

Will books be burned again in Germany?

A comment on the attacks on the Berlin International Film Festival

Peter Schwarz
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Reading the media and official comments about the closing gala of this year's Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, the question inevitably arises: will books be burned again in Germany? Because some award-winners and festival jurors had the courage to call things by their right names, instead of being mouthpieces of the powers that be, they are treated like criminals.

The fact that the film *No Other Land*, which documents the brutal expulsion of Palestinian villagers in the West Bank, received both the documentary prize awarded by a jury and the audience prize for documentaries was too much to bear for the morality watchdogs in the various editorial offices and political party headquarters.

After two of the filmmakers, Israeli Yuval Abraham and Palestinian Basel Adra, also condemned the massacre in Gaza and apartheid in Israel during the awards ceremony, festival jury members demanded a ceasefire and another prize winner appeared wearing a Palestinian scarf, the outrage in official circles knew no bounds.

"Embarrassing, shameful, disturbing and propagandistic," said Christian Tretbar, the editor-in-chief of the *Tagesspiegel*. "The shame of Berlin," headlined the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. *Die Welt* raged against "a milieu blind to reality" that "sought the big stage for its antisemitism in a self-centered drunkenness." The list goes on and on.

Although the Israeli army has murdered more than 30,000 Palestinians, displaced two million, starved and systematically destroyed homes, hospitals, schools and mosques over four and a half months, and is planning another offensive against Rafah, where 1.5 million now exist densely packed together, the appeal for a ceasefire alone is considered "antisemitism."

The call for state-led conformity and suppression is omnipresent. The public funding of art is to be transformed into a tool of censorship. "It must be made clear: there is no state money for antisemitism," asserted the Green politician Volker Beck. And *Die Welt* blustered: "The fact that taxpayers' money is spent on this is inexcusable."

Federal Minister of Justice Marco Buschmann (Free Democrats) is examining whether any statements were made that could be pursued under criminal law. And the Mayor of Berlin, Kai Wegner, warned on X/Twitter: "I expect the new management of the Berlinale to ensure that such incidents do not happen again."

It is clear that this is not just about the Berlinale, but about the suppression of the freedom of any artistic activity. If art is forbidden to tell the truth, it is not art, but state propaganda.

The consequences of the campaign go even further. It is life-threatening for those affected. *No Other Land* co-director Abraham had to delay his return trip to Israel the day after the award ceremony because, as he reported on his X account, "a right-wing Israeli mob came to my family's home yesterday to search for me, threatening close family members who fled to another town in the middle of the night." He continues to receive death threats.

The reason, according to Abraham, is the absurd description of his Berlinale prize speech as "antisemitic." "The appalling misuse of this word by Germans, not only to silence Palestinian critics of Israel, but also to silence Israelis like me who support a ceasefire that will end the killing in Gaza and allow the release of the Israeli hostages—empties the word antisemitism of meaning and thus endangers Jews all over the world," he said.

Abraham, whose grandmother was born in a concentration camp in Libya operated by Germany's Italian fascist allies, and whose grandfather's family was largely murdered by Germans in the Holocaust, finds it "particularly outraging that German politicians in 2024 have the audacity to weaponize this term against me in a way that endangered my family. But above all else, this behavior puts Palestinian co-director Basel Adra's life in danger, who lives under a military occupation surrounded by violent settlements in Masafer Yatta. He is in far greater danger than I am."

Abraham wrote that he is pleased that their film *No Other Land* is sparking an important international debate on this issue and hopes that millions of people will see the film. One can criticize his statements at the award ceremony without demonizing them, he said. "If this is what you're doing with your guilt for the Holocaust—I don't want your guilt," he added.

In fact, the denunciation of pro-Palestinian statements at the Berlinale has nothing to do with German responsibility for the Holocaust. The German ruling class, which after 1945 left tens of thousands of Nazi criminals in their government offices, on court benches and in university professorships, and allowed mass murderers who had killed enormous numbers of Jews to escape unscathed, never made a serious effort to come to terms with the Holocaust. It also supports Israel, which serves as a bridgehead for its imperialist interests in the Middle East, for purely geostrategic reasons.

The bitterness with which it pursues any criticism of the Israeli genocide in Gaza has other motives. German imperialism sees the courage with which Abraham, Adra and other artists face official propaganda as a harbinger and expression of a broad opposition to its war policy.

Gaza is only one front where the German government supports and fuels a murderous war. In the conflict with Russia in Ukraine, it has invested €22 billion [US\$24 billion] in the past two years alone—not counting the billions that flowed through the European Union.

The more desperate the situation on the front, the more it escalates the war, the goal of which is the subjugation and dismemberment of Russia and the control of its precious raw materials. Even the use of ground troops and the construction of Germany's own atomic bomb are now under discussion. Defence

Minister Boris Pistorius wants to make Germany "fit for war," which requires a further increase in military spending and corresponding social cuts.

This cannot be achieved by democratic means. The war policy has no support among the general population. The vast majority of young people are not prepared to be used like their great-grandfathers as cannon fodder in the interests of German corporations and banks. And the working class refuses to bear the costs of rearmament and war through further rounds of austerity.

When Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels and the students and professors beholden to him threw books by Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Karl Liebknecht, Carl von Ossietzky, Bertold Brecht, Heinrich Mann and dozens of others into the flames on May 10, 1933, they sent a signal that they would suppress and murder all opponents of war and militarism. The persecution of critical artists, youth and workers under the false accusation of antisemitism—persecution that is enthusiastically supported by the real antisemites in the ranks of the AfD (Alternative for Germany)—is in keeping with the criminal traditions of the German ruling class.

The defence of the freedom of art, of democracy and social gains today coincides directly with the struggle against war, militarism and its cause, the capitalist system.



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