

German IYSSE meeting series ends with discussion on historical falsification and the universities

By our reporters
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As part of its election campaign for the student parliament, the final meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Humboldt University was held on Monday. As with previous meetings, around 60 students and workers came to the meeting to discuss a report reviewing the universities' role as the ideological centre of militarism.

The IYSSE invited Ulrich Rippert, the chairman of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party), to speak. He began his speech with the words, "I would like to remind you that in a few days on January 27, it is the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. As the Red Army soldiers liberated the camp, they were confronted with a gruesome sight."

Rippert then played a documentary film, which was shot shortly after the liberation, and then continued, "I was 16 years old when I first saw this film. It was at a trade union school. I wasn't a student like many of you, and I also wasn't one later. I was an apprentice at a large industrial factory, where I later worked as a machine fitter."

"When I first saw this documentary, I was deeply shocked," said Rippert. "These pictures of bulldozers pushing piles of bodies into mass graves; malnourished, starved and skeletal people. The mass murder was organised on an industrial scale. Piles of women's hair and children's shoes could be seen. The skin was cut from the bodies and used to make lampshades."

The Nazis' war crimes were only two decades old, Rippert said, indicating the political atmosphere at that time, which he described as traumatised. "Hardly anyone spoke about what had happened. Six million Jews had been murdered in the Nazis' extermination camps, hundreds of thousands of Roma, Sinti and prisoners of war and many others, not to speak of the more than 50 million casualties of the war worldwide."

Despite these immense crimes, official politics went on as if nothing had happened. The government of Konrad

Adenauer had declared 1945 to be year zero, and without any major investigation, announced the establishment of a "general new beginning." But under the surface, all of the old Nazi circles were active throughout all sections of society: in politics, business, the judiciary and at the universities.

Rippert identified the German presidents in the post-war period and pointed out their Nazi past. Theodor Heuss, who served as head of state from 1949 to 1959, was not a Nazi, but as a parliamentary deputy in March 1933 he voted in favour of the law granting Hitler emergency powers. He was followed by Heinrich Lübke (1959-69), who collaborated closely with the Nazis, drafting construction plans for concentration camps. Walter Scheel was a member of the NSDAP (Nazi party), and Karl Carstens joined the SA (Brownshirts) in 1934 and later the Nazis. Even Richard von Weizsäcker and Roman Herzog also had indirect but close ties to old Nazis.

A lot was known about the Nazi past of Adenauer's chief of staff in the chancellery, Hans Globke, and the role of German Chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, but only a few knew that the long-serving German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had been a Nazi party member, Rippert commented.

Rippert said that he was a member of a generation that was very interested in history. "As we began to engage with history, the connection between fascism and capitalism quickly became clear to us. We read Hitler's speech at the Düsseldorf industrial club. We knew the pamphlet written by Fritz Thyssen in England, "I paid Hitler".

"We knew that Hitler was supported by heavy industry and the banks because he promised to destroy the organised workers' movement forever. We also knew that Hitler's hatred towards the Jews was closely connected with his hatred of workers."

Rippert said it was extremely alarming when positions were put forward at a university like this that "Hitler was

not cruel,” and that attempts were being made to legitimise the Nazis’ crimes. It was even worse that the university management were seeking to suppress criticism of these positions. This recalled the universities’ role in 1933.

He described the situation at the time, commenting, “After Hitler was appointed as Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933 by President Paul von Hindenburg, the NSDAP imposed a centralised state under the Führer within a few months. They did this by means of terror, emergency laws, the enforcement of political conformity, and party and organisational bans. The Reichstag fire on the night of February 27-28, 1933 played an important role in this.”

The remarkable thing about the universities was their “self-imposed conformity”, which was quickly and obediently achieved. He cited a sociologist from Giesen, Bruno W. Reimann, who dealt with the question in an essay about why the universities had difficulties even today in speaking about their history from 1933 to 1945.

In answer to the question of what lay at the root of this problem, Reimann responded, “The self-respect of the university would be shaken if it came out that institutions of higher education were not simply forcibly subordinated to Nazi dictates, but that in 1933 it was much more a process of self-imposed conformity that occurred, i.e., a process of voluntary adaptation to the Nazi state machinery and power.”

Rippert then indicated how this process of self-imposed conformity took place, and the prominent role played by Berlin’s Humboldt University (HU), which from 1828 to 1945 was called Friedrich Wilhelm University (FWU). Even since the founding of the German Reich under Bismarck in 1871, the FWU was considered to be the “first ideological arena of battle.” At the beginning of World War I, professors at the university authored the notorious “Appeal to the cultural world,” in which 93 scientists, artists and literary figures supported the crimes of the German troops in Belgium and hailed the war as a whole as a “struggle for culture.”

A speciality of the FWU/HU was its research on Eastern Europe and the drafting of the “General Plan East”, which directed military operations against the Soviet Union. Contrary to the claims of Ernst Nolte and his supporters, the war against Poland and the Soviet Union was not a defensive war against the violence of the Bolsheviks. The General Plan instead makes clear that the Germanisation of the East had been prepared long in advance.

For his research on the East, agricultural scientist Konrad Meyer was provided with virtually unlimited financial resources and a large team of scientific assistants. Already in his first draft on the Germanisation and forced settlement of western Poland, the plan was to remove 560,000 Jews and

3.4 million Poles from the region of western Poland.

Rippert explained the role of Humboldt University in the 1930s and today in relation to the changes in foreign policy and the return of militarism.

He described the German government’s announcement of the ending of the previous policy of military restraint as an historical turning point. It heralded a new era of an aggressive imperialist foreign policy. As in the 1930s, the preparations for war were connected with the building up of right-wing, racist organisations. This is how the Pegida movement had to be understood.

Rippert indicated how this right-wing campaign was encouraged by the media, dealing in this context with the international anti-Islam campaign in the wake of the terrorist attack on the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. “Under the slogan ‘I am Charlie’, obscene and insulting anti-Islamic caricatures were being distributed that recall the anti-Semitic tirades in the Nazi weekly *Der Stürmer* of Julius Schleichner,” Rippert said.

He concluded, “We are not intimidated by the war policy or the encouragement of right-wing, racist organisations. We base ourselves on the strongest social force: the international working class, which vehemently opposes the return of war and fascism. The source of our optimism is our understanding of history. We know the political lessons that have to be drawn from the great struggles and tragedies of the last century, and on that basis, we build a global party to mobilise the working class in support of an international, socialist programme.”

Following the speech, an intense discussion developed which was then continued in smaller groups after the end of the meeting. This included a response from an IYSSE member to a defender of *Charlie Hebdo*: “These anti-Islamic caricatures have nothing to do with satire, but are racist propaganda. Satire is always directed against the ruling and wealthy upper class, while *Charlie Hebdo* made fun of the religion and desperation of people who have been permanently under attack and suppressed by imperialist armies. This anti-Islamic propaganda is part of the policy of imperialist militarism.”

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