



2014-041

Andreas W. Daum,* “Unconventional and Independent: The Historian Peter Paret Celebrates His Ninetieth Birthday.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (9 April 2014) N3.

Translation by James P. Holoka, Eastern Michigan University (editor@www.miwsr.com).

What Does Clausewitz Have in Common with Kleist and Schiller?

Peter Paret was born in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic near the Kemperplatz on the eastern edge of the “Tiergarten.” There his grandfather, the art dealer and publisher Paul Cassirer, maintained a salon, legendary even in his own lifetime, where he promoted works of modern art. As a child, Paret visited the studio of the elderly Max Liebermann and other members of the Berlin Secession movement, for whom Cassirer sought to pave the way. In January 1933, at age eight, he left Berlin to accompany his mother to Vienna, where after their flight she underwent training analysis with Sigmund Freud.

Via France and England, he arrived in the United States in 1937. Paret, one of the most keenly perceptive historians of our time, ultimately a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, was able to escape the hatred of the National Socialists. The cultural legacy they wanted to destroy Paret has restored to Germans as a writer of history and art connoisseur, through his studies of the history of the Berlin Secession movement, which he exhibited in Berlin in 1981, and of Ernst Barlach and modernist artists since the nineteenth century. Paret has demonstrated that subjective experiences, if combined with intellectual candor, can provide us with new perspectives on historical themes. After earning his doctorate at the University of London in 1960, he went on to posts at the University of California at Davis, at Stanford, and finally in Princeton; throughout, he has been preoccupied with war and military strategy. Then as now, these were unfashionable subjects, but Paret has continually stressed how fundamental they are for our understanding of modern times. He himself experienced the Second World War as a soldier in the American Army in New Guinea and in the Philippines. To his comrades in those days as well as to those on the other side, he dedicated his great book *Imagined Battles* [1997]. It concerns the experience of war in the world of artistic representation from Piero della Francesca to Jacques Callot and Otto Dix. Unfortunately, this is not one of Paret’s books that have been translated into German.

Even in the few cases when his military studies have had a current relevance, such as in regard to guerrilla tactics in the twentieth century, Paret stresses a conviction to which he has remained loyal to this day: every subject deserves to be understood in its own context, divested of ideological considerations. That is also particularly true for art. Paret has never interpreted deterministically the relation of the social and political environment, on the one hand, to the artistic and intellectual, on the other. Rather, he always strives to clarify the individual case. One can see this in his observations on the imagery of the Revolution of 1848 in the work of Adolph Menzel and Alfred Rethel, as well as, one sees, in his acute comparison of Theodor Fontane and Max Liebermann. Paret did not hesitate, either, to undertake an analysis of the illustrator Hans Schweitzer, who produced National Socialist caricatures and political posters.

Paret has not ceased to apply this productive mixing of near and far in history in his many studies and editions of Carl von Clausewitz. He portrays the early nineteenth-century Prussian strategist and military reformer as a creative thinker of his time on a level with great poets like Schiller and Kleist. Paret stressed early on the broad horizon of Clausewitz’s interests. Recently, he has characterized him as an “extraordinarily searching observer” of a new phase of European and world history around 1800, a phrase that may be used as well for two other contemporaries of Clausewitz, the Humboldt brothers.

One can explain the breadth of Paret’s interests as a reflection of a milieu of emigrants which has preserved the best traditions of German bourgeois culture up to the present day. Such strands doubtless intersected in that generation of young emigrants of the 1930s who became Americans early on. As a student at

Berkeley, Paret heard the lectures of the philosopher of law Hans Kelsen and the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz, who had fled to the United States only in 1939. From Kantorowicz, Paret learned the “respect for the evidence” that may still today be seen in his readiness to do precise archival work and in his astute textual commentary. The qualities that he esteemed in the encyclopedically learned cultural historian Felix Gilbert, another emigrant and later colleague in Princeton, distinguish Paret as well: an openness to a multiplicity of methodological approaches and a capacity for discussing difficult questions based on specifics rather than generalizations.

In the end, however, Paret defies categorization. He found the freedom to pursue his interests, which transcend the boundary lines of specialties, in the academic landscape of the United States and in dialogues with colleagues from many other countries. His scholarly independence facilitated collaboration with historically oriented scholars in Germany. Humboldt University in his birth-city Berlin awarded Paret an honorary doctorate in 2007, in recognition of his lifetime achievement—and for building transatlantic bridges. Recently [17 September 2013], the Federal Republic honored him with the Great Cross of the Order of Merit. On 13 April, Peter Paret celebrated his ninetieth birthday. The publication of his newest book is announced for the coming year. Its subject is Clausewitz.

* Andreas Daum is professor of history at SUNY–Buffalo and the author of *Kennedy in Berlin*, trans. D. Geyer (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007), among other books, and co-editor of *The Second Generation: Émigrés as Historians in the Transatlantic World* (NY: Berghahn Books, forthcoming 2015). —Ed.