

Mehring Verlag publishing house presents new book, *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* at Frankfurt Book Fair

By our correspondent
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At this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, Mehring Verlag (Mehring Publishers) presented the book *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* which deals with the political controversy at Humboldt University in Berlin in context of the return of German militarism. The book met with great interest by attendees.

On October 17, Mehring presented the book at a public meeting held at Goethe University in the immediate vicinity of the book fair. Four days later, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) presented the book at Humboldt University in Berlin. Both events were well attended.

Professors Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler, whose political stance it sharply disputes, took part in a number of debates and talks at the fair: at the well-known "Blue Sofa," organised by Deutschlandradio, the 3Sat television broadcaster's stand, the *Die Welt* national daily newspaper's stand and many other booths.

Peter Schwarz, the editor of *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* delivered an introductory talk on the book in Frankfurt and Berlin. Quoting from the preface, he stressed that the book's theme goes "far beyond the dispute at Humboldt University."

Schwarz pointed out that this had certainly been confirmed four months after the quotation from the preface had been written. Under circumstances in which the influx of refugees into central Europe was politically polarising society, Baberowski was publicly agitating against asylum-seekers and thereby winning support from extreme right-wing forces.

The book's editor quoted from articles and interviews made public by Baberowski in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, on 3Sat and Deutschlandradio. Baberowski uses these publications to attack from the right "all the chatter about the welcoming culture" and the federal government's refugee policy, claiming that too many immigrants from foreign cultures are destroying the foundations of society.

He plays off the poorest strata of society against the migrants, describes the recent attacks on refugee shelters as "relatively harmless," and asserts in typically right-wing fashion that the mainstream media have turned Germany into a "realm of moral preachers," where prudence and reason are banned.

Münkler, who contended in his last book *Power in the Centre* that Germany should assume the role of hegemon and "disciplinarian" in Europe, is now furiously advocating in his latest work, *Kriegssplitter*, what he calls "humanitarian" military operations. He argues against a "world view, according to which not intervention, but abstention and waiting hopefully is the key to a more peaceful world."

Schwarz stressed that *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* was not designed to publicise a personal settling of scores with two individuals.

Instead, "Its significance is to be understood in the context of current political developments."

The capitalist world economy, he said, was in a deep crisis. The economic problems that brought the financial system to the brink of collapse in 2008 had not been overcome. The standard of living of the working population had been subjected to constant attacks, not only in Greece.

Schwarz went on to say, "The US and its European allies have been waging continuous war in the Middle East and North Africa for 14 years. They and their proxy military forces in the region have largely destroyed Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Millions have died, tens of millions are in flight. The refugees who are trying to escape from this hell have now brought the reality of war to the heart of Europe."

While the population has demonstrated widespread solidarity with the refugees and willingness to help them, the ruling elites have responded with unabated ruthlessness and a sharp move to the right. They have systematically attempted to mobilise the dregs of society and establish a right-wing movement that is directed not only against refugees, but any political or social opposition.

Protests and preparedness to help refugees were not enough to counter xenophobia, welfare cuts and militarism, Schwarz stressed. A social, political and ideological struggle was necessary. That was the import of this book. The struggle, conducted by the IYSSE at Humboldt University, very sharply revealed the issues that this would involve.

History of the dispute

Schwarz then summarised the history of the conflict at the university. He explained how a new interpretation of the history of the Soviet Union began to gain momentum following the USSR's dissolution almost 25 years ago. Quoting from the book, he pointed out "there was now no stopping" certain academics who had had to curb their reactionary instincts prior to 1991: "In a kind of collective primal scream, they gave way to uninhibited anti-Marxist and anti-communist tirades."

Other academics regretted their former sympathies with the left. "The embittered and extremely subjective irrationalism of post-modern anti-Marxism found a particularly devoted audience in this petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left milieu, which was characterised by intellectual cowardice."

This led to the development of a "post-Soviet school of historical falsification," whose attacks were primarily directed against the October Revolution and Leon Trotsky. Trotsky had to be discredited because he personified the proof that there had been an alternative to Stalinism, Schwarz said.

According to Schwarz, the dispute with Baberowski had its roots in these issues. As early as 2010, he had refused to receive the renowned American historian Alexander Rabinowitch, who was invited by Mehring

Verlag in Berlin to introduce his book, *The Bolsheviks in year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. While Rabinowitch was able to prove on the basis of his careful evaluation of sources that the Bolsheviks were supported by the masses, Baberowski proceeded without any evidence whatsoever to present the October Revolution as a senseless orgy of violence.

In 2014, Baberowski then invited Robert Service to Humboldt University to present his biography of Trotsky, although it had already been completely discredited internationally. When the IYSSE announced its intention to participate in the public colloquium and submitted written questions to Service, Baberowski responded by taking authoritarian measures. He moved the colloquium to a secret location and, having enlisted the aid of security personnel, denied entry to anyone he suspected of being critics of Service.

Schwarz explained that *Der Spiegel* magazine published in the same week an article that exposed the political agenda Baberowski was following. The article once again raised the issue of "German guilt" in the first and second world wars, and cited Baberowski, Münkler and Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte as chief advocates of a "changed view of history." Baberowski was quoted as saying that Nolte was right in the Historians' Dispute of the 1980s and that Hitler was not cruel.

Schwarz continued to explain how these historical falsifications were closely linked to efforts on the part of the federal government to revive German militarism. The *Der Spiegel* article had appeared 10 days after the Munich Security Conference, where members of the federal government had announced that Germany was "too large and too important" to exclude itself from the world's conflict zones and crisis regions, and 10 days before the government in Kiev was overthrown, due to massive support from Berlin and Washington aimed at enabling a right-wing, anti-Russian regime to come to power.

Schwarz went on to detail the course of the Humboldt University dispute, which is extensively documented in the book. "The IYSSE members were not prepared to accept these developments," he stressed. While the university administration gave Baberowski its backing and issued public statements accusing the IYSSE of "character assassination" and "defamation," the IYSSE received support from the students, organised well-attended meetings and eventually won a seat in the student parliament. The student parliament declared its disapproval of the university administration's view of the matter in an official statement.

When students then criticised the professor of political sciences lectures in the blog "Münkler Watch," the German press published a series of articles crammed with half-truths, distortions and outright lies in order to set off a storm of insults against the blog and IYSSE.

Schwarz concluded his talk by stressing that the dispute was not over: "We will not allow a repeat of the events of the 1930s. We are building a movement that is not prepared to accept such a development. The confrontation led by the IYSSE at Humboldt University is extremely important. To 'nip (the revival of fascism) in the bud,' a political, ideological and theoretical struggle must be waged."

Baberowski's falsification of history

Christoph Vandreier, spokesman for the IYSSE, explained in Frankfurt the ideological positions that Baberowski expresses in his books and media contributions. He read several passages from the book to illustrate this ideology.

He quoted a passage, in which David North described postmodernism as follows: Its "origins and evolution are theoretically based on subjective idealist irrationalism, politically motivated by hostility to socialism, and socially rooted in the material interests of the ruling class and affluent sections of the middle class."

He pointed out that it is characteristic of postmodernists that they deny objective reality. Postmodern theorists juxtapose lies and truth without distinction. Baberowski even denies the operation of historical causality

when he emphasises, "The events of the past are not the source of the actions of those who come after," and claims that one cannot know "whether or how an event has taken place."

"But why is history worth studying any more, if one denies that events are causally related to one another?" Vandreier asked. The study of social conditions, historical developments and social controversies is entirely irrelevant as far as Baberowski is concerned.

Vandreier went on to say that Baberowski's main polemical category was violence. "For him, that is the key to an understanding of the 20th century." In this respect, he also bases his position on extremely reactionary traditions of thought. According to Vandreier, Baberowski held that "violence (is) elementary and occurs without cause. It is simply there and spontaneously descends upon people, irrespective of the conditions under which they live, how they grew up, what interests they have, etc."

The only means he concedes as relevant to the containing of violence is the counter-violence of the state apparatus. This makes it increasingly clear that he is not concerned with a scientific approach to the study of history, but an ideological justification of existing conditions and the bourgeois state as an instrument of repression.

Baberowski also accounts for the origin of the Soviet Union and the course of the October Revolution in a very similar way. Vandreier said he defines them as the "starting point of the barbarism of the 20th century." According to Baberowski, the Russian Revolution of 1917 had opened "opportunities for violence" which psychopaths like Stalin had been able to exploit to live out their natures unimpeded. He presented the Bolsheviks as an uncivilised bunch of violent criminals.

Baberowski's depiction of the Red Army as barbarian hordes who wanted to overrun civilised Europe clearly supported the thesis of Ernst Nolte. Baberowski explicitly wrote in his book *Scorched Earth* that Stalin wanted to wage a war against Europe. This assertion is an historical lie that has long been refuted and continues to be peddled only by the most right-wing revisionist historians. It was designed to misrepresent and downplay the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

Sven Wurm, the representative of the IYSSE in the student parliament, also spoke on these issues in Berlin.

Lively discussion

The addresses were followed by lively discussions in both cities. Many participants posed questions and wanted to learn more about the postmodernists, the views of Humboldt professors and the criticism levelled against their ideologies.

A student in Frankfurt asked why the students who contributed to "Münkler Watch" wanted to remain anonymous. Peter Schwarz answered that the IYSSE defended the right of students to express themselves anonymously, but had always identified itself publicly in the course of polemics.

One of the audience recalled that some of Münkler's students had even been accused of trying to "censor" the professor. "That's ridiculous," he said, adding that censorship was always imposed by the state and students were in no position to do any censoring.

Vandreier stressed that "the tradition of the pseudonym (was) particularly deeply rooted" in Germany. There were good reasons for this, since German history was well acquainted with the despotism of the authoritarian state. "Democratic rights always had to be wrested from the state," he concluded. The right to anonymous expression of opinion is a "fundamental democratic issue," he said. "Imagine only being allowed to express criticism, if you had to give your name and address in advance. Democracy would no longer be possible," Vandreier said.

At the end of the event, numerous attendees bought the book *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* and took an interest in other works by Leon Trotsky and David North on the book table. Most of the participants stayed on to engage in discussions.

Pia and Sofie, two students at Goethe University, who had learnt about the event from the IYSSE flyer, found the talks and the discussion “very interesting.” “As I’ve found today, it’s simply not enough to read the bourgeois press,” said Pia, who is studying political science. “You have to take your own steps (to find sources of information), if you want to understand what’s going on.”

Her friend Sofie said, “I was particularly interested in what we heard here about the refugees. Of course, Pegida is inciting people against them. That’s obvious. But great solidarity with them is being shown by the general public.” Sofie, a law student, said she had believed for some time that sections of the state were genuinely trying to help the refugees, but that was soon proved to be an illusion.

Pia reported that a great deal of theory was discussed at university, but current affairs and the refugee crisis “are mostly spoken about in private discussions, and not in seminars or lectures.” She said a lot of students had a positive attitude towards the refugees, and some were quite willing to accept all refugees into the country.

Sofie wondered how it was possible that someone like Baberowski could be awarded the prize for non-fiction at the Leipzig Book Fair: “We were taught in elementary school that the period of fascism and Nazism must never be repeated.”

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