

World famous pianist Igor Levit victim of anti-Semitic death threats

By Marianne Arens
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In November 2019 the world-famous pianist Igor Levit received an email containing anti-Semitic death threats. At the end of December Levit responded to the email with an article published in the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel am Sonntag*.

Ignoring the specific threats contained in the email, but under conditions of increased security, the pianist played his next concert to the end. But the mere fact that a Jewish pianist cannot perform publicly without protection indicates the extent of the current turn to the right in German politics.

Igor Levit, 32, is one of the world's leading pianists. Multiple award winner and outstanding Beethoven interpreter, Levit has been professor of piano at the School of Music, Drama and Media in Hanover (HMTMH) since October 1, 2019. He studied there himself and is now its youngest ever professor.

Last year Igor Levit's complete recording of all 32 Beethoven sonatas was released by Sony Classical. On January 7 he commenced presenting these piano sonatas on German radio in 32 podcast episodes. His aim, he said, was to use these fascinating pieces to demonstrate the relevancy of Beethoven today, 250 years after the birth of the great composer.

In his article in the *Tagesspiegel*, Levit pointed out that Germany is "in the middle of a massive shift of norms within our democracy ... which will not be the same if we let anti-Semitism, racism and hatred of women gain more and more ground." It's not just about individual "cases," but rather about "victims, perpetrators and a system! It's about systematic anti-Semitism and racism, right-wing extremism, terror and racist violence." The state, he adds, "is blind in its right eye", i.e., it ignores the threat from the far right.

In his article Levit makes clear that the turn to the right in German politics has nothing to do with the entry into the country of a few Muslim immigrants, as state propaganda claims. The fact is that fascism is re-emerging in Germany. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag and extreme right-wing forces persecuted immigrants in Chemnitz in full daylight.

Taken together with the series of murders of immigrants carried out by the National Socialist Underground, the assassination of the politician Walter Lübcke by a neo-fascist, the recent armed attack on a synagogue in Halle, the threats against the lawyer Seda Ba?ay Y?ld?z signed by a group calling itself "NSU-2.0," as well as the cutting off of state funding for the anti-fascist VVN (Association of those persecuted by the Nazi Regime)—these all point to the existence of a deep neo-fascist "state within the state."

As Christoph Vandreier meticulously demonstrated in his book *Why Are They Back?: the revival of the far right is linked to the German bourgeoisie, its state and the return to militarism*. The ruling class needs and promotes the AfD in the Bundestag, because, as Vandreier writes, capitalism "has resolved none of the problems that led to catastrophe in the 1930s. ... Never was the gulf between classes so deep as it is today."

Old Nazi cliques and far-right networks are increasingly making their presence felt in the state apparatus, the military and police, as well as in political circles, the media and the country's universities. At Humboldt University in Berlin, professors such as Jörg Baberowski can publicly declare that "Hitler was not vicious" and are then protected from criticism by the German government and officially defended on the website of Education Minister Anja Karliczek (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

On the other hand, opponents of this development, such as the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP—Socialist Equality Party), are being persecuted and denounced by the German domestic intelligence service (*Verfassungsschutz*—Office for the Protection of the Constitution) as "left-wing extremist." The only "offence" of the SGP is that it advocates a socialist program.

According to the Office for the Protection of the Constitution: "The agitation of the SGP is directed in its program against the existing state and social order, as a generalized disparagement of 'capitalism,' against the EU [European Union], against alleged nationalism, imperialism and militarism." Only recently, Hans-Georg Maassen, the

former president of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, defamed refugees on a German television program and downplayed the threat of far-right terrorism.

“The day when Hans-Georg Maassen no longer matters will be a good day,” pianist Levit tweeted in response to Maassen. “Dear listeners,” he said on Deutschlandfunk radio, “the German population must understand that right-wing extremists are not only targeting us minorities—it sounds terrible and I hate to have to say this ... they have everyone in their sights who they do not like. Everyone is a potential victim, literally everyone. Just look at Lübcke ...” (a conservative politician who spoke out positively on behalf of refugees).

Levit, who describes himself on his website with the words “Citizen, European, Pianist,” has repeatedly spoken out on political issues. He campaigns against racism and war and has played for refugees, at the massive anti-fascist demo in Berlin in October 2018 and for Fridays for Future.

In one interview he emphasised that he had been politicised by the Greek crisis, and his Twitter page (which is worth visiting for the many music excerpts) contains passages such as: “PS: why does the world needs millionaires again? Why? What for? For whom?” Levit commented on the proposal by CDU politician Carsten Linnemann that children who could not speak German be refused school education, with the sentence: “Where did I, as a child of Russian refugees, learn German very quickly? That’s exactly what school is for.”

Four days after the armed attack on a synagogue in Halle, Levit played the “Goldberg Variations” by Johann Sebastian Bach at another demonstration in Berlin in front of the city’s New Synagogue. The same evening, he was awarded the Opus Klassik 2019 music prize. He dedicated the prize to the victims of Halle and said: “After the NSU, after countless attacks on mosques, synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, refugee homes, etc., what has happened here comes as no surprise.”

On the Swiss television program “Sternzeiten” he criticised the policies of the EU for its “lack of a climate policy, the collapse of democratic values and its nightmarish migration policy.” He donated the €10,000 from another award, the International Beethoven Prize, to the organisation HateAid to assist its campaigns against hate and agitation on the Internet.

At the time, Levit did not reveal that he himself had received anti-Semitic threats. On his Twitter account there is only a note from November 2, where he ironically writes: “Hey Twiternazis, you are right: I only owe my career to a powerful Jewish world lobby that pulls all the strings ...” On another occasion, Levit stressed that hate speech levelled against him, for example on Twitter, only served to increase

his determination. *Figaro* *Wasspiegel* In article, his “Am I afraid? Yes, but not for me, rather for this country. My country. Our country.”

In a television interview on November 14 Levit only briefly mentioned that he had received hate mail and then stated: “Racism is not an opinion, it is a definite outlook.” In so doing Levit threw down the gauntlet to all those who, for example, sought to justify the showing up of AfD founder Bernd Lucke at Hamburg University as a case of “freedom of expression.” “One should not proclaim all such [far-right] outlooks to be merely expressions of opinion,” Levit declared. The AfD is waging “a kind of war against Islam using the same weapons and words as classic, modern anti-Semitism.”

When Levit announced the death threats against him at the end of December, the CDU in Hanover proposed in response that the city adopt a twin town in Israel. Levit, however, does not come from Israel but was born in Nishni Novgorod, Russia, and commenced growing up in the German city of Hanover at the age of 8.

In articulating his views he has consistently distanced himself from the German media propaganda, which immediately equates the struggle against anti-Semitism with defending Israel. In a Twitter comment Levit declared: “As a Jew and citizen, I am repulsed when the Springer press try subtly and less subtly to combine the fight against anti-Semitism with their own Islamophobia. Nah guys, I’m not playing on your team. You don’t speak on my behalf.” *Springer* Press controls much of German media, including the daily *Bild* and *Die Welt* newspapers.

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