

Silencing Critics of Israel. Germany's Finkelstein Phobia

Renowned scholar and descendent of Holocaust survivors prevented by German Israel Lobby to speak about Gaza

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[Norman Finkelstein](#), an internationally renowned scholar of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was due to talk about the state of the decades-old conflict and the situation in Gaza one year after the Israeli assault last week in Munich and Berlin. As part of a [European speaking tour](#) which would have led him to Germany for the first time since 2002, Finkelstein has been invited [to speak in Prague](#) at a number of prestigious institutions, such as the [Institute of International Relations Prague](#), the [Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic](#), and the [Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Charles University in Prague](#).

One of Finkelstein's Berlin lectures was initially planned to be sponsored by the [Heinrich Böll Foundation](#), an institution affiliated to the German Green Party. The event was scheduled to take place at the [Protestant Trinitatis Church](#). In a [statement](#) announcing its decision to cancel the event, the church "regrets to have been implicated, against its will and its publicly known stances, in anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli polemics". Soon thereafter, on 9 February, the Böll Foundation [announced](#) its pullback stating "Due to inattention, insufficient investigation and trust in our cooperation partners, we have made a severe mistake. In our judgment, Finkelstein's behavior and his theses do not remain within the limits of legitimate critique." It finally „thanked the many notes and interventions pertaining to this event."

The other Finkelstein lecture was scheduled at the headquarters of the [Rosa Luxemburg Foundation](#) (RLS), a German institution affiliated to the Left Party. But on 17 February, the Left Party think-tank also withdrew its support. It [stated](#) to have underestimated the event's "political explosiveness", saying further that for the sake of guaranteeing a "controversial and pluralistic debate" its proposition to provide for a counterpart to Finkelstein has been rejected by the organizers. Aside from the unusual insistence to invite a "counterpart", Doris Pumphrey from the organizing committee stated that the RLS had not wanted to name this counterpart.

Finkelstein's projected two lectures in Munich, one of them at the [America House Munich](#), were likewise [cancelled](#).

The German Israel Lobby and the Anti-Semitism Claim

The wave of cancellations came after a concerted campaign by neoconservative and pro-Israeli pressure groups, such as [Honestly Concerned](#) and [BAK Shalom](#), which are known for their unconditional support of Israeli policies and the defamation of critics as anti-Semites. BAK Shalom, a pro-Zionist working group within the Left Party's youth organization, was one

of the main drivers behind the campaign to cancel Finkelstein's public lectures. A [statement](#), signed by BAK Shalom offshoots and like-minded groupings, reads that "Finkelstein is internationally popular among anti-Semites" while accusing him – a "self-proclaimed historian" – of "historical revisionism" and "anti-Semitism."

Finkelstein, whose parents were survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto and of Nazi concentration camps, was awarded a Ph.D. in political science from Princeton University and is the author of many academic books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His [Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict](#) (1995; 2003) has received much praise from eminent scholars such as Oxford University professor Avi Shlaim ("a major contribution to the study of the Arab-Israeli conflict") and leading intellectual Noam Chomsky ("the most revealing study of the historical background of the conflict and the current peace agreement"). In 2007, after a denunciation campaign with the involvement of Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, despite academic approval he was [denied tenure](#) at Chicago's DePaul University where he has been teaching. Dershowitz' book [The Case for Israel](#), whose scholarly integrity has been highly disputed [by Finkelstein](#) and others, has been [publicized](#) by BAK Shalom. Dershowitz has also called Finkelstein "a classic anti-Semite".

McCarthyism à l'Israélienne vs. Jewish Humanism

Finkelstein has repeatedly argued for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict according to international legal prescriptions and rulings while stressing that the lesson he learned from his family's Holocaust suffering was to call attention to the Palestinians' plight. His new book entitled [This Time We Went Too Far: Truth and Consequences of the Gaza Invasion](#) (OR Books) will be published in mid-March.

In a [response](#) to the pro-Israel lobbying groups, Professor Rolf Verleger, chair of the German section of the [European Jews for a Just Peace \(EJJP\)](#) – one of the sponsors of the Berlin lectures – rejected the claims put forward against Finkelstein. Instead, Verleger described him as "a proud and conscious Jew, who defends himself against the appropriation of Jewish tradition by Jewish blood-and-soil nationalism". Criticizing those pressure groups for their lack of opposition to human rights violations and nationalism when it came to Israel, Verleger compared their tactics to McCarthyite agitation, this time directed against "un-Israeli activities".

Verleger, who is the author of [Israel's Wrong Way: A Jewish View](#) (PapyRossa, in German, 2nd edn., 2009), is a former member of the board of delegates of the [Central Council of Jews in Germany](#) but was not re-elected due to his open criticism of Israeli policies.

In a [letter](#) sent earlier to the Trinitatis Church in a plea to reverse its decision, Verleger rejected the idea that criticism of Israel's policies would amount to anti-Semitism and instead talked of "Jewish responsibility" to do so. Verleger, who in the letter reminded that his father had died on the very day of the projected Finkelstein event in Berlin 45 years ago with an "Auschwitz number on his arm" and who had lost his family in Auschwitz, consigned Finkelstein to stand in the "humanistic tradition of German Judaism" à la [Martin Buber](#), [Hannah Arendt](#) and Rabbi [Leo Baeck](#).

Leftist Raison d'Etat

In particular, the withdrawal of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS) engendered [ongoing protests](#). In an [open letter](#) some Left Party Members of Parliament and leading sympathizers

criticized the foundation's handling of Norman Finkelstein. Therein, they consider the denunciatory claims against Finkelstein as "absurd". In [another open letter](#), former and current RLS scholarship holder conclude that the foundation might lose its "character as location for Leftist debates and controversies" if it were to continue to avoid criticism of Israeli government policies. Also many other Leftists voiced criticism of the RLS's decision noting that the latter would be unworthy of the Jewish philosopher and activist Rosa Luxemburg's famous quote of "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."

The RLS had come under [harsh criticism](#) last summer when allowing three well-known war-mongers – amongst them a leading representative from BAK Shalom – to speak at its largest students-led annual conference. The Left Party and its think-tank find themselves in an internal strife on the question of anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism, not at least since the chairman of the party's parliamentary group Gregor Gysi [advocated](#) in spring 2008 to reconsider those principles. This was seen as an effort to align the Left Party with German *raison d'état*. In a [speech](#) before the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) in March 2008, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said: "Here of all places I want to explicitly stress that every German Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's *raison d'être*. For me as German Chancellor, therefore, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation." Displaying "unconditional solidarity" with Israeli policies, two days into Tel Aviv's [military operation "Cast Lead" in Gaza](#), the German Chancellor and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "agreed that the responsibility for the development of the situation in the region clearly and exclusively lies with Hamas." [Such an assessment](#) had also been echoed then by the chairman of the Left Party in Berlin at a pro-Israel rally.

After the cancellations of venues for Finkelstein's lectures, at the end the [junge Welt](#) ("Young World") – an independent left-wing daily known for its staunch opposition to illegal wars – had stepped in by offering its rather small-spaced shop in Berlin.

Finally, in a statement issued on 20 February, Finkelstein explained why he would not travel to Germany: "Some Germans seem determined that their fellow German citizens only hear opinions on the Israel-Palestine conflict that support the policies of the Israeli government. Such intolerance is not good for Palestinians who are living under a brutal military occupation. It is not good for Germans who want their country to support human rights and international law. It is not good for courageous dissenting Israelis who need support from the European Union."

Finkelstein was also going to elaborate on the [Goldstone Report](#), commissioned by the United Nations, which finds Israel guilty of war crimes in its assault on Gaza during the winter of 2008-2009. Further, in violation of domestic and EU laws that would prohibit the selling of arms to conflict-torn regions, Berlin has been continuing to do so.

Precedents of Handling Critics of Israeli Policies

There have been a number of occasions most recently in Germany where critics of Israel's policies have been faced with comparable treatment. In January this year, three female Left Party members of the German Parliament (who also signed the above mentioned open letter to the RLS) had been attacked by similar groups in concert with [Evangelical clerics](#) for not offering standing ovations after Israeli President [Shimon Peres' Bundestag speech](#) on Holocaust Memorial Day. The parliamentarians, who had paid tribute to the victims of Nazi

crimes at ceremonies ahead of Peres' talk, explained their rejection by pointing to the Israeli President's exploitation of the event for a pro-Iran war call. In his speech, Peres considered Iran's government to be "a danger to the entire world". In spite of ongoing Israeli calls for a military strike on Iran, the Israeli President also said "we identify with the millions of Iranians who revolt against dictatorship and violence." The German section of the EJJ had [criticized](#) the invitation of Peres in the first place.

In early 2009, a projected discussion on Germany's major political TV show "Anne Will" about the Israeli military offensive in Gaza [was cancelled](#) only a few days before, in what was considered to have occurred after political interference.

In October 2009, following a lobbying campaign similar to the Finkelstein case, a projected talk in Munich by the exiled Israeli historian Ilan Pappé was cancelled by the city's authorities. In an open letter, Professor Pappé – who was then speaking at a different venue – [wrote](#) that his father "was silenced in a similar way as a German Jew in the early 1930s". Like himself, he went on, his father and his friends were regarded as "'humanists' and 'peacenik' Jews whose voice had to be quashed and stopped". Pappé said he was "worried, as any decent person should be, about the state of freedom of speech and democracy in present day Germany" as witnessed by the decision to censor his talk.

Both Finkelstein and Pappé have authored leading studies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are considered as eloquent advocates for a just and legal settlement of the conflict. Their Jewish background makes them especially troublesome for hardline defenders of Israel who frequently resort to labeling critics of being anti-Semites or even "self-hating Jews". One might argue that such a distinction between "good" and "bad" Jews would in itself amount to a sort of anti-Semitism.

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