

German broadcaster WDR provides platform for professional anti-Trotskyist and right-wing extremist Jörg Baberowski

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Broadcaster *Westdeutscher Rundfunk's* (WDR) 24 July edition of “Zeitzeichen”, which commemorates a historical event every day, dealt with the arrival of Leon Trotsky in France 90 years ago. The Russian revolutionary and socialist opponent of Stalin had been expelled from the Soviet Union by Stalin in 1929 and spent four years on the Turkish island of Prinkipo before he managed to obtain a visa for France. Two years later he had to leave France again, first to Norway and then to Mexico.

The broadcast was a spiteful attack on Trotsky—an amalgam of insults, lies, half-truths and omissions. The slanders were so crude that they discredit not Trotsky but the authors of the programme. Insofar as Trotsky himself is heard or the programme mentioned historical facts, he emerges as a positive and attractive person, in contrast to the vicious comments.

For example, a speech by Trotsky is played in the original English (here the YouTube version), in which he thanks the Mexican people for the fact that the country granted him asylum and—unlike the European governments—offered him the opportunity to defend himself against the slanders of the Moscow show trials:

Dear listeners, you will understand that I begin my short address in my very imperfect English with thanks to the Mexican people. When fiends absurdly threatened my family, when my wife and I could no longer defend ourselves, the Mexican government opened the doors to this wonderful country and told us that here you can defend your rights and your honour freely.

There is also an original quotation from the famous Copenhagen speech of 1932, in which Trotsky justifies, in German, the legitimacy of the October Revolution of 1917, which he led together with Lenin:

The fact that the proletariat first came to power in one of the most backward countries of Europe seems at first sight quite puzzling. But this is nevertheless completely lawful. Lenin gave this explanation in a pithy formula: “The chain is broken at its weakest link.”

Two other passages give some idea of the tremendous support Trotsky, the Left Opposition he led and the Fourth International he founded in 1938, possessed in the Soviet Union and internationally.

A quote from Trotsky’s wife Natalya Sedova (it comes from Trotsky’s autobiography *My Life*) describes the scenes at a Moscow railway station when Trotsky was deported from Moscow and sent into exile to Alma Ata

in January 1928:

The demonstrators ran in front of the locomotive, clung to the carriages, stopped the train and called for Trotsky. ... There was an indescribable commotion at the station. There were clashes with the militia and the agents of the [Stalinist secret police] GPU, there were casualties on both sides; arrests were made. The train could not leave for an hour and a half.

And towards the end of the programme, it is mentioned that 300,000 people gathered for Trotsky’s funeral in Mexico City after he succumbed to an attack by a Stalinist agent on 21 August 1940.

Baberowski

The rest of the programme stands in irreconcilable contrast to these scenes. Author Heiner Wember and editor Gesa Rünker, who is the deputy chairperson of Verdi/WDR, hired Jörg Baberowski as an expert in insulting Trotsky. He had his say in detail in the 15-minute programme. Baberowski holds the chair for the history of Eastern Europe at Berlin’s Humboldt University and, according to a court decision, may be called a “right-wing radical” and a “falsifier of history”.

When he was a student, Baberowski had already slandered Trotsky. As a member of the Maoist KBW, he justified the Moscow show trials and Stalin’s Great Terror, to which hundreds of thousands of Trotskyists, socialists, intellectuals, engineers and workers fell victim at the end of the 1930s. He also collected money for the Cambodian mass murderer Pol Pot. Since then, he has changed political flags: the Stalinist has become a fervent anticommunist and Hitler apologist. But Baberowski’s attitude to Trotsky has remained the same.

In 2014, he invited the British historian Robert Service to Humboldt University to promote his biography of Trotsky, which had been condemned by international experts as a “piece of hack-work”. The editor-in-chief of the *World Socialist Web Site*, David North, had demonstrated that Service’s work contained dozens of falsifications and concluded that his book was not a work of history but character assassination. The renowned journal *The American Historical Review* fully confirmed this assessment; the book disregarded “the basic standards of historical scholarship”, Bertrand M. Patenaude found.

Fourteen historians, political scientists and commentators from

Germany, Austria and Switzerland wrote an open letter against the publication of Service's work by Suhrkamp Verlag. Professor Dr. Hermann Weber, doyen of communism and Stalinism research, described it as "a diatribe and not a scholarly critical polemic". It was "written in a completely tendentious manner" and bristled with "deliberate misrepresentations and distortions".

Baberowski then invited Service to Berlin. To prevent him from being asked any critical questions, he moved the event to a secret location and employed a security guard to deny critics, including David North and students from his own faculty access to the venue.

That WDR has now decided to invite this professional anti-Trotskyist and right-wing radical as an "expert" is no coincidence. Baberowski was chosen to continue the character assassination of Trotsky. He tried his best to fulfil this mission—and at the most primitive intellectual level.

"Trotsky was a ruthless violent criminal who did not shy from employing violence", Baberowski railed. He was "cold and without a trace of humanity". He was "successful in the civil war because he was ruthless".

This is claimed by a man who publicly attested of Adolf Hitler, he was "not vicious" and "a *Schreibtischtäter* [desk-bound perpetrator] who did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds"; who publicly declared that one should keep one's hands off fighting terrorists if one were not prepared to "take hostages, burn villages and hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do"; who physically attacked a Trotskyist member of the student parliament at Humboldt University, tore down election posters with his own hands and was therefore ordered by the court to pay €4,000 to drop a case for bodily harm and damage to property; who runs in right-wing radical circles and trivialises the crimes of the Nazis.

Baberowski is an opponent of violence when it serves the revolution and—as in the Russian civil war—the fight against counterrevolution. If, on the other hand, it is a matter of fascist violence or state terror, Baberowski has a completely different opinion. Then, it is justified to "take hostages, burn villages and hang people".

Under Trotsky's command, the Red Army defeated several invading imperialist armies and White troops led by notorious butchers and antisemites, thus preventing Russia from reverting to pre-revolutionary despotism and barbarism.

Trotsky himself never made a secret of the fact that the civil war demanded hardship. "You cannot build an army without reprisals. You cannot lead masses of people to their death without having in the arsenal of command the death penalty," he wrote in *My Life*. That he ordered the shooting of hostages and personally witnessed their execution, as Baberowski claims in the WDR broadcast, is, however, a foul slander.

For the "moralising philistines" who measured the behaviour of the revolution by the same abstract moral standards as that of reaction, Trotsky had only contempt: "Let contemptible eunuchs not tell us that the slave owner who keeps the slave in chains by cunning and violence and the slave who breaks the chains by cunning or violence are equal before the court of morals," he wrote in 1938 in *Their Morals and Ours*.

Baberowski's rants against Trotsky sometimes take on bizarre features. For example, he claims that the armoured train Trotsky used as a mobile command centre between the fronts in the vast country actually served the "staging of power" and radiated "violence and power." It was "important, that the commander-in-chief appeared like that and not otherwise." Or he declares that Lev Davidovich Bronstein adopted the party name Trotsky "in order to be able to run away, to be able to disappear"—as if escaping from tsarist captivity were a reprehensible act.

Baberowski presents the conflict between Stalinism and Trotskyism as a struggle between two individuals "who wanted all the power for themselves". This is a mockery of any scientific view of history. As if a political struggle that lasted decades, involved hundreds of thousands, cost

countless lives, and decided the fate of the working class in countries like China, Germany, France and Spain could be explained by the personal ambitions of two individuals!

Trotsky and the Left Opposition embodied the historic interests of the international working class; they defended the programme of world socialist revolution that had helped the October Revolution to victory and underpinned the Communist International. Stalin represented the interests of the parasitic bureaucracy that had seized power in the Soviet Union, embodied imperialism's pressure on the isolated workers' state and also played a counterrevolutionary role internationally. Stalin's nationalist programme of "socialism in one country" was diametrically opposed to Trotsky's programme of "permanent revolution".

Baberowski's sympathies in this struggle lie unreservedly on the side of Stalin, the dictator and mass murderer, whom he repeatedly highlights in a positive light against Trotsky:

Stalin was the pragmatist among the Bolsheviks because he understood that he had to put the imperium on a foundation. It was absolutely clear to him that he could not operate with utopian ideas. Hence socialism in one country and the abandonment of world revolution.

Trotsky was able to inspire people, Baberowski claims, but was "not a team player". "Stalin was a team player. He could manipulate people, use them, and give them the feeling that he respected them and treated them as equals. Trotsky could not do that because he always thought he was the greatest".

What a mockery of reality! Stalin, who secured his rule by means of intrigues, the secret service and terror, was notorious for his solitary decisions, which took on paranoid features towards the end of his life. Trotsky, on the other hand, who no longer had any of the means of state power after his expulsion from the party, gathered thousands of loyal comrades-in-arms around him worldwide.

Baberowski also brings antisemitic motives into play. He imputes to Trotsky the cynical phrase: "The Trotskys make the revolution and the Bronsteins will pay for it." In reality, Trotsky never said anything of the sort. The sentence blaming the revolutionary activity of non-religious Jews (Trotsky) for the counterrevolutionary pogroms against the Jewish population (Bronstein) circulated in religious Jewish circles at the time, although the Bolsheviks fought antisemitism with all available means.

The WDR broadcast ends with a scene from Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*, in which the warlord Strelnikov (whom WDR equates with Trotsky) tells the poet Zhivago that he can no longer admire his poems because they are "absurdly personal" and history has killed private life in Russia. "Killed also by him, the revolutionary Leon Trotsky," adds WDR.

What an abysmal falsification of history! Trotsky was not only an outstanding Marxist theoretician, revolutionary leader and author, he also wrote an important contribution to the Marxist understanding of art with *Literature and Revolution*. Among other things, he subjected the doctrine of "proletarian art", which later flowed into the "socialist realism" of the Stalin era, to a biting critique. In 1938, together with the surrealist writer André Breton and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, he published a manifesto *For an Independent Revolutionary Art*.

Trotsky's fight against Hitler

The WDR programme denounces Trotsky's role in the revolution and the civil war but conceals the political circumstances of his arrival in France. Less than six months earlier, Hitler had seized power in Germany. When Trotsky arrived in France, the concentration camps were filling up with communists, trade unionists, social democrats and soon Jews.

Trotsky, from his Turkish exile, had warned of the impending catastrophe like no other and fought tirelessly against the disastrous policies of the German Communist Party (KPD) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) that divided the working class and allowed Hitler to seize power without a fight. His writings on Germany from this period, which fill two thick volumes, were read by tens of thousands and aroused the admiration of people as diverse as Kurt Tucholsky and Bertold Brecht.

Trotsky's arrival in France set alarm bells ringing in Nazi Germany. Hitler knew as well as Goebbels that Trotsky, not Stalin, embodied the world socialist revolution against which the Nazi terror was directed. When the French Ambassador Coulondre warned Hitler six years later, shortly before the war began, that in the event of war the real victor would be Trotsky, the Führer replied: "I know." Trotsky commented on this dialogue, "These gentlemen like to give the spectre of revolution a personal name."

Baberowski's diatribes against Trotsky could have appeared in this form in 1933 in the Nazi daily *Völkischer Beobachter* or another propaganda organ of Goebbels. This is no coincidence. Since Baberowski declared in *Der Spiegel* nine years ago that Hitler was "not vicious", the rehabilitation of Nazi crimes has come a long way.

Even then, the media fell not on Baberowski but on the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its youth organisation IYSSE, which criticised Baberowski. While numerous students and their organisations supported the IYSSE, the professors almost unanimously backed Baberowski. In the meantime, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) sits in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and the state parliaments, the federal government cooperates with Ukraine and the Baltic States with governments that erect monuments to Nazi collaborators and right-wing extremists sit in government in Italy, Finland, Sweden and Hungary.

The rehabilitation of the Nazis and the slander of Trotsky are two sides of the same coin. Decades of social austerity and growing social inequality place fierce class struggles on the agenda. Those in ruling circles react to this as they did 90 years ago, with fascism and war. They fear that the perspective of world socialist revolution, which Trotsky embodied like no other in the 20th century, will again find favour among workers and youth. *These* gentlemen, too, like to give the spectre of revolution a personal name.



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