

An open letter to all members of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers

Stop the shift to the right at the universities!

the International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The president of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (DHV), Bernhard Kempen, is abusing his post by transforming the body responsible for representing the professional interests of 31,000 academics into a mouthpiece for the far right.

We call upon all members of the Association, as well as academic staff and students, to protest against this development in the strongest terms.

On 28 August, Kempen gave an interview to the *Kulturzeit* magazine, on the 3SAT television channel, during which he defended right-wing extremist historian Jörg Baberowski. Kempen said he saw “academic freedom and the freedom of research under threat” because Humboldt University, where Baberowski teaches Eastern European history, refused to accept his proposal for a research center into dictatorships. He attacked students who had criticised the plans, claiming they had engaged in “ideological terrorism.”

Under conditions where the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is calling for left-wing and democratic academics to be denounced, where right-wing terrorist groups compile “kill lists” that include professors and student representatives, and where right-wing extremist ideology has become commonplace in the German parliament, Kempen is standing shoulder to shoulder with these far-right forces. In the process, he is turning reality on its head.

Baberowski’s project to establish a research centre on dictatorships at Humboldt University was opposed because it aimed to provide a pseudo-scholarly justification for dictatorship, not to conduct scholarly research into them. The project’s application explicitly declared dictatorships as legitimate and even popular alternatives to democratic forms of rule, adding that it was necessary to investigate such forms of rule free from prejudice (“wertfrei”).

As a result, external reviewers, professors and students have criticised the project. The Faculty of Law has determined that it would be impossible to secure a majority on Humboldt University’s academic senate under these conditions, prompting it to withdraw its support for the interdisciplinary centre. This has put an end to the application’s consideration.

When Kempen now laments over an attack on academic freedom, he joins the chorus of right-wing politicians and media outlets who portray themselves as the victims of a “dictatorship of ideas” when they come under criticism for advancing anti-refugee, racist and militarist points of view. Kempen essentially adopts word-for-word the apologies for Baberowski advanced by the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), the AfD and the far-right *Junge Freiheit* newspaper.

The professor is an “internationally renowned scholar,” Kempen has claimed. In reality, Baberowski is known to an international audience primarily through far-right publications like *Breitbart News* and the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer*, which cite him regularly and praise him to the skies. By contrast, he has no serious scholarly works to offer. His books are characterised by intellectual incompetency and explicit falsifications.

Baberowski is not a well-respected scholar, but a right-wing ideologue. Even during his time as a student, he supported, according to his own account, the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte when the latter provoked the Historikerstreit [Historians Dispute] with the claim that the Holocaust was an understandable response to the violence of the Bolsheviks.

In 2007, Baberowski blamed the military tactics of the Red Army for the Nazis’ war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, writing, “Stalin and his generals imposed a war of a new type on the Wehrmacht that no longer spared the civilian population.” Baberowski was putting the Holocaust on a par with alleged executions during the Russian Civil War:

“In essence, it was the same thing: killing on an industrial scale.”

In February 2014, Baberowski bluntly told *Der Spiegel*, “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.” As evidence to back up his claim, Baberowski remarked, “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious. He did not want to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

Baberowski’s activities are not confined to such outrageous relativisations of the Nazis’ crimes. He is a central figure within Germany’s far right. With Baberowski, his “scholarly oeuvre blends with his comments on daily politics into an amalgam of right-wing extremist criticism, which is laden with historical revisionism and nationalist motives,” as Professor Fischer-Lescano put it.

In 2015, Baberowski initiated a clandestine network of New Right ideologists, which meets at least twice a year in the Library of Conservatism. The “Baberowski salon,” as *Die Zeit* journalists Christian Fuchs and Paul Middelhoff refer to it in their bestseller, *The Networks of the New Right*, includes a long list of prominent far-right figures, from the openly racist Thilo Sarrazin to the personal adviser to AfD leader Alexander Gauland, Michael Klonovsky; editor-in-chief of the far-right *Junge Freiheit*, Dieter Stein; and Karlheinz Weissmann, who together with Götz Kubitschek founded the right-wing extremist think tank “Institute for State Politics.”

Baberowski downplayed arson attacks on refugee accommodation centres as natural responses on the part of concerned citizens, and opined, “Given the problems we have in Germany with immigration right now, what we have here is rather harmless.” He also regularly speaks out in favour of a strengthening of the repressive state apparatus and a more brutal foreign policy.

Kempfen is well aware of the far-right positions he is defending in the name of the DHV because this is not the first time he has done so. As early as 2017, he spoke out in a statement against a “climate of opinion” that demanded “political correctness.” Shortly thereafter, he opened the pages of the DHV’s organ *Forschung und Lehre* (Research and Teaching) for an interview with Baberowski, who was permitted to slander his critics in the most disgusting manner and advance his relativisation of the Nazis’ crimes without protest.

The Free Coalition of Student Representative Councils (FZS), which represents around 80 student councils in Germany, sharply criticised Kempfen following this statement, writing, “It would be beneficial to debates at universities and in society at large if scholars like Münkler, Baberowski, Rauscher and Kutschera were not permitted to express their and other controversial opinions without reflection, either through the teaching programme or by using their standing in society.”

Humboldt University’s student parliament, which represents over 40,000 students, overwhelmingly declared its opposition to Baberowski’s dictatorship project because it was not concerned “with scholarly research into dictatorships, but legitimising authoritarian rule.” Previously, the parliament had condemned Baberowski’s far-right positions by a similarly large majority.

Far from attempting to defend freedom of speech, Kempfen wants to silence and suppress the majority view among students. It concerns “small groups of students,” the DHV president lyingly claimed, who were carrying out “terrorism of opinions and ideas” in order to “silence individuals.” In this manner, legitimate and necessary student criticism of right-wing extremist positions is being criminalised and equated with terrorism. This is all the more repugnant, given that several student leaders are on the “kill lists” of real terrorist groups, like the right-wing Nordkreuz (Northern Cross) Network.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which has exposed Baberowski’s role as an ideological pioneer of the far right in books and articles, was accused by Kempfen in his 3SAT interview of conducting a “campaign of character assassination.” He also declared that Baberowski was

“being pursued into his private life, up to and including threats of physical violence”—a claim without any foundation in fact, which the professor has previously raised against his critics in order to discredit their legitimate criticism of his work.

Kempfen ultimately seeks to delegitimise any student criticism of Baberowski by pointing out that the political party, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP)—whose youth movement is the IYSSE—is under surveillance by the Verfassungsschutz secret service. But this only proves how far advanced the shift to the right has been. Last year, the former head of the Verfassungsschutz, the AfD’s friend Hans-Georg Maassen, included the SGP in the agency’s report for the first time, precisely because the SGP had opposed the political danger represented by the far right. Since then, even mass events, such as the “Rock against the Right” concert in Chemnitz last September, have been defamed as “left-wing extremist” by the Verfassungsschutz. The SGP has already taken legal action against its naming in the Verfassungsschutz report.

With his public statements backing Baberowski, Kempfen is involving the DHV in a campaign aimed at transforming the universities into strongholds of right-wing, authoritarian ideology, where left-wing criticism will be suppressed and persecuted. He is attempting to make Baberowski’s right-wing extremist positions the DHV’s official line, or, to put it another way, to bring the DHV in line with the AfD.

This is taking place at a time when official politics around the world is shifting sharply to the right. With more than 90 deputies, the AfD is the first right-wing extremist party to sit in Germany’s parliament since the end of World War II, while far-right violence now represents a serious danger. The murder of Kassel District President Walter Lübcke demonstrated that right-wing extremist terrorist networks, which enjoy close ties to the Verfassungsschutz, the army, and the police, can act with virtual impunity.

With this open letter, we appeal to all members of the DHV, as well as students, academic staff and the public as a whole, to raise their voices in protest against these dangerous right-wing developments and to condemn Kempfen’s right-wing propaganda. Under conditions in which a far-right party is represented in Germany’s parliament, and similar parties are on the rise in other countries, the transformation of the universities into ideological breeding grounds for authoritarian forms of rule must be stopped, especially given the history of Germany.

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