

German deputy minister of culture visits Weimar

An affront to the victims of fascism

By Emma Bode
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Changes in foreign policy are often accompanied by revisions of history. For a long period following the Second World War, the crimes of the Nazi regime justified a defensive German foreign policy, which avoided the postures of a Great Power and military deployments. Now, however, with the German army actively involved in defending German interests with missions all over the world, efforts are under way, not to deny, but rather to downplay the significance of the abominations committed by the National Socialists.

This is the background surrounding the scandal accompanying this year's opening of the annual festival of arts held in the German city of Weimar.

The inaugural address to the festival was given by the deputy minister of culture, Professor Hermann Schäfer, and was devoted to the theme "Remembering Buchenwald." Between 1937 and 1945, 250,000 people from a total of 36 countries were imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp, which is close to Weimar. Today the site is a memorial to the 56,000 captives there who died in prison or were murdered.

But in his speech, Schäfer made no mention of these victims—although some survivors of the camp were in attendance at the meeting. Instead, the official representative of the German government referred exclusively to those Germans who were forced to flee their homes towards the end of the Second World War. Schäfer preferred to waste none of his speech on the crimes of National Socialism or the victims of the fascist politics of genocide.

Understandably, the audience reacted by noisily disrupting the speech with loud coughing and calls of protest. Eventually, the speaker was forced to abandon his speech following a chorus of loud clapping.

According to the president of the international Buchenwald committee, Bertrand Herz—who was abducted as a 14-year-old boy to the camp, where his parents were murdered—the speech represented an unparalleled abuse of a

commemoration ceremony for the victims of fascism. In a press statement, he expressed his profound dismay and hurt that the speech not only made no mention of the concentration camp, but failed to express any sort of condolence or appreciation for its victims. Herz declared that he was particularly concerned, because Schäfer is a member of the council for the memorial site. Herz posed the question of whether the former consensus reached between survivors and those responsible for the memorial regarding the evaluation of Nazi crimes had now been abandoned.

The director of the Buchenwald memorial site, Volkhard Knigge, spoke of a scandal because of the political signal sent by Schäfer's speech. Knigge inquired whether such a presentation was in the meantime official policy and called upon the German government to clarify its historical position. Otherwise, one would have to interpret the commemoration speech as the new version of history adopted by the government—a version that involved emphasising the plight of German refugees at the end of the war instead of the victims of the Holocaust.

Some politicians from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party have demanded that steps be taken to prevent political fallout from the incident at home and abroad. They called for a clear statement from Schäfer's immediate superior, German Culture Minister Bernd Neumann (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

The vice-president of the German parliament (Bundestag), Katrin Goering Eckhard (Greens), said the speech had been correctly identified as a provocation. For the SPD, Wolfgang Thierse noted not only "a lack of sensitivity for the theme and those being addressed, but also a shift in relation towards our historical recollection."

The mayor of Weimar, Stephan Wolf (SPD), offered a full apology for the affair to the organisation of former concentration camp prisoners, and Ulla Jelpke, the spokeswoman for domestic affairs for the Left Party, called upon the government "to concentrate its historical and

political efforts on the forgotten and still to be compensated victims of German terror, instead of playing up the role of German victims.”

Initially, Schäfer was unrepentant and justified his speech by saying that he had kept to the guidelines suggested by the head of the festival, Nike Wagner (great-granddaughter of the composer Richard Wagner). Accordingly, the lecture was to be devoted to “the policies of recollection in a general sense.” He expressed his regret if this had led to “misunderstandings” or “discontent on the part of the audience,” but this was, “however, not his responsibility.” In addition, he went on, the audience became unsettled because it wanted to hear Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, which was also on the program. The audience, according to Schäfer, could not understand why it was being “subjected to torture with speeches.”

Eventually, Schäfer made a lukewarm apology and declared his regret on German television that he had made no mention in his speech of the victims of National Socialism.

Schäfer ignored calls for his resignation, knowing that he had the personal backing of his superior, Bernd Neumann, who declared he regretted the comments made by his deputy. Schäfer had apologised, however, and as far as Neumann was concerned the matter was settled.

The media speaker of the CDU/CSU Bundestag faction, Wolfgang Börnsen, considered reaction to the speech as overblown. It is absurd to provoke a debate over the historical stance adopted by the Federal Republic on the basis of a “misunderstanding,” he said.

The fact that the government sees no need to take any measures following the Schäfer incident has its own political significance. It would be wrong to infer that the historian Schäfer (born 1942) is a supporter of Nazi ideology. The complete insensitivity that he showed with regard to the reactions to his speech is, however, typical for certain conservative circles, which have sought to increase their influence following the “historians’ controversy” of the 1980s, which also sought to revise the generally accepted view of Nazism. Such forces seek to depict the crimes of the Nazis as one of many committed and which in the final analysis can be regarded as a consequence and reaction to the so-called “crimes of communism.”

Schäfer emerged as Germany’s foremost leading historian during the period dominated by the conservative governments led by Helmut Kohl (CDU). Schäfer was director of the House of History for the German Republic (founded in 1987) and was responsible for the exhibition “Escape—Expulsion—Integration,” which was recently on display in Bonn and Berlin and which concentrated on the expulsion of Germans from a number of fascist-occupied

countries at the end of the Second World War. Schäfer is a member of numerous committees, including the scientific advisory council of the institute “Centre against Expulsion,” which is run by the notoriously right-wing Federation for Refugees.

The utilisation of the issue of German refugees at the end of the war in order to revise German history is also clear from the order by the German Ministry of the Interior requiring all state buildings to display the German flag on the “Day of the Homeland” (September 2). The first Sunday in September has been selected as the day to commemorate the plight of German refugees forced to flee their homeland. Culture Minister Neumann and Schäfer forwarded the order to all concentration camp memorial sites, which are also required to honour the memory of German refugees. It goes without saying that Germany has never introduced a day to commemorate the memory of concentration camp victims, and no flags are raised in their memory.

It is clear from such developments that efforts are being made to provide an ideological foundation for the increasing activities of the German army abroad by stressing the priority of defending and advancing German interests.

An unconditional condemnation of the war policies of the Nazis—including the repression and liquidation of political opponents, euthanasia and genocide—together with recognition and recollection of fascism’s numerous victims is evidently incompatible with the current interests of the ruling elite in Germany, which aims to reorganise the world, its resources, raw materials and markets in collusion with the US administration.

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