Carrie Collenberg-Gonzalez

Kleist in the Reception of the Red Army Faction


You are the one and only woman on earth I should wish to see again in the beyond. Not Ulrike? Yes and no: let her own feeling decide. She has not, it seems to me, understood the art of sacrificing oneself, of going under utterly for the one thing one loves […] Adieu³

— Heinrich von Kleist

Aye, yai, yai, Kleist!
— Ulrike Meinhof²

Heinrich von Kleist’s two-hundredth birthday celebration on 18 October 1977 coincided with one of the most influential postwar dates in German history and the history of terrorism. On this day — the pinnacle of what is referred to as Deutscher Herbst (German Autumn) — three ongoing events that had been plaguing the Federal Republic of Germany came to an end: 1) A special commando of the German government rescued all eighty-six passengers from a German Lufthansa plane in Mogadishu, Somalia that had previously been hijacked on 13 October 1977 by PFLP terrorists demanding


the release of Red Army Faction (RAF) prisoners; 2) Prominent RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe committed suicide in their jail cells in the high-security Stammheim prison in Stuttgart and Irmgard Möller was found critically injured; 3) Hanns-Martin Schleyer, an industrialist who had previously been kidnapped by the RAF on September 5, 1977, was killed. This date and these events — in particular the deaths of the RAF terrorists — have been seared into the collective memory of Germany, a fact that is demonstrated by the large number of films, literary works, artworks, and critical studies on the RAF that have been published since, several of which reference Heinrich von Kleist. Although it could be inferred that the association between Kleist and the RAF is simply a result of the date they share, this uncanny relationship both includes and transcends the coincidence of the date. To a certain extent, the reverence demonstrated for Kleist’s work and biography in relation to one of the most traumatic moments of this generation honors Kleist — a figure known for his radically transgressive behavior, soul-searching, fervent pursuit of justice, understanding of history, isolation from society, his murder/suicide death, and characters who follow similar ethical codes. Although Kleist may have been an outsider in the early nineteenth century, he seems to have found his place in history with the unfortunate turn of events on 18 October 1977 and with members of a generation who understood him, or at least tried to, in an attempt to understand their past.

The connection between Kleist and the RAF is not only serendipitous but also traceable when considering the history of terrorism. Both were products of certain historical moments when revolutionaries were romanticized and change was believed possible and are related to distinct transformations in the understanding of terrorism. Although tyrannicide and various forms of terrorism have existed throughout human history and have been well documented in literature, the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist” came about as Kleist was coming of age. Walter Laqueur places their first use around the time of the French Revolution (1793–1794) and in specific relationship to

3 The deaths of other prominent and influential RAF members Ulrike Meinhof and Holger Meins are also important precedents to the deaths of 1977. Meinhof hanged herself on 9 May 1976 in Stammheim prison and Holger Meins died of a hunger strike in Justizvollzugsanstalt Wittlich on 9 November 1974.

4 There is some dispute as to whether Kleist’s birthday was the 10th or the 18th of October. See Horst Häker, “10. oder 18. Oktober? Ein Plädoyer für Kleist,” Beiträge zur Kleist Forschung, 7 (1993), pp. 149–154.

5 The list usually begins with Book V of Aristotle’s Politics (c. 350 B.C.E.), in which he writes about the nature and origins of tyranny.