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Germany: AfD leader Gauland and the hypocritical response to Nazi rehabilitation

At the weekend, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) leader Alexander Gauland again took up the right-wing propaganda campaign to gloss over and relativise the crimes of the Nazis. At a meeting of the AfD youth movement he said, “Hitler and the Nazis are just a speck of bird shit in over a thousand years of successful German history.”

This was a deliberate provocation. In order to rehabilitate Hitler and fascism, the monstrous crimes of the Nazis must be trivialized. Six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust and more than 50 million dead in a world war that began in Nazi Germany were no more than a small blemish on an otherwise glorious German history, a stain that can be swept aside with a wave of the hand.

Representatives of official politics and the establishment parties responded to Gauland’s belittlement of the Nazis with hypocritical horror. Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that those who denied the “unique break with civilization” by Hitler and the Nazis, or minimised or relativized it, not only derided the millions of victims, but wanted to rip open old wounds and sow new hatred, “and we must oppose this together.”

Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said, “It is shameful that we have to deal with such statements by a member of the Bundestag (parliament).” National Socialist rule and the Nazi devised crime of the Holocaust were singular, “a real crime against humanity.” Immeasurable suffering was the result in many countries, “also in Germany,” Seibert emphasized.

Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) said in the *Bild* newspaper: “Dealing responsibly with the depths of Nazi criminal rule is part of the basic consensus of our democratic constitutional state.” And further, “I have to insist on this as president of the Bundestag, as well as a patriot.”

The indignation and criticism of Gauland’s belittlement of the Nazis’ crimes is intended to blur over the tracks showing that the rise of the AfD was systematically supported and promoted by the establishment parties and the media. No other party had such a pervasive media presence in the past federal election campaign and since as the AfD. Commentators and moderators are fascinated by the dull racist hatred and their constant attacks on the “culture of remembrance of the Nazi era.”

A week ago, Gauland was again invited onto Anne Wills’ Sunday talk show and politely asked his opinion about the deportation centres for refugees planned by the government. A few hours earlier, at the Brandenburg Gate at an AfD rally, he had bellowed out his right-wing xenophobic agitation into the microphone. Although 20 times more counterdemonstrators had gathered in Berlin that day, none of them was invited to the roundtable discussion with Gauland, on whom the talk show host’s interest exclusively focused.

The AfD slogan, “Foreigners out!” has long become the official policy of the federal government and all parties. In the [parliamentary debate](#) in March, Chancellor Angela Merkel dedicated most of her government statement to the refugee issue. In AfD style, she claimed that the “many people who fled” were the main reason for the division and polarization of the country. One speaker after another joined in the witch-hunting of refugees.

The AfD has long combined its racist policies with a relativisation of Nazi crimes. Shortly before the federal election last autumn, at the AfD’s so-called Kyffhäuser meeting, Gauland had demanded a line be finally drawn under the Nazi past and to evaluate this positively. No other country had dealt with its past as thoroughly as Germany, he said, emphasizing, “These 12 years shouldn’t be held against us anymore. They no longer affect our identity.”

To be proud of Germany also meant to be proud of Germany’s past, he said at that time. “If the French are justifiably proud of their emperor and the British of Nelson and Churchill, then we have the right to be proud of the achievements of German soldiers in two world wars.” This call to take pride in the Wehrmacht (Hitler’s army), which conducted a war of aggression contrary to international law and committed monstrous war

crimes in the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia and in many other countries, was already a positive reassessment of the Nazi era.

There were some indignant voices among politicians and the media at that time. But this did not prevent any party from supporting the right-wing demagogues and Nazi apologists into the Bundestag, welcoming their “AfD colleagues” and entrusting the mob of right-wingers with the leadership of a number of important parliamentary committees.

There is a very simple reason why the AfD sets the tone in parliament and drives forward the government with its right-wing policies. All parties agree that the global crisis of capitalism and the growing transatlantic tensions require a more aggressive role for German imperialism in world politics and a return to militarism. Four years ago, leading representatives of the government, including the then foreign minister and today’s federal president Frank-Walter Steinmeier, had already demanded a change in foreign affairs towards a great power policy. Germany was economically too strong and too powerful to stay out of the crisis of the world in the future, it was said.

At the same time, *Der Spiegel* published an article headlined “Culpability Question Divides Historians Today,” which called for a reassessment of German crimes during the First and Second World Wars. This cited the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte and the Humboldt professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski as its chief witnesses. The latter was quoted saying: “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.” Of Nolte, who had triggered the “historians’ dispute” in the 1980s with his justification of the Nazis, Baberowski said, “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.”

The *Spiegel* article ended by saying that the Holocaust was more or less a “footnote.” This may not be as vulgar as Gauland’s talk of bird shit, but it means the same thing.

At the time of the *Spiegel* article there was no outcry in the media and among politicians. Only the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and its youth and student organization the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) publicly criticized Baberowski. They understood very well the connection between the revision of history and the return of Germany to militarism. “The revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history, one which downplays the crimes of the Nazi era,” the IYSSE wrote in an open letter to the administration of Humboldt University in February 2014.

Leading media outlets and academics responded to the criticism of Baberowski with a storm of indignation, backed the right-wing extremist historian and continue to do so today. By now it is clear that they have prepared the ground for Gauland and his pro-Nazi

ideology. Baberowski himself has initiated a “right-wing salon” in which Gauland’s personal adviser Michael Klonovsky and right-wing journalists such as Dieter Stein (*Young Freedom*), Karlheinz Weißmann (*Cato*) and Frank Böckelmann (*Tumult*) are regular speakers.

It is now clear that the fight against the AfD and the rehabilitation of the Nazis also requires a fight against the hypocrites who might occasionally criticize Gauland, while ideologically paving the way for him and closely collaborating with him.