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Palestine solidarity

A public stoning in Germany

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[IMG/jpg/Hermann_Dierkes.jpg] Hermann Dierkes

Hermann Dierkes is a respected politician with an honorable record of campaigning for social and political justice in the German Rhineland city of Duisburg. He represented his party Die Linke (The Left Party) on Duisburg City Council, campaigning tirelessly on anti-racist and anti-fascist issues. Most recently, he was his party's candidate for the post of Lord Mayor.

On 18 February 2009 Dierkes addressed a public meeting on the question of Palestine. To the question of how to take action against the injustice being suffered by Palestinians, he responded that the recent World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil had proposed an arms embargo, sanctions and the boycott of Israeli exports. He added: "We should no longer accept that in the name of the Holocaust and with the support of the government of the Federal Republic [of Germany] such grave violations of human rights can be perpetrated and tolerated ... Everyone can help strengthen pressure for a different politics, for example by boycotting Israeli products."

A few days later, Dierkes gave an interview to the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ), a conservative paper based in the nearby city of Essen. He explained the demands of the World Social Forum, and requested that the published interview should stress that this had nothing to do with anti-Semitism "âEuros" a qualification that invariably needs to be made in Germany, except when there is suspicion of Islamophobia. Predictably, his precautions were in vain; scenting a political coup, the reporter published his article without including the qualification.

All hell broke loose. In the 25 February edition of Bild "âEuros" Germany's best-selling and most obnoxious daily paper "âEuros" Dieter Graumann, Vice-President of the Central Jewish Council, accused him of "pure anti-Semitism." WAZ editorialist Achim Beer decried Dierke's "careless Nazi utterances," comparing his words to "a mass execution at the edge of a Ukrainian forest." Hendrik Wuest, General Secretary of the CDU (the Christian Democratic Party), warned that "the Nazi propaganda" emanating from Die Linke is "intolerable." Michael Groschek "âEuros" General Secretary of the local branch of the Social Democratic Party, which shares power nationally with the CDU "âEuros" played electoral politics with the claim that "[a]nyone playing electoral politics with such anti-Israeli utterances sets himself outside the rules of the democratic game."

Worse still, Dierke's own party failed to stand by him unambiguously. Press spokesperson Alrun Nuesslein opined that if Israel is criticized because "the population in the Gaza Strip is collectively punished by the ... closure of border crossings, it is equally impossible for us to punish the Israeli population" by means of a boycott of Israeli goods, particularly "in the context of German history," a mantra with which Germans routinely absolve themselves of their historic responsibility towards the Palestinians.

Other voices within the party took a more strident tone. Petra Pau, Vice President of the Bundestag (German Parliament), said Dierke's words "awake unspeakable associations and employ dubious cliches." Left Party politicians in Dierke's own area condemned his "anti-Jewish endeavors" (Guenter Will) and "anti-Semitic utterances" (Anna Lena Orłowski).

Events took their predestined course, and on 26 February Dierkes resigned his position within Die Linke and withdrew his mayoral candidacy. In an open letter to his party colleagues, pointing out that he had been the victim of "a public stoning" and of a campaign that was "a terrible mixture of the gravest insults and defamation, Islamophobic hatred, hatred of immigrants, and murder threats," he maintained that "[t]he victims of the Shoah and the heroes of the Warsaw Jewish rising would turn away with horror [could they see] with what malice and toward what ends they are being instrumentalized in order to justify ... the undemocratic and murderous politics of the Israeli government."

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A quick perusal of the German blogosphere throws up countless repetitions of the phrase "kauft nicht beim Juden!" "don't buy from the Jew!" "don't buy from the Jew!" a slogan from the Nazi era that no longer serves to defame Jews but rather those who seek justice for the Palestinians. However, Jews aren't entirely immune from this weapon: in the respected weekly *Die Zeit* (15 January 2009) a certain Thomas Assheuer turned it against the Canadian Jewish author Naomi Klein after the *British Guardian* published her call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. Given that Klein had carefully specified that BDS should be aimed at Israeli institutions and not individuals, this piece of defamation was particularly crass.

It appears that freedom of speech, supposedly one of the proudest acquisitions of post-Fascist Germany, is readily suppressed when exercised to advocate positive action against the racist, political institutions and actions of the Zionist state. Indeed so brutal and venomous was the response to Hermann Dierke's remarks, and so instantaneous and unanimous the recourse, however ironic, to Nazi sloganeering, that it is difficult not to be reminded of the rhetoric promulgated by Julius Streicher's vile paper *Der Stuermer* between 1923 and 1945 and not to feel that the same atavistic sources that once disgorged Jew-hatred are now being tapped in this virulent and unceasing campaign against the advocacy of Palestinian rights. The Palestinians, after all, stand in the way of the establishment of a racial Jewish state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river, an eventuality that the German establishment deludedly sees as somehow shriving its own past crimes.

It has to be said that ordinary German people are, by and large, as unimpressed by philosemitic hysteria as they are by anti-Semitism. It remains to be seen how those people who have repeatedly voted for Hermann Dierkes because they see him as an honest and reliable politician "something as rare in Germany as elsewhere" will react to being robbed of their representative by such a campaign of hatred and defamation on behalf of a quasi-fascist state.

Finally, it will be interesting to see if this debacle induces *Die Linke* to reconsider whether it is more appropriate to adopt a principled position on Israel than to continue playing to the gallery of rightist pressure-groups that have taken upon themselves the task of perpetuating unconditional German support for Israel. It is hard to feel optimistic about this.

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