

New false accusations of antisemitism in Germany's cultural sector

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In recent weeks, numerous artists and cultural workers in Germany and other countries have come under slanderous attack as antisemites and deprived of opportunities to work. Artists who take a stand against the Israeli military's massacre in Gaza or have criticised the policies of the Israeli government in the past are being denounced and censored.

This campaign is not new. Back in 2019, the German parliament passed a resolution stating that organisations and individuals associated with the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign, which is critical of Israel, should be denied access to public rooms and financial support.

However, since the Israeli army began its genocidal campaign against the civilian population in the Gaza Strip before the eyes of a horrified world, attacks on freedom of art and expression have intensified. The floodgates have been opened for an anti-democratic smear and defamation campaign, involving every party represented in the *Bundestag* and the German media. It is often enough for those affected not to mention “ Hamas terror ” for them to be sanctioned.

The campaign is increasingly taking on the character of a synchronized attack on the entire cultural sector, resembling the “ Gleichschaltung ” [“ coordination ”—the systematic Nazification of German society] that took place under Hitler. It is taking place at a time when Germany's ruling class is once again waging war against Russia in Ukraine, fully supporting the genocide in Gaza and adopting the programme of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in many spheres of policy.

Saarbrücken: Exhibition of Jewish artist cancelled

The Saarland Museum in Saarbrücken cancelled an exhibition by South African-born, Jewish artist Candice Breitz planned for 2024 after she was alleged to have made “ controversial statements in the context of Hamas' war of aggression against the state of Israel. ” Breitz's video installation “ TDLR ” (2017), dealing with sex work in Johannesburg, was to be shown in Saarbrücken.

Prior to the cancellation, no attempt was made to contact the artist by the Saarland Cultural Heritage Foundation (SSK), to which the Saarland Museum belongs. The foundation referred exclusively to media coverage of the artist, and in particular to an article in the *taz* daily newspaper (traditionally close to the Green Party). According to a press release, by cancelling the

exhibition, the SSK wanted to indicate that it was not prepared to “ offer a platform to artists who do not clearly position themselves against the Hamas terror. ”

The *taz* reported on a gathering of around 2,000 persons, including many Jewish cultural activists, who protested in Berlin November 10 against the cancellation of the discussion event “ We Still Need to Talk ” by the Akademie der Künste and the Federal Agency for Civic Education.

The vile inflammatory article in the *taz* accused the artists of “ seeing themselves as victims of the BDS resolution and censorship ... imposed on them by a phalanx of Zionists, the German government and German Nazis, ” while at the same time ignoring “ attacks on synagogues, calls for violence against Jews, even threatening letters to private Jewish addresses and escalating demonstrations by Islamists. ”

The plan for the discussion “ We Still Need to Talk ” arose at the Documenta 15 exhibition following a wave of entirely unjustified accusations of antisemitism. Breitz, who is also a tenured professor at the Braunschweig University of Art, was one of the initiators of the planned event in Berlin and the protest demonstration against its cancellation, at which she gave a speech.

The *taz* accused her of criticising “ Jewish privilege ” and “ apartheid ” in Israel in a video—a claim Breitz denies. In a letter to the newspaper, quoted by *Monopol magazine*, Breitz explains: “ At no point during the evening did I mention the word 'apartheid' in connection with the state of Israel. At an early point in my speech I mentioned that I grew up under apartheid in South Africa, and that I therefore know what apartheid looks like and how it works (which is what you do when you have lived under an oppressive regime). I stand by that statement. ”

Breitz reacted indignantly to the accusation that she was ignoring attacks on synagogues, declaring that the author of the article had no idea what she has been going through as a Jewish person since October 7. “ How dare the author assume, without speaking to me or knowing anything about my personal relationship with Judaism, that I am not deeply affected by the ongoing anti-Semitism and hate-fuelled violence that Jews experience time and time again in this country? ”

Essen: Folkwang Museum dismisses guest curator

Along the same lines, Museum Folkwang in Essen dismissed the Haitian-American guest curator Anaïs Duplan, who worked on the exhibition “We is Future” and curated its Afro-futurist section. The exhibition highlights alternative forms of coexistence.

Duplan published a series of posts on Instagram opposing the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, in which he expressed his bewilderment at the events and sympathy for the Palestinian population, and shared corresponding posts.

Museum director Peter Gorschlüter explained that the posts shared by Duplan were unacceptable because they did not take into account Israel's perspective on the situation in the Gaza Strip. The museum feared being associated with antisemitic tendencies and voices that questioned the existence of Israel.

The Folkwang explained that the decision had been taken to ensure “transparency with regard to the curator's political stance and his support for BDS.”

Bochum cancels award of the Peter Weiss Prize to Sharon Otoo

A third example pertains to the Peter Weiss Prize, named after the left-wing author, playwright, painter and filmmaker, which has been awarded by the city of Bochum every two years since 1990 to a personality from the field of literature, theatre, visual arts or film. The prize is endowed with 15,000 euros.

At its November 10 meeting, the eight-member jury chose Sharon Dodua Otoo, a German-British writer with Ghanaian roots living in Berlin, as winner of the prize. Otoo came to prominence when she received the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt in 2016. In 2021, she published her highly acclaimed novel *Ada's Dream*.

The city of Bochum announced Otoo's nomination on its website November 27. Just one day later, it announced that the award would be suspended because the author was alleged to have supported an organisation associated with the BDS.

The accusations against Otoo, like many others before it, can be traced back to the blog “Ruhrbarone,” which specialises in selectively snooping through signature lists and denouncing as antisemites anyone who has ever signed a resolution by BDS or similar groups opposing Israel's actions against the Palestinians.

The writers' association PEN Berlin has criticised the city of Bochum's decision. Otoo had been accused of having signed petitions calling for the liberation of Palestine “by all means”—and thus supporting the Hamas massacres in Israel. In reality, none of the relevant petitions contained such wording.

In view of the increasing accusations of antisemitism, PEN Berlin spokesperson Eva Menasse warned that a distinction must be made “between the author and his political convictions on the one hand and an artistic achievement worthy of an award on the other.” “Snooping through signature lists” undermined freedom of speech and artistic freedom.

Otoo immediately retreated and distanced herself from the petition she signed almost ten years ago. At the time, she had supported the British group Artists for Palestine, which has

described the Hamas attack after October 7 as “Palestinian resistance.”

Otoo wrote that by signing the petition in 2015, she wanted to “position herself as an individual in solidarity with the non-violent resistance of cultural workers in Palestine.” Today, she would no longer sign such an appeal. “I am therefore distancing myself from the petition today and am endeavouring, with legal support, to remove my name from the list.”

Otoo announced that she would not accept the Weiss prize from the city of Bochum. “I do not want the jury, the city of Bochum or the name of Peter Weiss to be associated with the accusations against me and the debate that has been triggered,” she wrote. Instead, she suggested donating the prize money of 15,000 euros to a charitable organisation, such as the initiative Society on the Move.

Peter Weiss himself would have certainly rejected any such retreat. He was not only a writer of great linguistic and poetic power. For him, “art had to have the power [...] to change life.” That is why he also took a fearless political stance. In his outstanding three-volume novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, he thematises the history of anti-fascist resistance in its many facets, including the political opposition to Stalinism.

In his documentary plays *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* and in *Viet Nam Discourse* (both 1970), Weiss courageously and uncompromisingly confronted colonialism, imperialist oppression and wars, and sharply denounced the profiteers in the economic and financial elites. With his “Oratorio in 11 Cantos,” *The Investigation* (1965), he brought to the stage the first major Auschwitz trial ever held in Germany, at a time when numerous Nazi murderers were still on the loose and living unchallenged in the postwar republic. The stage text provoked numerous anonymous abusive and threatening letters directed against the author and the directors of the production.

Following criticism of his play *Trotsky in Exile* by East German cultural functionaries, Weiss strongly defended Trotsky and the relevance of his struggle against Stalinism even if this meant he was denied performance opportunities by the Stalinists. One can be sure that Weiss would have spoken out unequivocally against the genocide of the Palestinians.



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