

# Felix Gilbert on Being a Student of Friedrich Meinecke in the 1920s (Retrospective Account, 1988)

## Abstract

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In this excerpt, historian Felix Gilbert describes the extent to which he was influenced by Friedrich Meinecke, who was one of his professors. Meinecke characterized himself as a “monarchist at heart” [*Herzensmonarchist*], who, in the face of the revolution of 1918, had been transformed into a “republican by reason” [*Vernunftrepublikaner*]. Despite his skepticism about political parties and the parliamentary system in general, Meinecke belonged to the liberal German Democratic Party [*Deutsche Demokratische Partei* or DDP]. He also initiated the “Weimar Circle,” a group of university professors who were loyal to the constitution. The group met for the first time in Weimar on April 23-24, 1926. Best described as a liberal conservative, Meinecke rejected National Socialism and Communism alike. He put forth the “national unity” of all social classes as his ideal utopian vision of social harmony. This vision, however, never compelled him to advocate for a racially defined *Volksgemeinschaft*, and in this respect, he differed from many of his contemporaries (and also from many of his colleagues at the university).

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Friedrich Meinecke, my history professor, lectured every morning at nine in the university. At the first lecture of a semester you reserved a seat for yourself by fixing your visiting card on the desk in front of your seat. I had reserved for myself a very good seat in the middle of the second row in order to hear well what Meinecke was saying. But getting up early in the morning was never to my liking, and I usually arrived only at the last minute, sometimes even only as Meinecke was ascending the podium. To get to my seat in the middle of the row all those sitting closer to the aisle had to get up. I noticed that one young man was getting up more and more slowly when I passed by to take my seat. We had reached the point at which I might have had to push him to get to my seat. This was the young man at Alsberg’s party, and we stared at each other. Finally he or I said: “Tomorrow morning we shall have a terrible fistfight.” We laughed, began to talk, and withdrew into a corner away from the company of the famous jurists. This began my friendship with Arnold Haase, which has continued to the present day.

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After the end of my work as an assistant to the editors of the German Foreign Office documents [but before I returned to my studies in Berlin in the fall of 1926], I studied for a year in Munich. By then the political turmoil that had exploded in the Hitler putsch of 1923 had subsided, and Munich had sunk into quiet provincialism. I remember some posters announcing that Adolf Hitler, now out of prison, would speak at a public meeting, but it did not enter my mind to go because at the time Hitler and his movement seemed utterly unimportant. Still, despite the lack of excitement, living in Munich – a lovely city set in a beautiful landscape – was highly enjoyable, and the year there was also intellectually profitable. [...] Yet, although Munich had its attractions, I had no doubt that I wanted to complete my historical studies in Berlin. The reason was the presence of Friedrich Meinecke at Berlin University. Meinecke had shaken up German historical scholarship by emphasizing the relations among intellectual movements, political thought, and political action; after working for two years in diplomatic documents I was eager to broaden my outlook on the past. In addition, among the many conservative and reactionary German professors, Meinecke was an exception: he was a defender of the republic. Moreover, while I was working in the Foreign Office I had come to know several students of Meinecke, and I had heard from them that he allowed his students a very free hand, though at the same time was very much interested in

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what they were doing.

Meinecke was a great teacher. Although he stammered, and his lectures were rhetorically undistinguished, they were beautifully organized, and in placing the events of national histories in a European context they continued a tradition of German historiography that had begun with Leopold von Ranke. Meinecke's seminars provided a rigorous training in historical methodology. They focused on the art of interpretation. We usually discussed a single document or treatise, like the French Charter of 1814, or Machiavelli's *Prince*, and subjected the meaning of each sentence, almost each word, to scrutiny and discussion. Half of each seminar was taken up with the reading of papers written by the participants on the document under investigation. After a paper was presented Meinecke usually did not say more than "Thank you," but when he added "Good," you believed you were in seventh heaven.

Some members of the seminar were most reluctant to open their mouths because they did not want to confront Meinecke with what might be an inappropriate contribution to the discussion. Although, in my opinion, this was a silly attitude, it shows something of Meinecke's immense prestige and authority among history students. Those who attended his seminar knew that in the evaluation of a historical work quality was his only concern; he was entirely impartial, and his judgments were uninfluenced by ideological considerations. Meinecke's attitude toward the work of Eckart Kehr is a good example of this. Kehr, after the Second World War, attained posthumous fame as a pioneer in the application of methods of social history and social criticism to German history. In the late twenties, when I was studying in Berlin, Kehr had just finished his dissertation on the building of the German navy; in contrast to the traditional doctrine about the primacy of foreign policy, it set forth the thesis that the navy owed its existence to a compromise between the interests of the great landowners and the leaders of heavy industry. Meinecke was not particularly enthusiastic about this demonstration of the determining nature of material interests in the foreign policy of the empire. But he was so impressed by the quality of Kehr's research that he did something very unusual: in the book he was then writing on the origins of the conflict between Germany and Great Britain, he praised Kehr's manuscript, which was still unpublished.

I knew Kehr quite well. He was a most astonishing mixture of high intelligence and naiveté. He came from a family of Prussian civil servants, and had inherited something of their ascetic attitude. He was full of distrust of wealth, and was inclined to believe that wealthy people must be evil. On the other hand, he believed that when confronted with the truth, people would accept it no matter what their prejudices, traditions, and interests might be. He saw himself as starting a new, modern movement in German historiography, and there is no doubt that he appeared to many of us as the born leader of a new generation of historians.

Because of Meinecke's presence, the historical seminar of the University of Berlin was the center of gravity for history students with a democratic and intellectually adventurous outlook. This attitude was not popular among older, conservative historians, still predominant in German academic life. On the occasion of Meinecke's retirement (I believe it was in 1931), a meeting in his honor was arranged in the Berlin seminar, at which his older and younger disciples were present. Kehr and I had written a play in which we made fun of the various patriotic myths of German history (I must confess that Kehr wrote the more satirical and amusing parts, whereas I moderated the tone by inserting here and there patriotic and sentimental verses). I have no doubt that this play was a sorry effort, but the openly expressed contempt of Meinecke's older disciples, whose admiration for the master had been expressed in a very traditional eulogy, was aroused not so much by the lack of quality of our dilettantish poetry as by its lack of respect for the heroic stories of the past and by our radicalism.

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After having finished the dissertation it was customary in Germany for the doctoral candidate to go to the professors who would examine him and arrange a date for the oral examination. The establishment of an

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examination schedule usually took place four to six weeks before the examination. I went to Meinecke early in January, soon after the Christmas vacation, and after I had explained to him the purpose of my visit I asked him when in February or March he would have time to examine me. Meinecke said: "I am free now. How is it if I would examine you now?" For a moment I was shaken, but then I thought that it would be ridiculous to tell the professor with whom I had studied modern European history for four years that I would be ready to be examined in this field only after I had studied it for another four weeks. I therefore said that if he had time to examine me now, this would be fine with me. Once the examination was over I concluded that it hadn't gone too badly because, after the hour of questions, Meinecke said: "Do you really think it would have been much better four weeks later?" And I left Meinecke's house somewhat elated because, whereas I had expected in the following four weeks to devote my time to modern European history, I could now spend all my time preparing for examinations in my minor fields: medieval history, philosophy, and economics.

The next morning my friend Mommsen telephoned. He told me that the evening before, his mother had been at a party with Mrs. Meinecke, who had mentioned that her husband had been most pleasantly surprised that afternoon. After asking doctoral candidates from time to time over the last thirty years whether they would be willing to be examined immediately rather than arranging a future date, he had for the first time found a candidate who had agreed to this proposal. Later Meinecke alluded several times to this event. If it contributed to establishing a closer connection with him, this connection was not based on my scholarly qualities but on my intellectual impudence.

In any case, the end of my studies for a doctorate in history was satisfactory. A few weeks after the examination Meinecke offered me the job of editing the political writings of Droysen for the Prussian Academy. He also indicated that he thought I might pursue a university career, and that it was not necessary for me to take the state examination, which would have entitled me to teach at a Gymnasium. At that time I was highly pleased, but from a practical, financial point of view it turned out to be bad advice. If I had sat for the state examinations I would have, after 1945, received a pension as if I had been an active civil servant throughout the entire Nazi period.

Meinecke never became a Nazi, nor did he lose contact with friends and students who had to leave Germany. But in the thirties he never gave much expression to his disapproval of the Nazi regime; he tried hard to find positive features in it and he looked upon the Nazis as a powerful, dynamic force. This attitude did not surprise me, nor do I think it surprised many of his other students. Meinecke called himself "a republican by reason." The republic seemed to him the appropriate form of government after the First World War, but his heart was not in the republic. He once asked me as elections approached whether I would be willing to do some work for the Democratic Party. He was somewhat shocked when I said that I was willing to help but that I did not vote the Democratic Party, I voted Socialist. It must also be said that although no Jew had difficulties in being accepted among those who wrote dissertations under him, I think he supported habilitation only of those Jews who had converted to Christianity. Meinecke came from a traditional, conservative background, and it was not surprising that traces of this background remained. It is astonishing how far he had gotten in overcoming this background and opening himself to other ideas: liberalism, democracy, and nonconfessional religiosity. And it should also not be overlooked that what was a weakness in his political outlook was tied to what was characteristic and, one might say, a strength in his historical approach: its relativism, its emphasis on judging a past time on the basis of its own values, a subtle recognition of the continuous change in values. Such an attitude does not lead to very strong convictions and beliefs in politics. It must be admitted that, although historians are fatally attracted to politics, historians are not necessarily good politicians.

Source: *A European Past: Memoirs, 1905–1945* by Felix Gilbert (pp. 62–63, 68–71, and 73–76.).

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