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Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenge of War: Prussia 1806*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. x, 164. ISBN 978–0–691–13581–6.

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> *Commissions of enquiry at the end of a war, especially one ending in defeat, are not uncommon. But the investigation's scale and intensity were unprecedented at the time and may not have been equaled* (84–85).

Peter Paret, Professor Emeritus of Modern European History at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, does not overstate the importance of what one might call the Prussian Army's "After Action Review" of the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt. The investigation was unprecedented; its aftereffects remain incalculable. The remedial actions taken by the Prussian Army in the aftermath of 1806 sowed the seeds of Prussia's military resurgence in 1813 and, in consequence, of the 6th Coalition's victory over Napoleon. Of even greater consequence is the reform movement's role in sparking the particular alliance of German nationalism with Prussian militarism that engendered the *Kaiserreich*.

But this crucial moment in German history remains so little appreciated that Paret sensibly calls his book *Prussia 1806*, alluding to the famous disaster, not the little known reforms. Who would buy a book about 1807? The Prussian Reform period is a gap in the English-language historiography of Germany. The best existing works, Paret's biographies of Hans David Ludwig von Yorck and Carl von Clausewitz and Charles Edward White's study of Gerhard Scharnhorst,[1] address the larger German experience through the lives of exceptional individuals, and the period cries out for a more comprehensive treatment. Given the importance of the topic and Paret's exceptional expertise, his new book on 1806 must arouse considerable interest.

Instead of placing the Prussian Reform in the larger context of the rise of the German nation, as one might expect from the author of *Clausewitz and the State*, Paret analyzes the Prussian reaction to 1806 as a case study of response to change and innovation in war or "the cognitive challenge of war" (1). The work begins with the assertion that war presents innovations that require military organizations to respond directly and societies to come to terms with the new world of those innovations (1–2).

This rather dogmatic equation of cognition with response to innovation and the artificial distribution of labor between military and social spheres call attention to the nature of the work. This is not a comprehensive study of the Prussian reaction to 1806 but a set of four lectures showcasing highlights of Paret's illustrious academic careers.

The book's four chapters were originally the 2008 Lee Knowles lectures delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge. The first lecture, "Two Battles," describes Jena and Auerstedt with masterful clarity and succinctness. Particularly admirable is a judicious discussion of the fundamental qualities of the two armies, in which Paret identifies Prussian weaknesses without so exaggerating them as to make the battle itself a foregone conclusion. A noteworthy, if natural, consequence of Paret's purpose, is the effort to underpin the campaign narrative with intimations of what the rival commanders were apparently thinking.

One oddity in this first chapter is that the more dogmatic bits, especially the introductory remarks, read like passages from Clausewitz's *On War* as translated by Paret and Michael Howard.[2] "How often has success itself proved counterproductive—perhaps because of the manner in which it is achieved!" (3)—this sentence and others make one wonder whether Paret is channeling the subject of so much of his work.

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[1] Peter Paret, *Yorck and the Era of Prussia Reform* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1966) and *Clausewitz and the State* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1976); Charles Edward White, *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the Militarische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801–1805* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1988).

[2] *On War/Carl von Clausewitz*, rev. ed., ed. and tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1986).

In the second chapter, "Violence in Words and Images," Paret shifts from the battlefield itself to depictions of the 1806 debacle in art and literature. Although many of the soldiers involved in the Prussian Reform were men of culture, this change of subject signals a transfer of dramatic emphasis from the military to the civilian realm. The allocation of an entire chapter to high culture allows Paret to demonstrate his inimitable mastery of the interface between military history and art history;[3] more crucially, the cultural evidence corroborates the thesis, normally presented in more conventional political terms, that the reforms of 1807 happened because German civil society was willing to accept the political and social changes prerequisite to military change. Typical of the argument is Paret's description of the impact of Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Chasseur in the Forest.*[4] "Friedrich takes an ancient symbol—the German forest—and turns it into a new ideal, the nation, which gives the bourgeois, until now exempt from the military, compelling ideological reasons and official compulsion to serve" (71). This chapter vindicates the initial insistence on a strict division between military and social responses to innovation, but a less formulaic presentation would have made the claim seem more persuasive at the outset.

"Reponses and Reform," the third chapter, details Prussia's response to defeat through the work of two commissions established in 1807: Scharnhorst's Military Reorganization Commission and a second commission appointed to assess the conduct of the army's officers and units (84). Unsurprisingly, given Paret's earlier biographical studies, the focus is on the contributions of individuals—the reformers Gerhard Scharnhorst and Yorck and their occasionally cooperative monarch King Frederick William III. Although Paret reminds us early on that, defeat being an indictment of Prussia's society as much as its army, "the process of regeneration therefore challenged not only technical military practices but broad social and political interests (73); his narrative emphasizes "technical military practices" to the virtual exclusion of political and social matters. The military detail is valuable but so dense that a careless reader might overlook Paret's single reference to the revolutionary decision to abolish serfdom (95). Also of interest in this chapter is the brief reference to Prussian attitudes towards irregular war, a burning contemporary issue on which Clausewitz lectured at the new Prussian War College.

Having discussed Prussia's political, social, and military responses to the disaster of 1806, Paret turns in the fourth chapter, "The Conquest of Reality by Theory," to an examination of the intellectual response. The chapter is essentially an argument about how to read *On War*. Neither material nor approach is new, but they bear repetition—and reconsideration. While insisting, not altogether convincingly, that Clausewitz and Jomini did not write in direct competition with one another, Paret stresses their different agendas—"where Jomini sees strategic similarities, Clausewitz above all sees contextual differences" (121). Jomini offers rules and principles for fighting war; Clausewitz suggests a theoretical method for applying a general understanding of the nature of war to specific conflicts. In arguing that Clausewitz intended not to offer prescriptive theories about war but to educate soldiers to think about war for themselves, Paret returns to the idea of cognition, but seems to contradict his earlier linking of cognition with the problem of change. Surely individual wars, in their specific historical circumstances, pose soldiers sufficient intellectual challenges even if contemporary military institutions seem more or less static.

Much of chapter 4 investigates how readings of Clausewitz reflect the circumstances of his readers. Thus, in 1911, Friedrich von Bernhardi found it necessary to "refute" Clausewitz's arguments for the advantages of defensive over offensive war because defense did "not accord with Germany's geopolitical position in the twentieth century" (134). Today, although Clausewitz wrote "to understand war, not to establish a doctrine for engaging in it" (120), soldiers and politicians who read *On War* for guidance in dealing with immediate military problems brush aside his abstract exegesis of the nature of war in a quest for "the principles and laws of a dogmatic system" (120).

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3. See, among other works, *Imagined Battles: Reflections of War in European Art* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1997).

4. See <www.miwsr.com/rd/1001.htm>.

While not pretending to offer a comprehensive synopsis of Clausewitz's thought, Paret smoothly organizes so many elements of *On War* into a few pages as to give the impression of a masterful survey of the entire work. The trick lies in the attention paid not to the work's most quoted bits but to its most essential ones. These key passages treat methods not of fighting wars but of thinking about them. By accentuating Clausewitz's peculiar way of thinking, Paret ends his lecture series where he began, with war as the objective of a daunting cognitive challenge.

The result is neat and the first three chapters are individually satisfying, but even the most superb lecture series is likely to yield short-term gratification but long-term questions. The idea of studying war as a cognitive phenomenon is important and worthy of greater explication than Paret offers. Though entirely in keeping with the tenor of contemporary military history, his equation of "the cognitive challenge of war" to response to innovation (1) is unnecessarily narrow, indeed narrower than his own discussion suggests. Arguably, Paret does not go as far as Clausewitz himself in analyzing the practical difficulties of thinking about war. As I have argued elsewhere, Clausewitz uses the concept of "friction" less to describe physical impediments to military action than as a metaphor for those mental obstacles military commanders face in making decisions under pressure. To say that friction impedes cognition may be trite, but the point reminds us that Clausewitz emphasizes theory as part of a practical program for training commanders.

Can one entirely separate cognition from psychology? Paret would have one believe that Clausewitz understood the former before psychologists existed to understand the emotional aspects of war (141). He also implies that modern psychology has solved a problem inaccessible to Clausewitz. While modern studies have increased our understanding of the psychological price war extracts from its participants, the problem of comprehending mankind's psychological relationship to war remains intractable.

The three military essays deal largely with Prussians, or at least with men wearing the Blue Prussian uniforms, while the chapter about civil society concerns Germans. Perhaps in this context Prussians and Germans are the same, but that argument requires an extended study of the Prussian reform movement of the kind whose absence is lamented above. The reader unfamiliar with the role of the Prussian reform in the unification of Germany may find Paret's jump from Prussia to Germany a bit cavalier.

Students of Clausewitz are likely to read Paret's book in tandem with Jon Tetsuro Sumida's *Decoding Clausewitz*, and the publication of two cognitive studies of Clausewitz in as many years makes comparison inevitable. Sumida refers to Paret's previous corpus when he speaks bluntly of "overgeneralized and incomplete analysis" and charges that Paret "misunderstands Clausewitz's theoretical intent,"[5] but he would certainly be dissatisfied even with those parts of *The Cognitive Challenge of War* that share his belief that Clausewitz offers tools for thinking about war rather than prescriptions for fighting. Paret, on the other hand, does not engage Sumida's argument except to dismiss the significance of his claim that *On War* is a finished work and, in a harsh footnote, to dismiss a central point arguably after misconstruing it, as "academic fantasy" (119 n.20, 155–56). One need not buy Sumida's entire argument to find in *Decoding Clausewitz* a useful mirror in which to examine Paret's notion of what a cognitive approach to war ought to do.

Like most lectures, these essays will bring the greatest pleasure to those already familiar with the overall historical narrative. The descriptions of art and literature are clear enough to be interesting even to the uninitiated, but those unfamiliar with the history Prussia from 1806 to 1814—or with the contents of *On War*—will be ill-equipped to appreciate Paret's artistry.

For readers with the necessary background, however, the essays will be a pleasure marred only by the occasional passage compressing a page's worth of material into near incomprehensibility. The following sentence, for example, reminds this Paret student of the master's impatience with those slow to grasp his meaning:

> the opposition his efforts encountered changed their outcome, and when the Landwehr was formed early in 1813—to reach a strength of 120,000 men by year's end—it was no longer the largely self-sufficient bourgeois force that Scharnhorst had envisioned, first steps in a process that by the 1820s made it fully subordinate to the

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[5] Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2008) 59.

> standing army—a development motivated by the need to maintain standards of discipline and training, but even more so by conservative dislike of the Landwehr's privileges and their social imperialism (98–99).

If this handsome little book does not fulfill the need for a comprehensive study of the Prussian reform, it does provide a brief, intelligent, and artful recapitulation of some of the period's major themes.