

Working Group Critical Peace Research of the Association for Peace and Conflict Studies (AFK)

Academic Freedom as a Prerequisite for Peace and Conflict Studies

This text was developed in a participatory process by the [Working Group Critical Peace Research](#) of the German Association for Peace and Conflict Research (AFK) in January/February 2025 and discussed at the AFK general meeting on 20 March 2025. It does NOT represent the position of the AFK as a whole.

Anchoring in fundamental rights

As with any other science, the quality and relevance of peace and conflict studies depends on the social and political conditions that make it possible, whether research is *about* or *for* peace. One of these basic prerequisites is the freedom of science in research and teaching, which is enshrined in international law and in the national constitutions of Germany, Austria, Switzerland.[1] As an achievement of the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century, it is primarily to be understood as a *right of defence* against state interference. In a democratic knowledge society, however, academic freedom must also be lived as a *right of participation* in order to approach its normative ideals.[2]

Both dimensions are constantly at stake due to the historical and contemporary entanglement of the sciences in power, violence and domination relations. Spaces for discussion and action are currently being severely restricted in peace and conflict research as well as in peace (education) work, with certain counter-hegemonic views being placed under general suspicion in both academia and politics and excluded from the spectrum of respectable positions.

Contested terrain

Attacks on disliked intellectuals, science and art have always been an essential element of authoritarian turns. For several years now, representatives of critical scientific traditions in particular have experienced massive obstruction and oppression of their work, as numerous examples in fields such as critical migration research, gender studies and post- and decolonial studies illustrate. These developments are exacerbated in German-speaking countries, particularly in the context of the highly controversial wars in Gaza and the West Bank, but also around the war in Ukraine and the war led by Turkey in northern Syria and northern Iraq. This is evidenced by countless cancellations of events, disinvitations of speakers, interventions in courses, bans on assemblies, attempts to regulate teaching staff both within and outside universities, and the cancellation of funding for academic and civil society activities on an alarming scale.

Added to this is a worrying deterrent effect,[3] which is particularly effective in a highly precarious professional environment in the form of self-censorship. Not least the consideration by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research of criminal and funding law measures against the signatories of an open letter on the protection of freedom of expression and assembly in response to the clearing of a protest camp in May 2024 sends a fatal signal.[4] The work of civil society (peace) organisations is also discredited or even criminalized through public defamation and hindered by the withdrawal of funding (as recently in the case of cooperation between the German educational centre *Kurve Wustrow* and the NGOs *Zochrot* and *New Profile*, which are active in Israel).[5]

Instrumentalization of anti-Semitism

Internationally, legal, political, societal and academic controversies regarding the latest developments in Israel/Palestine are being conducted in a much less obsessive and restrictive manner than in German-speaking countries, where the focus is clearly not only on the victims of political violence, but often also on the sensibilities of the majority society.[6] Numerous international colleagues describe the increasing instrumentalization of anti-Semitism in Germany, Austria and Switzerland as not only problematic, but also provincial. They argue that this promotes an increasingly authoritarian world order that goes far beyond the current war in Israel/Palestine.

Not least the invocation of the so-called 'reason of state' (German: *Staatsräson*) – a concept from the age of absolutism[7] that is diametrically opposed to a democratic understanding of politics and at the same time flanks the authoritarian turn within countries – serves to violate liberal-democratic principles such as freedom of science and assembly, but also international law, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, for example through arms deliveries.

Researchers on anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and genocide, including numerous Jewish intellectuals, point out that the increased interventions by the German, Swiss and Austrian federal governments, as well as by numerous governing bodies of universities, colleges, schools and other educational institutions, are in stark contradiction to international law and the freedom of science in research and teaching that our predecessors fought so hard to achieve. The increased repression is an effective means of suppressing critical research, education and public discourse. Even the rather conservative German Rectors' Conference (HRK) is concerned about university autonomy and academic freedom in view of the Bundestag's resolution on anti-Semitism in schools and universities.[8]

In German-speaking countries, so far mostly other disciplines have developed statements against repressive instruments such as the two German Bundestag resolutions 'Never again is now: protecting, preserving and strengthening Jewish life in Germany'[9] and 'Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding freedom of discourse'[10]. It goes without saying that peace and conflict studies and critical education work must unequivocally oppose anti-Semitism, just as they oppose any other form of group-related hostility. However, both resolutions are based on the vague and easily misused definition of anti-Semitism provided by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).[11] With its help, any criticism of Israel's policy and even certain technical terms or theoretical perspectives can easily be branded as anti-Semitic – an accusation that can cost organizations and projects their funding and people their professional livelihoods.

Another example of the threat to academic freedom in research and teaching in the wake of the authoritarian turn is the 'Position Paper of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research on Research Safety in Light of the *Zeitenwende* [Change of Times]'[12] and the 'Law on the Promotion of the German Armed Forces'[13], particularly at educational institutions. Both have been strongly criticized by the civil society and student initiative of the Civil Clause Movement. Even if they are not directly related to the debate on the reason of state and remembrance culture, the increasing use of education and science for a widely demanded new 'readiness for war' (*Kriegstüchtigkeit*) is clearly recognizable in them.

Responsibility of peace and conflict studies

Regardless of different theoretical perspectives and specific research foci, as peace and conflict researchers, we are concerned with preserving and democratically developing academic freedom in research and teaching. Authoritative political intervention in scientific controversies, as in the case of the definition of anti-Semitism, is incompatible with this goal. The same applies to calls for increased support for war and militarism in (higher) education, universities and civil society.

With this in mind, we call on political decision-makers to refrain from further restrictions on science and education and to withdraw any initiatives taken to date. Instead, universities, colleges and educational institutions should be designed as lively spaces for discourse, not least in order to promote peace. We encourage each other and our colleagues in academic and educational institutions to oppose restrictions on academic freedom in research and teaching, for example on the basis of the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism, just as resolutely as we oppose anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination, but also to oppose the increasing use of colleges and universities for military purposes and increased repression within society against freedom of expression, assembly and academic freedom.

As peace and conflict researchers, we are committed to supporting colleagues affected by intimidation, repression, sanctions under funding law or even criminal prosecution, especially those in precarious employment relationships, who are often also subject to restrictions on their right of residence, in the fields of science and education as well as in civil society peace work.

Last but not least, we are committed to actively opposing increasing censorship and self-censorship when it comes to analyzing, theorizing, discussing and also criticizing political conflicts, wars and violence in all their forms.

Beyond protecting academic freedom in research and teaching, we also call on our governments and parliaments to renew the commitment to their constitutional obligations to peace. As former German President Gustav Heinemann stated in 1969: 'There is no existence beyond peace.' [14] That is why he considered peace, and not war, to be the 'case of emergency'. This means daring to strive for more peace, not less – in science, civil society and politics.

Notes

[1] German UNESCO Commission (2017): Wissenschaftsfreiheit weltweit [Academic freedom worldwide], <https://www.unesco.de/dokumente-und-hintergruende/dokumente/dokumente-der-deutschen-unesco-kommission/wissenschaftsfreiheit-weltweit/> [30 January 2025]

[2] Association of Democratic Scientists (2024): Vorwort der Redaktion zum Thema des Hefts „Umkämpfte Wissenschaftsfreiheit“ [Foreword by the editors on the issue theme 'Contested Academic Freedom'], BdWi Studienheft 14, 4-6

[3] Naomi Klein (2025): 'The Exceptions Have Become the Rule.' Naomi Klein on Trump, Gaza and the End of the 'Liberal Order', interview with Omid Memarian, <https://dawnmena.org/the-exceptions->

[have-become-the-rule-naomi-klein-on-trump-gaza-and-the-end-of-the-liberal-order/](#) [30 January 2025]

[4] Student Union Executive Committee (AStA) of Free University Berlin (2024): Ausführliche Stellungnahme zur polizeilichen Räumung des Protestcamps an der FU am 7.5.2024 [Detailed statement on the police evacuation of the protest camp at the FU on 7 May 2024], <https://astafu.de/node/603> [30 January 2025]

[5] Kurve Wustrow (2025): Friedensorganisationen in Israel Unterstützung entzogen [Support withdrawn from peace organizations in Israel], <https://www.kurviewustrow.org/aktuelles/bundesregierung-friedensorganisationen-israel-unterstuetzung-entzogen> [30 January 2025]

[6] Alliance for Critical Scholarship in Solidarity (2025): Aktivitäten [Activities], <https://krisol-wissenschaft.org/>

[7] European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (2025): Staatsräson gegen Grundrechte [Reason of state versus fundamental rights], <https://loa.ecchr.eu/podcasts/staatsrason-gegen-grundrechte/> [30 January 2025]

[8] N.N. (2024): HRK kritisiert Antisemitismus-Resolution für Hochschulen [German Rectors Conference (HRK) criticizes anti-Semitism resolution for universities], <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/politik/hrk-kritisiert-antisemitismus-resolution-speziell-fuer-hochschulen-6772> [30 January 2025]

[9] German Bundestag (2024): Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP: Nie wieder ist jetzt – Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken [Motion by the SPD, CDU/CSU, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP parliamentary groups: Never again is now - protecting, preserving and strengthening Jewish life in Germany], <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/136/2013627.pdf>; Bundespressekonferenz e.V. (2024): Kritik an Antisemitismusresolution, <https://youtu.be/TkM4-g5bKr8?si=uz81m0BmNkBTBnq2> [30 January 2025]

[10] German Bundestag (2025): Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP: Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit an Schulen und Hochschulen entschlossen entgegnetreten sowie den freien Diskursraum sichern [Motion by the SPD, CDU/CSU, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP parliamentary groups: Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding the freedom of discourse], <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/147/2014703.pdf>; Alliance for Critical Scholarship in Solidarity (2025): Stärken statt Regulieren: Stellungnahme zum Resolutionsantrag „Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit an Schulen und Hochschulen“ [Strengthening instead of regulating: Statement on the draft resolution ‘Anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel in schools and universities’] <https://krisol-wissenschaft.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/StellungnahmeStaerkenstattRegulieren.pdf> [30 January 2025]

[11] Verfassungsblog (2025): Die Implementation der IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition Antisemitismus ins deutsche Recht [The implementation of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism in German law], <https://verfassungsblog.de/die-implementation-der-ihra-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-ins-deutsche-recht-eine-rechtliche-beurteilung/>; Dis:Orient (2024): Das Problem mit der IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition, <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/ihra-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-berlin-kultur> [30.1.2025]

[12] German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) (2024): Positionspapier Forschungssicherheit [Position paper on research safety], <https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/2024/positionspapier-forschungssicherheit.html>

[13] Zivilklausel.de (2025): Initiative gegen das Gesetz zur Förderung der Bundeswehr insbesondere in Bayern [Initiative against the law to promote the Bundeswehr, especially in Bavaria], <http://zivilklausel.de/> [30 January 2025]

[14] Heinemann, Gustav (1969): Der Frieden ist der Ernstfall [Peace is the case of emergency], <https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/deu/Chapter12Doc2NEW1.pdf> [30 January 2025]