

# Appearance of Robert Service in Berlin ends in fiasco

By Peter Schwarz  
14 February 2014

In what amounted to a confession of intellectual bankruptcy, Wednesday evening's publicly announced lecture in Berlin by Robert Service, the author of a widely discredited biography of Leon Trotsky, was canceled at the last minute without explanation. Students and members of the public who arrived at the site of the lecture found nothing but a sheet of paper posted on the door of the meeting room, which read: "The meeting on 12 February 2014 with Mr. Robert Service has unfortunately been canceled."

The cancellation of the public lecture was not the result of an unanticipated misfortune. Rather, it was ordered by Professor Jörg Baberowski, the right-wing chairman of Humboldt University's Department of East European History, so that Service would not be compelled to answer in public to criticisms of his biography.

The original announcement of the lecture, posted on the web site of Baberowski's department, stated that "All of those interested are warmly welcome."

But in a demonstration of contempt for the public and hostility to democratic discourse, Baberowski moved the site of Service's appearance to a secret location. Only a small group of department insiders beholden to Baberowski were informed of the new location.

As a result of a slip-up in Baberowski's apparatus, the site of the secret meeting became known. However, members of the public who walked to the new location, nearly a kilometer away, were confronted by Professor Baberowski, surrounded by a security detail, who demanded that visitors identify themselves and explain why they were attending the lecture.

All those who Baberowski feared might ask Service a critical question were barred from attending the lecture, which was held in a windowless meeting room that resembled a bunker.

Among those who were barred from the meeting was David North, the author of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, the book that played a central role in exposing Service's hack work. When North identified himself, Baberowski resorted to personal insults and threatened to call the police.

Professor Mario Kessler of Potsdam University, an internationally respected historian and one of the signatories to an open letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house protesting the publication of the German-language edition of Service's biography, was also denied entry.

In the end, less than 40 people—most of them Baberowski factotums who would not dare to raise a criticism of Service—were able to enter the meeting room. The doors were locked from the inside, with guards posted outside.

Inside the meeting room, an atmosphere of repression and intimidation prevailed. When Service, despite all the precautions that had been taken, was challenged on his use of anti-Semitic motifs—specifically, his falsification of Trotsky's childhood name—Baberowski demanded that the questioner stop talking.

After the meeting, a security guard expressed satisfaction that only two "bad questions," as he put it, had been asked.

Service himself did not deal with any of the nine questions posed to him in writing by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany) in his one-hour rambling presentation. (See: "Nine questions for Robert Service"). His remarks were devoid of intelligent commentary and simply ignored all the substantial criticisms of his work. He never referred to the devastating critique of his work that appeared in the *American Historical Review*, or to the open letter of 14 European historians to Suhrkamp.

His remarks veered between the irrelevant (Service dwelled at length on Trotsky's "movie-star" looks) and the absurd (he claimed that Trotsky and Stalin had few disagreements).

Service insisted that there was no alternative to Stalinism. He portrayed Trotsky as a brute Bolshevik, who would have acted in the same way as Stalin if he had triumphed after Lenin's death. He concluded by saying that Trotsky was a "misguided, dangerous politician" and "Stalin's blood brother."

Service's appearance at the Humboldt University had been conceived as a political, rather than academic and intellectual, event. Baberowski brought Service to Berlin as part of his on-going efforts to promote a new anti-communist narrative of 20th century history. This campaign is closely aligned with the German government's recent proclamations, greeted enthusiastically in the media, that decades of German military restraint have come to an end.

The promotion of renewed German militarism requires a new historical narrative that seeks to justify the war crimes of the Nazi era as a legitimate response to "Bolshevik violence." Baberowski is playing a major role in this historical revisionism, which goes so far as to present Hitler in a favorable light.

In the current edition of *Der Spiegel*, Germany's leading news magazine, Baberowski offers the following sympathetic appraisal of the *Führer*:

"Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not cruel. He did not want the extermination of the Jews to be talked about at his table."

The invitation of Robert Service to speak at the Humboldt University was part of this political campaign to rewrite history. Baberowski's actions on Wednesday evening exposed that his project of historical revisionism requires lies, falsifications, intimidation and oppression. That is the significance of the events that took place Wednesday at the Humboldt University. But thanks to the intervention of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, this particular episode ended in a humiliating fiasco for Baberowski and Service.

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