

# Bowing to government pressure, German arts centre cancels *Guernica Gaza* exhibition

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The Bahnhof Langendreer arts centre in the German city of Bochum is bowing to state pressure and false accusations of antisemitism. The latter are being launched to divert attention from the state of Israel and its murderous oppression of the Palestinians and genocidal war in Gaza.

This is occurring although the war, with all its horrors, continues, is even spreading to Lebanon and grows more gruesome and bloody. That genocide is taking place in Gaza has been confirmed by international bodies, including the International Court of Justice and the United Nations. The figure of at least 45,000 dead, mostly women and children, has been officially confirmed, but the total is likely to be much higher, while the US, Germany, Britain and many other countries supply the weapons. However, anyone who protests against this massacre and dares to denounce those responsible faces persecution.

On September 6, an exhibition of a series of collages entitled *Guernica Gaza* by Palestinian artist Mohammed Al Hawajri was scheduled to open at the arts centre. The artist lives with his family in Gaza and is himself exposed to the bombing terror. Abruptly, just one day before the planned opening, the exhibition was cancelled by the organiser.

As a socio-cultural centre, Bochum's arts centre has been combining culture with socio-political content for 35 years. Its films, performances, music events, exhibitions and discussions are usually well attended and provide a wide range of stimuli and open discussion on cultural and political issues. In line with this, the latest exhibition was due to be shown and, in view of the current situation in Gaza, provoke highly topical discussions.

Al Hawajri, born in 1976, lives and works in Gaza, and is a founding member of the Eltiqa Group of Contemporary Arts. He works within a broad and varied range of media—painting, sculpture, video art, photography. His choices are often determined by such everyday problems as the materials available under the terribly restricted conditions in Gaza. At the moment, it is impossible for him to pursue his art. His house has been destroyed and he is living in a tent like most of the Gazan population.

In the last days before the scheduled opening, German politicians and the media unleashed a vicious smear campaign against the exhibition with the familiar accusation of “antisemitism.” Both the artist and Dr. Norman Paech, an invited professor emeritus and international law expert, as well as the exhibition's organisers, were accused of this. This is despite the fact that the exhibition features images created years ago that seem almost idyllic in comparison to what is currently happening in Gaza.

The Bochum Green Party, the Association of Jewish Students in

Bochum, Bochum's head of cultural affairs and the regional press felt called upon to slander the artists and organisers with the most perfidious arguments.

Daniel Gorin, cultural policy spokesperson for the Greens on Bochum City Council, explained: “One of the images equates the devastating bombing of the Spanish city of Guernica by the German air force in 1937 with the Israeli state's reaction to the attacks carried out over decades by the terrorist Hamas from the Gaza Strip. This interpretation of events is part of anti-Israeli and antisemitic discourses. We do not want this to be promoted here in Bochum.”

The website *Ruhrbarone* also came out strongly against the planned exhibition. It accused the arts centre of serving as a “contact point for antisemites” by “exhibiting images whose artistic quality is of zero worth and whose political content is on a par with that of [the Nazis'] *Der Stürmer*.” In fact, this comparison with the notorious Nazi newspaper applies more to the *Ruhrbarone* itself and its viciously offensive, distorted “reportage.”

For their part, members of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Free Democrats (FDP) in Bochum demanded cuts to state funding for the arts centre if it did not cancel the exhibition—a threat that Bochum's head of cultural affairs has apparently embraced.

The city threatened to withdraw funding from the popular arts centre, one of the oldest in North Rhine-Westphalia. A press release from the city states: “The city of Bochum is now examining how funding conditions can be adapted so that concrete funding objectives can be targeted to projects against antisemitism, racism, queophobia, homophobia or other forms of discrimination.”

The city is following in the footsteps of Berlin's Senator for Culture Joe Chialo, who is trying to cut off funding to the Oyoun arts centre, evict it from its premises and also introduce a censorship clause for art and artists.

The city of Bochum is also lining up with the right-wing Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) opposition and government parties (a coalition of the SPD, Greens and FDP), which are currently working on a joint declaration.

According to Zeit-online, the declaration contains not only expressions of solidarity, “but also formulations that massively affect German cultural and scientific funding—indeed could symbolically place it under curatorship.” There is a threat of “comprehensive scrutiny of artists and researchers applying for public funding by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution” (Germany's domestic intelligence agency). This new measure would effectively mean the end of the freedom of opinion and academic freedom guaranteed in the German constitution.

In this witch-hunt atmosphere, Bahnhof Langendreer officials

cancelled the exhibition. The reason given was that *Guernica Gaza* would not be shown because the public discussion surrounding the exhibition no longer served the original aim of “opening up spaces for discourse on the subject of the Middle East conflict,” as the exhibition announcement had stated. Instead, the officials claimed, it was now feared that the exhibition would contribute to the hardening of positions.

In addition, there had been security concerns involved with presenting the artworks, although the organisers did not specify the nature of these “security concerns.”

The press release continues: “We consider the allegations to be completely false.” The paintings, which Paech acquired after their exhibition at Documenta15, are “critical of Israel, but not antisemitic.”

They had already been shown to a large audience at the Mai-Galerie in Berlin and the Buch-Oase in Kassel. “The numerous public discussions that took place there never confirmed the accusations.” On the contrary, they led to the “intended discussion about the role of art in raising awareness in a society, ‘that art raises questions and opens the door to dialogue between peoples of different cultures’ (M. Al Hawajri).”

Al Hawajri’s paintings were shown as part of Documenta15 in 2022 and already served as a pretext for labelling the entire exhibition as “antisemitic” before it opened. The smear campaign extended from the opening lecture by Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier (SPD) throughout the duration of the exhibition and continues to this day. Steinmeier had only reluctantly travelled to Kassel.

Critics of the exhibition in Bochum generally referred to the final report produced by a panel of experts at the end of the Documenta exhibition.

The *Guernica Gaza* cycle consists of collages that combine images by classical artists with attacks by the Israeli armed forces on Palestinian territory. Al Hawajri combines images of such attacks with classical motifs from paintings by Millet, Delacroix, Chagall, van Gogh and Picasso.

The title of the cycle recalls Pablo Picasso’s 1937 painting *Guernica*, with Al Hawajri’s collage alluding to the cutting of the electricity supply to Gaza and thus to the Israeli government’s constant threat to cut off the enclave’s vital supply lines.

The fact that Al Hawajri compares the destruction of the Spanish town of Guernica by a murderous air raid carried out by the German “Condor Legion” with the Israeli army’s air raids on Gaza was and still is denounced as illegitimate.

The final report on Documenta15 states that, in relation to the event, the work equates the Israeli Defence Forces with the Nazi troops, who predominantly bombed women and children in Guernica and killed or wounded a third of the defenceless population: “In this case, *Guernica Gaza* can be considered an antisemitic work.”

If, on the other hand, the title refers to Picasso’s iconic work “as a generalised statement against the war,” then “average viewers would not necessarily perceive it as antisemitic.” Even in this case, however, the Guernica-Gaza comparison is discredited by the fact that Gaza is not “unarmed.” Because there are “not only defenceless civilians” in Gaza, but also “a highly armed terrorist organisation” in the form of Hamas, the comparison with Guernica is unjustified and therefore clearly antisemitic!

In light of the current war of extermination and genocide, in which Gaza is being razed to the ground, the civilian population starved, repeatedly bombed and expelled from their makeshift tents to

supposedly “protected” areas, such an argument is both absurd and inhuman.

The comparison is more of an understatement. The bombing of Guernica on April 26, 1937 was undoubtedly a cruel war crime. However, it only lasted one day, and was carried out with primitive equipment and weapons, while the civilian population in Gaza has been bombarded with the most advanced weaponry, starved and cut off from supplies on a daily basis for almost a year.

The brutality of what is happening in Gaza goes far beyond the scenes depicted in Al Hawajri’s works, and it would have been utterly appropriate to show the images and open up a comprehensive public discussion.

Paech, who was in contact with the artist, explained in an interview with the *Junge Welt* newspaper: “But the pictures also show that Gaza, although declared uninhabitable by the UN in 2020, has not only been a place of misery and helplessness, but also of resistance and creative life. Now it is rubble and ashes—the artist was able to flee with his family and is now in Rafah. His house, studio and artworks have been destroyed.” (The building that housed the Eltiqa collective was obliterated by an Israeli air strike, along with over 200 other art and cultural sites in Gaza.)

The question of the defence of art and freedom of expression is becoming an increasingly urgent task not only for artists, authors and journalists, but for the entire working class. Together they must assume responsibility for the defence of democratic rights.

Even before the Nazis came to power, repression began with fierce attacks on writers, artists and theatre workers. Immediately after Hitler came to power, all workers’ organisations and democratic institutions were smashed, “brought into line” and geared towards preparing for war.

The campaign by leading politicians and the media against “antisemitism” is also more than hypocritical. It is downright grotesque when they boast they are fighting “antisemitism.” In the case of Ukraine, the same politicians are working with extreme right-wing, pro-fascist forces who praise Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and the antisemitic murder organisation OUN as heroes, going so far as to trivialise the Holocaust.

Day in, day out, the same politicians demand the supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine, even though it has been proven that the Ukrainian army is teeming with fascist elements and right-wing mercenaries from abroad. Now there is talk of stationing long-range missiles for attacks on Russia that could trigger a nuclear war.

The right to freedom of expression, which is invoked everywhere as the cornerstone of democracy, is suspended the moment opposition is directed against a regime like Israel, which German imperialism supports, claiming every Israeli war crime is justified as an act of self-defence. The unceasing campaign of slanders against anyone who defends the Palestinians is increasingly developing into state censorship and the comprehensive suppression of freedom of the press, art and opinion.



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