

Statement on the Cancellation of the Event “The 1948 War and Jihad” with Benny Morris

The cancellation of historian Benny Morris, who was scheduled to speak at the Institute for Practical Theology on December 5th, 2024 as part of the series “Traditions and Contemporary Forms of Antisemitism” is scandalous. Benny Morris is one of Israel's most prominent historians. He has been researching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for over 36 years and has published numerous seminal works on the subject. A central figure among the “New Historians”, he was part of a generation of Israeli scholars who, after the opening of the Israeli archives, critically examined Israel's founding and painted a nuanced picture of the origins of the conflict. During the Second Intifada, Morris revised his stance on possible peace negotiations, finding himself caught between ideological positions and unafraid to criticize renowned colleagues. His designation as *persona non grata* by the University of Leipzig is unacceptable. Instead of promoting academic exchange, dissent is being suppressed.

The cancellation was justified by Morris's “controversial statements”, demands from “various groups”, and “security concerns”. As a public intellectual, Morris has regularly commented on Israeli politics, including in the left-liberal newspaper Haaretz. However, the official statement does not specify which of his statements led to the disinvitation. Instead, it vaguely suggests that his “recent” statements “could be perceived as offensive or even racist”.¹ In a Haaretz interview on December 1st, 2024, Morris clarified that the remarks in question, likely referring to a call for a security barrier (“cage”), were made two decades ago during a period of daily suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.² Morris apologized for his wording in 2004, but rightfully points out that the security fence between Israel and the Palestinian territories has since prevented the vast majority of planned attacks.³

¹ “VORTRAG ENTFÄLLT zum Thema: The 1948 War and Jihad”, <https://www.theol.uni-leipzig.de/institut-fuer-praktische-theologie/veranstaltungsdetail/termin/the-1948-war-and-jihad>.

² <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2024-12-01/ty-article/.premium/german-university-cancels-lecture-by-leading-israeli-historian-following-student-protests/00000193-81ac-de89-abff-99ff0e1c0000>

³ <https://www.haaretz.com/2004-01-08/ty-article/survival-of-the-fittest-cont/0000017f-e86d-da9b-a1ff-ec6fb5000000>;

The events of October 7th, 2023 remind us of the intentions of the attackers and the unacceptable risk an open border poses to Israel. The cancellation, however, removes such context and discussion, privileging one interpretation of Morris's statements over his own position.

It is relatively clear which groups called for the cancellation of the event. Since October 7, organizations such as Students for Palestine have increasingly used antisemitic slogans on campus. These groups had already called for Morris's disinvitation in a November 15th, 2024 Instagram post.⁴ More recently, they have increasingly used authoritarian means to influence campus discourse. For example, the student group "Progressive Initiative Weeks" was stripped of its student organization status and access to university resources for planning events critical of antisemitism, which had been completely excluded from the "Kritische Einführungswochen" organized by the Student Council (StuRa).⁵ Instead, solidarity with the "Palestinian cause" – often a euphemism for threats against Israel – was given priority.⁶ The double standard regarding Israel was evident in a lecture by Cyrus Schayegh on December 5th, 2024 in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philosophy. While Morris was denied a platform for potentially "offensive speech," a prominent BDS supporter was invited to speak on October 7, of all things.⁷

The university's cancellation must be seen as a capitulation to these authoritarian and antisemitic groups.

The fact that the Leipzig University, together with the police, who have always been present at previous events of the lecture series, are no longer able to guarantee the security of a renowned Israeli scholar is either implausible or extremely worrying.

<https://www.haaretz.com/2004-01-22/ty-article/right-of-reply-i-do-not-support-expulsion/0000017f-e3d3-d75c-a7ff-ffdf6cba0000>.

⁴ "Students for Palestine" on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/DCaC45vu6Oy/?img_index=1.

⁵ "Pamphlet against the withdrawal of Progressive Initiative Weeks" status as student organization and against the planned event with BDS supporter Dr. Christopher Parker on 16.12.24", <https://bigleipzig.wordpress.com/2024/11/26/nie-wieder-stura-nie-wieder-judenhass-gegen-die-kollaboration-mit-islamistischen-terrororganisationen>.

⁶ <https://kew-leipzig.de/event/introduction-to-the-palestinian-cause/>.

⁷ <https://www.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/global-and-european-studies-institute/veranstaltungsdetail/termin/israel-staat-und-gesellschaft-ein-jahr-nach-dem-7-oktober>; https://canarymission.org/professor/Cyrus_Schayegh.

Moreover, the university has used outside security companies for previous events, so a certain amount of experience should be at hand.⁸

The decision to cancel Morris's talk comes at a time when antisemitism is becoming more overt and aggressive - especially on university campuses. Jewish students have faced threats and harassment, leading them to avoid campus during pro-Hamas protests or hide their identities from their peers. Antisemitic slogans such as "Yallah Yallah Intifada" are increasingly common, and related graffiti and stickers have become part of campus life. Pro-Israel academics have become targets of intimidation and defamation campaigns. The Faculty of Theology's lecture series critically examined these developments and aimed to explore antisemitism from different perspectives. That the university now allows student groups to dictate who can and cannot speak on the subject is scandalous.

We reject this decision and call for solidarity with Benny Morris.

Signed by:

- Bündnis Israelsolidarischer Gruppen und Personen in Leipzig
- TaMaR Germany e.V.
- Gruppe Minus
- Hochschulen Leipzig gegen Antisemitismus
- Hentrich & Hentrich Verlag
- MASARYK
- Roter Salon im Conne Island
- Jüdische Allianz Mitteldeutschland
- Junges Forum (JuFo) der Deutsch-Israelischen Gesellschaft Leipzig
- Antideutsche Kommunisten Leipzig
- Power drift e.V.

⁸ <https://nachrichten.idw-online.de/2024/11/15/eroeffnung-des-internationalen-graduiertenkollegs-belongings-zur-juedischen-materiellen-kultur>.