

# An attack on Holocaust research: The takeover of the History Chair at the Institute for East European Studies at Berlin's Free University

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Recent developments at the Institute for East European Studies (Osteuropa-Institut OEI) at Berlin's Free University (Freie Universität), one of the most renowned institutes of its kind in the world, pose a major threat to the future of historical scholarship and Holocaust research.

Following the retirement of Professor Gertrud Pickhan, under whose leadership the Institute's history chair had a unique focus in Germany on Polish-Jewish history and the crimes of National Socialism (Nazism), Robert Kindler was appointed to the chair. Kindler is a favourite of the radical right-wing professor Jörg Baberowski, who had already pushed through an extreme right-wing turn at Humboldt University in Berlin.

Kindler wrote his dissertation under Baberowski on the famine in Kazakhstan and wrote his second book on the hunting of sea seals in the Russian Empire. Alongside Kindler, Martin Wagner is now also at the Institute for East European Studies. Wagner also completed his doctorate under Baberowski and co-authored the book "Crises in Authoritarian Regimes. Fragile Orders and Contested Power." Together with Baberowski, Wagner participated in a workshop at Princeton University in the USA in 2020 on the project "From Totalitarian to Authoritarian Rule," which was led by Baberowski and Princeton professor Deborah Kaple and supported by Princeton University to the tune of \$300,000.

When Kindler took over the chair at the Institute for Eastern European Studies, a fundamental reorientation began. Under his leadership, the entire focus at the institute was smashed apart, which was also reflected in the choice of topics for doctoral theses supervised by Pickhan. After only one year, not a single one of the chair's previous staff members is still employed at the Institute.

Instead of courses on Polish-Jewish history, on the history of Poland and on the Holocaust, the Osteuropa-Institut now offers seminars exclusively under the banner of German foreign policy and its renewed drive to the East. For example, Kindler offers seminars with titles such as "Energy Empires. Interconnections, Resources and Conflicts in Eastern Europe" and "Places of Repression. Soviet Special Camps in Germany, 1945-1950."

Martin Wagner offers courses such as "History is Present. State and Nation in Ukraine." In keeping with imperialist war policy against Russia, which includes fomenting national and ethnic conflicts as in Ukraine as a central element, the Osteuropa-Institut now also focuses

on the nationality question in Russia and the former Soviet Union.

The far-reaching implications of what is happening at the Free University (FU) can only be understood against the background of the enormous crimes of Nazism in Poland and the less than magnificent history of researching them and the Holocaust after the end of the Second World War.

During the Second World War, Nazi-occupied Poland was the central theatre of the industrial extermination of European Jewry. All the extermination camps, from Auschwitz to Treblinka and Sobibor, were located in what is now Poland. Until the Holocaust, Poland was home to the largest Jewish population in the world, estimated at 3 to 3.5 million people. Of these, 90 percent were murdered by the Nazis. In addition, there were millions of non-Jewish Polish civilians who also fell victim to the Nazis.

With a few laudable exceptions, German historians shied away from an in-depth examination of the crimes of Nazism after the Second World War, especially the mass murder of Europe's Jewish population and the Nazis' war of extermination in Eastern Europe.

The first fundamental works on the Holocaust were all written outside Germany in the first decades after the war, and almost exclusively by Holocaust survivors. Of particular note is "The Destruction of the European Jews," by Raul Hilberg, who had fled Austria to escape the Nazis and wrote his work on the history of the Holocaust in the 1950s in the USA. In Germany, his book, first published in English in 1961, was only published in 1982 by the small Berlin publishing house Olle & Wolter after long-standing resistance from major publishers.

Other authoritative works by Holocaust historians from Poland who documented and analysed the Holocaust and the lives of the Polish Jewish population while the war was still going on or in the post-war period, mainly in Yiddish—the socialist historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who was murdered in 1944, should be mentioned here in particular—have not been translated into German to this day.

Gertrud Pickhan was one of the first in Germany to turn to a serious study of Polish-Jewish history after the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) of the late 1980s. In the *Historikerstreit*, the radical right-wing historian Ernst Nolte, a role model for Jörg Baberowski, had tried in vain to achieve a far-reaching legitimisation of the crimes of National Socialism.

Pickhan's 2001 book "Gegen den Strom. Der Allgemeine Jüdische

Arbeiterbund 'Bund' in Polen 1918-1939" ("Against the Stream. The General Jewish Labour Union 'Bund' in Poland 1918-1939") was an important academic achievement. Based on extensive source research in Polish, Yiddish and German, it paints a nuanced picture of the often-contradictory politics of the Polish Jewish Social Democratic *Bund* in the interwar period.

The *Bund* broke with Lenin's Bolsheviks as early as 1903. Its development in the interwar period was nevertheless influenced by the Russian October Revolution of 1917, which it vehemently defended in the 1920s and 1930s, even against Stalin's worst crimes, the Moscow Trials.

Pickhan's other works dealt with the history of Russian nationalism and Russian art, among other things.

Pickhan took over as head of the History division of the Institute for East European Studies in 2004. It is largely thanks to her efforts that the department gained international recognition and pioneered research into the history of Polish Jewry.

In contrast to almost all other chairs at German universities dealing with the history of the Holocaust, research at the Institute for East European Studies not only focused on the murder of Polish Jewry, but also on their rich political and intellectual life before the Holocaust—including in Germany—as well as the history of Polish anti-Semitism before and after the Second World War.

The Institute initiated numerous research projects, including one on the history of the Jewish quarter in interwar Berlin, the "Scheunenviertel." Pickhan and other Institute staff worked with research centres and historians in Poland as well as with the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre.

The Institute sponsored a summer school in Yiddish, the main language of Eastern European Jewry before the Second World War. Although any serious research on Eastern European Jewish history requires knowledge of Yiddish, there was no language school of this kind at German universities until this summer school was established.

In 2015-2017, the Institute, under the direction of Gertrud Pickhan and Alina Bothe, offered a course on the so-called "Polish Action" in October 1938, the first mass deportation of Jews from Nazi Germany, in which Master's students researched the biographies of affected families.

The results of this research project were compiled in an exhibition catalogue and an exhibition that was first shown at the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and will soon also be on display in the German-Polish border town of Zbąszy?, where many of the deportees were temporarily stuck in 1938-1939. It was the first research project on the Polish Action in Berlin, a little-studied episode in the history of the Holocaust, and was realised with minimal financial resources mainly thanks to the initiative of Pickhan and Bothe and the students.

Professor Pickhan also took a stand on historical revisionism in Poland and was repeatedly caught in the crossfire of the extreme right and the Polish state media for her principled work. The ultra-right government of the Law and Justice Party has been waging a systematic campaign of historical falsification since 2015, attacking historians researching the history of Polish anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

In Germany, her research has undoubtedly been a thorn in the side of the forces that have been systematically working to legitimise the crimes of the Nazis for decades, and especially since 2014.

In February 2014, the same month that Berlin and Washington supported a right-wing coup in Kiev, *Der Spiegel* published an

interview with the far-right Humboldt professor Jörg Baberowski, in which he declared that, unlike Stalin, Hitler "wasn't vicious." To make it clear that he was concerned with a complete revision of history, Baberowski stressed, "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right."

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), were the only ones at the time to protest against these right-wing positions and warn of their far-reaching political implications.

These warnings have been borne out. The past nine years have seen not only an extreme shift to the right of all bourgeois politics and the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), but also a systematic revival of German militarism. In February 2022, the German bourgeoisie used the Russian attack on Ukraine to launch its most comprehensive rearmament programme since the end of the Second World War.

German imperialism's return to an open pro-war policy is accompanied by a full-scale attack on history and historical research. The takeover of the Institute for East European Studies by the Baberowski apprentice Kindler is the most far-reaching political consequence of this turnaround at the universities so far.

Since 2014, the IYSSE and the WSWs have called on researchers and historians to oppose the right-wing historical revisionism of Baberowski and consorts. The developments at the Institute for East European Studies underline that it is high time for this. At stake is nothing less than the future of historical studies and Holocaust research. If it were up to the German bourgeoisie and its aides in the professoriate, only "history" that serves the interests of German imperialism and its war policy would be taught at German universities.

The dismantling of Professor Pickhan's chair has undoubtedly greatly disturbed many historians and students. But it is now time to act. We call on students and historians to oppose this attack on Holocaust studies and the historical revisionism of the extreme right, which is now being openly promoted by the state, and to contact the WSWs and the IYSSE.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**