

The neo-Nazi offensive in Germany and the role of historians

By Christoph Vandreier
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The following statement was distributed by members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to the Historians' Conference currently underway in the city of Münster. The annual conference is the most prestigious gathering of its kind in Germany, bringing together historians from all over the world. It meets this year under the title "Divided Society."

The 52nd Historikertag (Historians' Conference) in Münster takes place under conditions where historical questions have assumed immense significance. Eighty-five years after the Nazis came to power, several thousand far-right demonstrators marched through the streets of Chemnitz, hunting down refugees, besieging a Jewish restaurant and attacking a local office of the Left Party. Sometime later, in Dortmund, a few hundred neo-Nazis chanted anti-Semitic slogans and committed crimes.

These forces have been actively encouraged by leading representatives of the government and the state. Interior Minister Horst Seehofer lined up behind the far-right demonstrators and even stated that he would have marched alongside them in Chemnitz if he were not a minister. The president of the German domestic intelligence service, the BfV, Hans-Georg Maassen, denied that there had been any persecution of refugees in Chemnitz and accused journalists and victims of the fascist mob of lying. Previously, he had met confidentially with leading members of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The fact that the grand coalition in Berlin has refused to dismiss Maassen sends a clear signal to the AfD, its sympathisers and its members in the state apparatus that they have the backing of the government (a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union and Social Democratic Party).

Although the AfD is despised by the vast majority of the population, it has become the most influential political force in Germany. It heads key Bundestag committees, and the grand coalition has adopted and is implementing its racist policies. These policies include the setting up of a comprehensive system of camps where refugees are incarcerated, harassed and then deported. They also include the build-up of the state apparatus and an aggressive foreign policy, as agreed in the

coalition agreement.

This fundamental change in German politics has shocked many, but it did not appear out of the blue. It was prepared ideologically.

For years, an intellectual climate has been cultivated in which the far-right could thrive. Already at the time of the reunification of Germany, nearly 30 years ago, tendencies emerged in historical circles seeking to rehabilitate old Nazi myths while downplaying the crimes committed by German imperialism. Then, in January 2014, the German government announced the "end of Germany's military restraint," and such forms of historical falsification assumed a new quality.

"It is difficult to conduct a responsible policy in Europe with the notion that we are to blame for everything. With relation to 1914 this is a legend," Herfried Münkler declared on January 4, 2014, in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, thereby sparking a new wave of historical falsification. On the same day, the right-wing military historian Sönke Neitzel, Professor Dominik Geppert (Bonn University), the "New Right" author Cora Stephan and Professor Thomas Weber published an article in *Die Welt* denying that Germany pursued aggressive goals in World War I. Germany, they argued, was "far removed from any pursuit of world power driven by pride and megalomania."

The professor of Eastern European history at Humboldt University, Jörg Baberowski, went even further and sought to whitewash the crimes of National Socialism (Nazism). In an article in *Der Spiegel* in February 2014, he lined up behind the historian Ernst Nolte, who had unleashed the Historians' Debate in 1986. Nolte had claimed that the Holocaust was an understandable response to the violence of the Soviet Union. Nolte's thesis led to a storm of protest at the time and was quite correctly refuted by dozens of historians. Soon after, Nolte appeared solely on the platform of far-right organisations.

Baberowski, however, is intent on rehabilitating the Nazi apologist: "Nolte was done an injustice," the Humboldt professor told *Der Spiegel*. "Historically speaking he was right."

Baberowski continued, "Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn't vicious. He didn't want people to talk about the

extermination of the Jews at his table.” Baberowski drew a parallel between the Holocaust and alleged executions during the Russian Civil War, claiming: “It was essentially the same thing: killing on an industrial scale.”

Baberowski combines his trivialisation of the crimes of the Nazis with a malicious campaign against refugees, which, in content and tone, echoes the AfD. In May 2017, he complained to the NZZ that since 1968, “the resistance to a dead dictator [Adolf Hitler] is legitimacy enough to rise morally above other people.” Anyone who “reaches conclusions about racism, colonialism, war and peace or gender relations that depart from what the hegemonic discourse allows is morally discredited,” he continued.

In 2015, on the TV programme “Kulturzeit,” he described the growing number of attacks on refugees as “rather harmless” weighed against the problems that he alleged were associated with refugees.

Baberowski’s comments in 2014 were not the first time he sought to exonerate the Nazis and their leader. Already in a text from 2007 he denied that the war of annihilation in eastern Europe was the result of systematic planning and Nazi ideology. Instead, he blamed the Red Army: “Stalin and his generals forced on the Wehrmacht a new kind of war that no longer spared the civilian population,” he wrote. Similar theses can be found in his book *Scorched Earth* from 2012.

In 1986, positions such as those defended by Baberowski met with a torrent of criticism. In 2014, they were greeted mainly with silence. For the next three years, not a single historian or professor objected to the fact that the Holocaust had been played down and the viciousness of Hitler called into question in Germany’s biggest-circulation news magazine.

Instead, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth organisation of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), was roundly attacked by numerous media outlets, university officials and historians for criticising Baberowski in its pamphlets and meetings.

Even after the Cologne Higher Regional Court ruled that Baberowski had been correctly quoted by his critics and that it was perfectly legitimate to describe him as a “right-wing extremist,” “racist” and “glorifier of violence,” the presidium of Humboldt University in Berlin and a number of professors, including Michael Wildt and Hannes Grandits, praised Baberowski as an “outstanding scientist whose integrity is beyond doubt.” His scientific statements were “not right-wing radical,” they declared.

The IYSSE and other critical students were branded as being linked to “violence and extremism,” without any evidence being offered, while “media attacks” on Baberowski were declared to be “unacceptable.”

The current BfV report, produced under Maassen’s leadership, lists the Socialist Equality Party, for the first time, as a “left-wing extremist party” and “object for surveillance.” This is evidently the response to the SGP’s campaign against

the right-wing ideological offensive.

The report does not accuse the SGP of any type of violence or improper activity. Instead, the party is condemned because it is “against alleged nationalism, imperialism and militarism.” According to the BfV, anyone who protests against, or gathers information on, right-wing extremists is a “left-wing extremist.”

The report fails to make any critical mention of the AfD or other leading figures and movements associated with the far right (Pegida, Bernd Höcke, Götz Kubitschek, etc.). Much of the report bears the signature of the AfD, which Maassen consulted on a number of occasions prior to its publication.

Anyone familiar with German history is aware of the significance of the recent neo-Nazi offensive. In 1933, Hitler was “elevated” to power by the German elites (Ian Kershaw), because they needed him to smash the workers’ movement and prepare World War II. Today, the rise of the right-wing extremists coincides once again with a critical turning point in German history: faced with trade war, international conflicts and growing social tensions, the ruling elites are pressing ahead with the revival of German militarism and strengthening the state apparatus.

Unlike 1933, the far-right extremists are not yet a mass party. They draw their strength from the support of the state and government and from the right-wing ideological climate cultivated at Germany’s universities. The whitewashing of Nazi crimes by Baberowski, his defence by leading press organs and professors, and the cowardly silence of many others have created an ideological climate that encourages this development. It is time to break the silence and oppose the historical revisionism that is the breeding ground for right-wing extremists.

* Stop the surveillance of the SGP and other left-wing organisations by the BfV!

* Condemn the statement of the Humboldt University presidium against the IYSSE and critical students!

* Publicly protest against Baberowski’s attempts to relativise the crimes of the Nazis!

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