dismissal as curator of the African Book Festival!



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