

“Berlin correspondence:” Germany’s Humboldt University in the service of militarism

By Johannes Stern
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“Will the universities remain centres of scholarship and free criticism? Or will they once again become state-directed cadre-training centres for right-wing and militarist ideologies, as previously in German history?” asks the forward to the book, *Scholarship or War Propaganda*, which deals with the role of Berlin’s Humboldt University in the remilitarization of Germany.

The series of meetings, entitled “Berlin Correspondence,” currently taking place at Berlin’s Gorky Theatre, demonstrate the advanced stage of the transformation of Humboldt University into a think-tank of German imperialism.

The “Berlin Correspondence” meetings are based upon direct cooperation between the German Foreign Ministry and Humboldt University, and pursue the goal of implementing the foreign policy change that was announced by German President Gauck and the German government in early 2014 at the Munich Security Conference.

In his opening speech to the meetings, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who had previously demanded that Germany must “be ready for earlier, more decisive and more substantive engagement” in World politics, described the series as “a bold step of cooperation between three very different partners, the Gorki Theater, the Humboldt University and the Federal Foreign Office,” and as a “bold step for those of us working with foreign policy.”

Steinmeier left no doubt about what he means by this: The development of a German strategy in the competitive struggle of the great powers to redivide the world. He noted, “crises and conflicts are coming thick

and fast at the moment, and that is no coincidence. It is a reflection of the wrestling for supremacy, the power struggles between old and new powers, between state and non-state players with a wealth of interests, ambitions, ideologies.”

Germany was indeed “responsible for the destruction of an entire order” in the 20th century, but “despite that, this country, over the past 70 years, has [...] become an important hub in the network of international relations,” Steinmeier continued.

Then he asked rhetorically: “But what does all that mean for our engagement in the world?” answering, “I believe that since we now derive so much benefit from our integration in the international order, we have to do all the more to preserve and develop this order—especially now, when the world seems to be falling apart at the seams.”

In the second event in the series, which took place last Sunday, Humboldt Professor Herfried Münkler took on the task of justifying the remarks of the foreign minister “scientifically.”

The political scientist spoke quite openly about his role as a lackey for German militarism. It had been “quite a challenge,” when, “a few months ago, the then president of Humboldt University Jan-Hendrik Olbertz approached some of us with a request to think about ‘order,’ and make the term fruitful for the most recent political challenges, as the foreign ministry said for a world that seems to be falling apart at the seams.”

Somewhat later, Münkler assured his audience that it was not his perspective to develop “theories of world order” as a “pure theorist” and to keep “strictly away” from the political actors. “The Werdersche Markt in Berlin”—where the headquarters of the foreign ministry

is located—was “a kilometre from the Humboldt University,” and “to a certain extent, I try to make this distance short and quick and to switch back and forth.”

Münkler’s work has long been closely linked to German foreign policy. In 2014, with financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation and the Thyssen Foundation, he published his book *Der Große Krieg* (The Great War), at the centre of which are attacks on the renowned historian Fritz Fischer and the relativization of German war guilt in World War One. His essay “Macht in der Mitte” (Power in the Middle), published in 2015, advocates that Germany take over the role of hegemon in Europe and move from being its “paymaster” to its “disciplinarian.” It was cited especially in the wake of the German austerity diktats against Greece.

With his latest work, *Kriegssplitter* (War Splitters), Münkler pursues the stated objective of developing a “real geopolitical strategy” for German imperialism in the 21st century, “to address the challenges of our time.” His lecture in the Gorki Theater on the topic of “Order—a politically contested concept” served this project. And as usual, the professor did not mince his words, despite the inflated and false references to Kant, Hegel and even Marx.

Under conditions of increasing geopolitical “disorder”—he identified the main causes as the “retreat of the US as the world’s policeman,” failed states and the spread of terrorism—Münkler pleaded for the “rehabilitation of the outmoded concept of order.” Germany must be willing to accept the role of a power for order, which not only “consumed” order, but also “produced” it, and if necessary by political and military means.

Currently, it was particularly a matter of the stabilization of the European periphery. “Germany must take on more ‘responsibility’, as the political formula reads, perhaps not in the world but in the European periphery”, according to Münkler. Elsewhere he said, “The central challenge facing Europeans [is] the stabilization of the opposite Mediterranean coast [i.e. the coast of North Africa] and the reorganization of the Middle East.”

At the end of his presentation, Münkler impressed on his audience: “We have to decide whether and how we want to defend the existing order against the intrusion of disorder, or whether we trust ourselves to create a

workable and enforceable new order, about which many like to talk. But that depends on our self-confidence and the force we sense within us.”

The question “addressed to us” was “not only the right question, but also a burdensome question.” At issue was nothing less than “making the choice between the defence of the old order or the creation of a fundamentally new order, and what we trust ourselves to do in an old, weary, in my language, post-heroic society. The longer we delay this response, the greater the disorder.”

The Humboldt University professor also referenced the theoretical influences on which his great power fantasies rest. For example, he pointed to the conceptions of the German geographer Ernst Kapp (1808-1896). Kapp himself was a convinced liberal, but his historical teachings about “the creation of empires” and his concepts of “Raum und Zeit” (Space and Time) influenced the following generation of reactionary imperialist geo-strategists.

Kapp’s thoughts were later developed by Friedrich Ratzel and can be found in similar form in Carl Schmitt’s geopolitical writings.

Ratzel (1844-1904) is considered a pioneer of German geopolitics. As a member of the anti-Semitic and militaristic Pan-German League, he coined the notorious concept of “Lebensraum” (living space) in 1901.

Schmitt was not only the crown jurist of the Third Reich, but also an influential Nazi geopolitician. It speaks volumes that the latter is one of Münkler’s main influences. The bibliography of *Kriegssplitter* lists four of Schmitt’s works, including the notorious *Land und Meer* (*Land and Sea*) published in 1942. Even though it may not have been clear to all the listeners in the Gorki Theatre, the remarks by Münkler, at the invitation of Humboldt University and the foreign ministry, stood in this tradition.

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