

Berlin Film Festival: Artists courageously speak out against Israel's genocide despite right-wing media agitation

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The Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) stands out in the festival landscape for its open door for public participation. Its annual audience prize is a coveted award and an indication of the preferences of the German public, often in opposition to the opinion of professional movie critics. In a significant blow to the German political establishment and media, the documentary film *No Other Land* won the Panorama Audience Award at this year's film festival. In addition to the Audience Award the film also picked up the Berlinale Documentary Award.

The WSWs review notes that already at its world premiere, at the start of the festival, *No Other Land* was greeted with sustained applause from the audience. Produced by the Palestinian-Israeli collective of Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, the film relates the brutal expulsion of Palestinian villagers from Masafer Yatta, a settlement of 19 villages south of Hebron in the West Bank. Justifying the award, the Berlinale jury declared that *No Other Land* "gets under the skin" and shows the "inhumane, ignorant policies of the Israeli government."

The film clearly struck a powerful chord with layers of the German population who view with mounting revulsion, anger and opposition the genocidal policy pursued by the Israeli government in Gaza and the West Bank.

The German media first chose to largely ignore the showing of *No Other Land* in the Festival. They could not ignore, however, the Audience Award and the many statements of solidarity with the plight of Palestinians in besieged Gaza made at the closing award ceremony of the festival on Saturday evening.

Accepting the prize for *No Other Land* at the ceremony, co-director Basel Adra thanked the jury and declared, "I'm here celebrating the award, but also (it's) very hard for me to celebrate when there are tens of thousands of my people being slaughtered, massacred by Israel in Gaza." He continued: "I ask one thing from Germany, as I am in Berlin here, to respect the UN calls and stop sending weapons to Israel."

His comments were met with loud applause from the audience in the huge Berlinale Palast. *No Other Land* co-director, Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham, added: "I am Israeli, Basel is Palestinian. And in two days we will go back to a land where we are not equal. ... This situation of apartheid between us, this inequality has to end."

He later wrote on X that "Israel's channel 11 aired this 30

second segment from my speech, insanely called it 'anti-semitic'—and I've been receiving death threats since. I stand behind every word."

The Audience Award was handed over to the film's directors by Berlinale jury member Verena Paravel, who wore on her back a sign calling for "Cease-Fire Now."

In the course of the award ceremony other filmmakers expressed their solidarity with the plight of Palestinians, with some appearing on stage wearing the traditional kaffiyeh (Palestinian scarf). In accepting an award for his film *Direct Action*, shown at the festival, director Ben Russell, wearing a kaffiyeh, noted: "And of course we also stand for life here and we stand against genocide and in favour of a ceasefire with all our comrades." His comments were also met with cheering and applause from the audience.

The winner of the Golden Bear, the Berlinale's main prize for best film, the French-Senegalese director Mati Diop (for her film *Dahomey*) also used her acceptance speech to call for a cease-fire in Gaza.

In a separate development, posts appeared on the Instagram channel of the Berlinale's Panorama section with the slogan: "Free Palestine from the River to the Sea," which has been consistently and falsely declared to be an antisemitic slogan by Zionist forces. The slogan was accompanied by the hashtag "#ceasefirenow."

Another Instagram post declared, "Genocide is genocide. We are all complicit." It accused Israel of "ethnically cleansing Palestine." and called for a ceasefire on behalf of the "Panorama" section. Other posts purporting to relate to the Berlinale called for an "End to the state terror financed by Germany." A picture of children read: "Stop the genocide in Gaza."

In a desperate attempt at damage limitation and seemingly under the pressure of a right-wing media campaign, the festival management distanced itself from these statements. In a press statement published on Monday, the Berlinale management declared that the Instagram channel of the Berlinale Panorama section "was briefly hacked and anti-Semitic image-text posts" were posted on the channel. The Berlinale "condemns this criminal act in the strongest possible terms and has deleted the posts and launched an investigation."

The Festival management also stated that "the sometimes one-sided and activist statements made by award winners were an

expression of individual personal opinions. They in no way reflect the festival's position." At the same time the statement also insisted that the Berlinale, as a "platform for open dialogue across cultures and countries," would "tolerate opinions and statements that contradict our own opinions."

The many explicit and correct criticisms of both the Israeli and German governments expressed at the closing ceremony, to the fulsome applause of the festival audience, have evoked what can only be described as an apoplectic response from the German media and leading politicians from across the political spectrum.

Christian Tretbar, joint editor of the Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel*, which has unconditionally positioned itself behind Israeli policy (and also behind the German government's support for war against Russia) was outraged. According to Tretbar. "The closing night of the Berlinale on Saturday evening in Berlin was one thing above all: shameful." Tretbar went on to complain of the references made to a genocide against Palestinians and the demand that Germany cease its supply of weapons to Israel. "Palestinian scarves were proudly displayed," Tretbar notes with dismay, and "All declarations of an end to the war were unilaterally directed against Israel."

Most disturbingly for the *Tagesspiegel* editor "the whole thing was eagerly applauded by the cultural audience in the hall. This has nothing to do with dialogue and nothing to do with a political event. ... it's just embarrassing, activist and propagandistic."

Rivalling the *Tagesspiegel* for its unrelenting support for Israel's genocidal aggression against Palestinians, the main daily paper of the Springer publishing house, *Die Welt*, went even further. The daily's chief reporter Anna Schneider titled her comment on the closing ceremony: "Sitting in the wrong film at the Berlinale" and wrote: "It was creepy to see how a reality-blind milieu sought the big stage for its anti-Semitism at the awards ceremony of the film festival in a peculiar self-drunken state. It is irresponsible that millions of taxpayers' money was spent on this."

In threatening fashion she concluded her comment with a second threat to cut the festival's funding. Noting that the Berlinale receives over €12 million in funding from the German government's Culture Ministry (headed by Green Party politician Claudia Roth) Schneider acknowledged, "Art is free, so are artists"... but "the fact that taxpayers' money is being spent on this is indefensible."

The comments made by leading politicians of the establishment parties were similarly aggressive and had a threatening undertone.

On X, the deputy chairman of the Bundestag Culture Committee, Marco Wandewitz (CDU), declared that there were "unchallenged anti-Israeli statements on stage and from the audience that were unacceptable" and concluded ominously: "We must analyse this @berlinale very carefully in line with federal cultural policy."

Wandewitz's remarks were echoed by Berlin's governing mayor Kai Wegner (also CDU). "There is no place for anti-Semitism in Berlin, and that also applies to the art scene," he wrote on X. "I expect the new management of the Berlinale to ensure that such incidents do not happen again."

Speaking on behalf of the SPD, its media policy spokesperson Melanie Kühnemann-Grunow, also criticised the award ceremony,

complaining: "Some cultural workers clearly lack the ability to differentiate—and also see Israel's suffering." The SPD politician acknowledged the fact that co-festival director Mariette Rissenbeek had called for the release of Israeli hostages at the beginning of the award ceremony, but then noted that the film festival received €2 million from the Berlin state budget and posed the question: "What does Berlin gain from the Berlinale? If there is damage, we will have to live with it in the end."

While expressing her concerns about the "thousands of innocent people falling victim in Gaza" the media policy spokesperson for the Left Party, Anne Helm, also fell into line with all other Bundestag parties and criticised the fact that the "hostages and victims of the terrorist offensive were not mentioned." Helm added that "the unchallenged accusation of a planned genocide crosses a line."

Unable to contain their outrage, a series of Green Party politicians vented their fury at the proceedings at the festival's closing ceremony on Saturday. Commenting directly on the demand made by the Palestinian filmmaker Basel Adra that Germany stop supplying weapons to Israel, the president of the German-Israeli Society, Volker Beck (Green Party), declared that Adra's remarks and the subsequent audience applause represented "a cultural, intellectual and ethical low point" of the festival.

The rapid and rabid response by the German media and government politicians to the entirely justified and necessary criticisms of the Israeli and German governments' support for the genocide in Gaza reveals the gulf between broad layers of the population and the political establishment. The German government's attempts to put the country on a war footing and its use of the Israeli aggression in Gaza to condition the population to massive civilian deaths is being increasingly met with widespread opposition.

The clamour of those who have been justifying the genocide since the beginning of the war and trying to intimidate and silence anyone who speaks out against it will not change this. The courageous appearance of artists and the audience at the Berlinale has shown that the hysterical campaign is not succeeding and that resistance is only growing. The mood in the international working class against militarism, genocide and war is even more explosive.



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