

“A declaration of hostility towards the principles of humanity”

Professor Mario Kessler publishes comment criticizing views of right-wing professor Jörg Baberowski

By Christoph Vandreier
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On Sunday, the *Tagesspiegel* published a guest commentary by Professor Mario Kessler, who attributed an “elemental lack of feeling” for the victims of the Nazis to the radical right-wing Professor Jörg Baberowski. He also questioned whether Baberowski swept aside the results of scientific research on Hitler’s viciousness due to “a lack of education or through calculation.”

Kessler is an internationally renowned professor at the University of Potsdam and works at the Centre for Contemporary Historical Research. He has published over two dozen books in German and English on the history of anti-Semitism, the European labour movement and other topics. He was a guest professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Columbus State University in Georgia, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His research has also taken him to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, King’s College in London, and Harvard University.

Kessler’s comment is a response to an article in *Tagesspiegel*, which reported on an interview with Baberowski, published in the journal of the German Universities Association, *Forschung & Lehre* (*Research & Teaching*). In the interview, Baberowski, a professor of Eastern European history at Humboldt University, reaffirmed a statement he made in February 2014 in Germany’s highest circulation newsweekly, *Der Spiegel*. At that time, Baberowski said, “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious. He did not want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

In *Research and Teaching*, Baberowski defended this

monstrous minimisation of Nazi crimes by saying, “I’ve compared Hitler to Stalin. Stalin was a psychopath, Hitler was not. Stalin enjoyed violence, Hitler did not. Hitler knew what he was doing. He was an armchair perpetrator (*Schreibtischtäter*), who did not want to know about the bloody consequences of his deeds. This does not make his deeds morally better, but worse. Nobody can really misunderstand what I mean.” *Tagesspiegel* had quoted this passage.

Kessler vehemently refutes this presentation. “Here—let’s put this in a friendly way—Baberowski ignores what contemporaries recorded with horror, and which was then proven in detail in decades of research: the fact Hitler had definitely described the possible and then actual consequences of the annihilation of millions of Jews and non-Jews in images that were just as terrible as they were cynical; that he had cold-bloodedly planned and ordered this extermination.” Hitler’s documented discussions at his table and “many other public and semi-public statements by Hitler especially from 1941” also showed Hitler’s viciousness.

Kessler reported on discussions at the Jewish Yeshiva University in New York, where he was a guest professor until January of this year. Colleagues and students had asked him “whether Baberowski was a Nazi,” after the *Spiegel* interview of 2014 had also been published in English. “I clearly denied this but the questioners kept digging,” writes Kessler. “Is he, perhaps, a Nazi who has not, or not yet, dared to give free rein to his views? I also denied this, but could only partially convince my interlocutors.”

Finally, he acknowledged that his colleagues “had instinctively made an important point: whoever claims that Hitler was not vicious, reveals an elementary lack of feeling for his victims, no matter what explanation for this he may make. That Jews, but not only them, regard this as a declaration of hostility against themselves and the principles of humanity, is more than understandable.”

Kessler thus gets to the heart of the orientation of Baberowski’s statements. His statement, “Hitler was not vicious,” is aimed at minimising the greatest crimes of human history. The context of his statement underscores this fact. In the same *Spiegel* article from 2014, Baberowski is quoted as saying that the Nazi-apologist Ernst Nolte “was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.” In addition, he also relativises the Holocaust when he declares, in relation to alleged shootings near Moscow, “Basically it was the same thing: industrial killing.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth organization of the Socialist Equality Party (*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*), criticized these formulations immediately after their publication. Subsequently, the IYSSE pointed out that the relativisation of Nazi crimes is a central theme of Baberowski’s academic work and is closely related to his right-wing positions on contemporary political developments.

In its fight against right-wing and militarist ideology at Humboldt University, the IYSSE has received growing support from students. It has organized events with hundreds of participants and won 7 percent of the vote in the last elections to the student parliament. Student representatives in Bremen and Hamburg have also written flyers against Baberowski, describing him as a “radical right-winger.” In Berlin, the student parliaments at Humboldt University and the Free University passed motions against Baberowski. Most recently, the Students’ Union at the Heidelberg University of Education declared its support for the IYSSE.

At the same time, several professors have sided with Baberowski and defended his historical account.

In 2014, the Institute of History at Humboldt University accused the IYSSE of defaming Baberowski as a right-wing historian, and called on students to oppose the IYSSE. In a statement, the then president of

Humboldt University, Jan-Hendrik Olbertz, and 27 other professors wrote of a “campaign of character assassination.” More recently, the current president of the university, Sabine Kunst, supported Baberowski and declared that “media attacks” on the radical right-wing professor are “unacceptable.”

They all ignored, to put it in “friendly terms” as Kessler has, “what contemporaries recorded with horror, and which was then proven in detail in decades of research,” the fact of the crimes of the Nazis and of the Wehrmacht (Hitler’s army).

These statements were accompanied by a veritable campaign of smears against the IYSSE, which was accused of slander, psycho-terrorism and even violence. None of the articles and statements cited a single word from Baberowski’s statements, which the IYSSE had taken up and criticized. This was made possible by the fact that no professor in all of Germany had spoken against Baberowski’s appalling statements. For three and a half years, the statement “Hitler was not vicious” remained unchallenged among professors.

That is why it is significant that not only tens of thousands of students, but now also an internationally respected professor, have taken a stand and called Baberowski’s right-wing positions by name. It is to be hoped that other academics will follow this example and no longer remain silent about Baberowski’s trivialization of Nazi crimes.

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