

Prize-winning novelist Lana Bastašić denounces Austrian literary organizations' acceptance of Israeli genocide in Gaza

Erik Schreiber
4 February 2024

Bosnian-Serbian writer Lana Bastašić has become another target of the state-backed suppression of pro-Palestinian artists in the German-speaking world.

Literaturfest Salzburg and Literaturhaus NÖ, two eminent Austrian literary organizations, have cancelled Bastašić's upcoming residency and reading because she protested her German publisher's silence on the genocide that Israel is committing in Gaza with the unwavering support of the Berlin government. Far from having silenced Bastašić, these cowardly organizations have provoked a blistering response from the writer that should serve as a model to artists everywhere.

Bastašić was born to a Serbian family in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, in 1986. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Bastašić's family was forced to flee Croatia amid "the nationalist frenzy of the early 1990s," as she wrote recently in the *Guardian*. This frenzy was stoked by the imperialist powers, the United States and Germany foremost among them, to gain access to rich mineral resources and strategic geopolitical advantages.

During her childhood in Bosnia, Bastašić witnessed the poisonous effects of nationalism firsthand. Her Muslim classmates and neighbors were labeled violent and dangerous beasts, much as the Israeli state now calls Gazans "human animals." "By the time I was eight, I learned how to tell the difference between *us* and *them*," Bastašić wrote in the *Guardian*. "A teacher was no longer a teacher; she was a Serb. A classmate was no longer a classmate. He was a Muslim. A doctor was no longer a doctor. They were now a Croat."

These experiences informed the writer's first novel *Catch the Rabbit* (2018), which won the 2020 European Union Prize for Literature (EURL). The book

examines the questions of exile and identity that Bastašić could not avoid confronting as a child.

The historic savagery of the ongoing Israeli attack on Gaza has affected Bastašić deeply, as it has many artists. In December 2023, she severed her relationship with her German publisher S. Fischer to protest its failure "to be vocal about the ongoing genocide happening in Gaza."

She also denounced the publisher for not opposing the censorship of pro-Palestinian artists in Germany. This censorship has included the Frankfurt book fair's cancellation of an award ceremony for the Palestinian novelist Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017), Gorki Theatre's cancellation of a performance of Austrian-Israeli Yael Ronen's play *The Situation* and the Berlin Haus für Poesie's cancellation of an event honoring an anthology of works by 34 exiled Arabic poets.

Bastašić, as quoted in *Literary Hub*, said that by breaking with her publisher, a step that authors almost never take, she turned her back on "enough money to last me a year." She made this sacrifice because she believed it to be her "moral and ethical duty to terminate my contracts" with the publishing house. Bastašić's decision is exemplary in an environment that encourages concern for one's career above all other considerations.

However, this decision had unexpected consequences. Literaturfest Salzburg and Literaturhaus NÖ informed Bastašić by letter that they were canceling her upcoming residency and reading. With phony and hypocritical politeness, officials Josef Kirchner and Anna Weidenholzer thanked the writer for her interest and referred to supposedly "intensive discussions" they had had about her break with S. Fischer.

“As much as we appreciate your books, under the given circumstances, we unfortunately must withdraw our invitation,” they wrote. “Your stay at Literaturhaus NÖ and participation in the Literature Festival Salzburg would inevitably imply a positioning on our part that we do not wish for and contradicts our role.” Clearly, these respectable and high-minded cultural organizations cannot risk giving the impression that they oppose the mass murder of innocent civilians.

Bastaši?’s incendiary response deserves to be quoted in full. She gave the following reply:

Dear Anna,

For the sake of truth and transparency, I would like to remind you that the interest was yours, given that you invited me. Your decision to uninvite me is a clear positioning on your part. Let it also be clear that this is a cancellation of a residency and an event we previously agreed on, based solely on my decision to leave a publisher. It is my political and human opinion that children should not be slaughtered and that German cultural institutions should know better when it comes to genocide. You should also know that you have now added yourselves to the long and infamous list of cultural institutions which cancel artists who refuse to stay silent when the world is screaming.

I do not know what literature means to you outside of networking and grants. To me it means, first and foremost, an unwavering love for human beings and the sanctity of human life. Given that you invited me to your residency and festival, you must have been acquainted with my work, which deals closely with the consequences war has on children. Perhaps to you, literary works are divorced from real life, but then again you probably have never known war firsthand.

Thank you for uninviting me. I would not want to be part of another institution which not only cancels artists because of their activism, but also seems to think silence and censorship is the right answer to genocide. While I am aware of the fact that the funding you receive within

the system you inhabit must have made you forgetful of what art really is about, I still want to remind you that (fortunately for precarious writers like myself) you are not Literature. Your money is not Literature. S. Fischer is not Literature. Germany is not Literature. And we, the writers, will remember.

Lana Bastaši?

Bastaši?’s reply to these craven philistines shows commendable sensitivity, courage and anger. One can only cheer at her exposure of these “literary” professionals who care only about “networking and grants” and who believe that art should be cordoned off from life, especially when state interests demand it. Kirchner and Weidenholzer represent a social layer, by no means limited to Austria and Germany, that sees literature as a means for gaining a comfortable sinecure and establishing a reputation. Questions of human dignity and artistic truth are entirely alien to them.

Writers, filmmakers, musicians and artists of every kind should study Bastaši?’s example. It reflects growing anger and increasing political engagement among artists everywhere. The writer’s act of defiance is an encouraging sign for the development of opposition and the elevation of the world’s culture.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact