

# Intellectuals of noble descent and the reinvention of aristocratic identity in Germany and Austria, 1918-1939\*

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The year 1918 was an historic turning point for 'old Europe' in social, political, and economic terms. The transformation of the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov empires with their complex hierarchies of power into republics and nation-states took different forms. One factor in common was that all these new states attempted to abolish the nobility as a privileged status and to reduce the actual influence of nobles on future politics. Nonetheless, in the past three decades, historians have drawn attention to the persistence of nobles' influence on the new power structures of twentieth-century Europe.<sup>1</sup> The explanatory framework for the continued importance of nobles has centred on the economic power of noble families. But historians have paid comparatively little attention to the social and ideational foundations of the influence nobles had maintained as a group in German and Austrian society. The end of World War I was a watershed for the way many Europeans imagined the future political order, but it was particularly significant for nobles, whose identity as Europe's 'former' elite was constituted by genealogical ties to several European regions.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the role of intellectuals of noble descent in shaping the German idea of the new Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The first to do so was A.J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (London-New York, 1981). To mention some of the important subsequent work on the persistence of nobles, see M. de Saint Martin, *L'espace de la noblesse* (Paris, 1993); H. Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, II. Entwicklungslinien und Wendepunkte im 20. Jahrhundert (Berlin, 2001); M. Cotta and H. Best, 'Between Professionalisation and Democratization. A Synoptic View on the Making of the European Representative', in: M. Cotta and H. Best, ed., *Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848-2000. Legislative Recruitment and Careers in Eleven European Countries* (Oxford, 2000) 493-526.

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of self-identification and memory for the persistence of noble influence, see J. Matzerath and S.

While it was not uncommon for European nobles to pursue intellectual interests before World War I, after 1918, the number of German-speaking nobles to become writers or get involved in cultural activities as patrons or artists grew perceptibly. Satirists such as Kurt Tucholsky parodied the writing nobility, such as the philosopher Count Hermann Keyserling, as philosophers 'softened with the title of a count', or a 'count with a philosophical symbol on his coat of arms'.<sup>3</sup> Even beyond Germany, magazines such as *Time Magazine* described Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, who emigrated from Austria to the United States after the assassination of Austrian Chancellor Dollfuß, before returning to Europe after World War II, as 'a Bohemian citizen of the world turned visiting professor of history at New York University'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century, the German-speaking former nobleman had become a distinctive type. My contention is that this small, but significant social group influenced ideas of political order in elite social circles of the period in ways that have so far been overlooked.

Many German-speaking nobles from regions that formed part of the old European empires, including the Baltic lands, Bohemia, and Moravia, chose to settle in Germany and Austria. For many nobles from these regions, intellectual practice became a new form of occupation, in some cases even providing their main income. A number of dispossessed nobles from what, in 1919, became Estonia, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia, decided to pursue an academic career that they had previously undertaken as a freelance pastime. To name just a few: the Bohemian Count Ferdinand Czernin, the son of the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to Britain during World War I, became a journalist and wrote histories and critiques of the problems of the old Empire, as well as critical commentaries on ongoing political affairs in and concerning Central Europe.<sup>5</sup> The Baltic German nobleman Jakob von Uexküll embarked on an academic career in the form of philosophical writing on biology.<sup>6</sup> The writer Otto von Taube published works of history of the Baltic region.<sup>7</sup> Prince Karl Anton Rohan, an Austro-Bohemian nobleman who established himself in Vienna as a publicist and cultural mediator working within the framework of the League of Nations, founded the journal *Europäische Revue* and theorised on Austrian, European, and noble identity. Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, a nobleman whose family was based on Bohemia, chose Vienna as the centre of his *Pan-European* federation, a union of politicians, industrialists, and intellectuals advocating the unification of Europe in the interwar period.<sup>8</sup> This group of intellectuals developed predominantly internationalist

Marburg, 'Vom Stand zur Erinnerungsgruppe. Zur Adelsgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts,' in: idem, ed., *Der Schritt in die Moderne. Sächsischer Adel zwischen 1763 und 1918* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> K. Tucholsky (aka Peter Panter), 'Der Darmstädter Armleuchter', *Die Weltbühne*, 19 June 1928, 936.

<sup>4</sup> N.N., 'One Europe', *Time Magazine*, 26 March 1945.

<sup>5</sup> F. Czernin, 'A Common United Nations Policy-Now!', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCXXVIII (1943) 11-15.

<sup>6</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (Berlin, 1921); J. von Uexküll and D.L. Mackinnon, *Theoretical Biology* (New York, 1926).

<sup>7</sup> O. von Taube, *Baltischer Adel. Drei Novellen* (Oldenburg, 1932). See also idem, 'Der baltische Adel', *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, XXIII,5 (1926) (thematic issue 'Deutscher Adel') 396-402.

<sup>8</sup> On Coudenhove-Kalergi, see A. Ziegerhofer-Pretenthaler, *Botschafter Europas. Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergus und die Paneuropabewegung in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2004).

ideas of political order. The idea of renewing the nobility and turning it into more than just a functional elite was central to their project.

Thanks to recent studies by Alexandra Gerstner and others, the discourse of 'new nobility' to which nobles also contributed is now much better understood.<sup>9</sup> Calls for a 'new nobility' circulated among conservative revolutionaries like Edgar J. Jung and Arthur Moeller von den Bruck, as well as among reactionary modernists like Stefan George, and even among some socialists, such as Kurt Hiller. Theorists of 'new nobility' are frequently considered to be the path-breakers for elitist strands within National Socialism, even though neo-aristocratic ideals were also important in consolidating the identity of conservative critics of the Nazis. In this context, however, the specific place of writers of noble background in this panoply has not been sufficiently explained. Internationally minded nobles like Coudenhove-Kalergi were neither singular in their beliefs about the need for nobles to modernise, nor can their views be understood if they are considered merely as representatives of the discourse on 'new nobility' in general. Rather, noble intellectuals constitute a specific segment in German intellectual life, whose perspective on the European crisis had a group biographical character. While nobles felt at home in a variety of neo-aristocratic projects, their motivations were articulated quite differently from those of other neo-aristocratic theorists of political order.

The relationship between schemes of historical perception shared by members of high nobility and their political attitudes has been analysed mostly as far as nobles' attitudes to National Socialism are concerned. Stefan Malinowski in particular has articulated the relationship between nobles' cultural predisposition towards genealogical forms of asserting legitimacy and the preservation of authoritarian forms of political order.<sup>10</sup> However, National Socialism was not the only, nor the most 'natural' ideology suitable for nobles for whom their noble identity was important. More internationalist ideologies, like liberal and even social democratic ideals of European unification, proved equally attractive to intellectuals with a noble background. Their influence reached far beyond German politics, affecting not only projects of European unification, but also anti-Europeanist discourses among African, Indian, and Latin American intellectuals.<sup>11</sup>

I want to propose two claims about this group of intellectual nobles turned professional intellectuals after 1918/19: first, that the sudden loss of status at the highest political level did not correspond to a loss of noble subjectivity at the level of their social circles; and second, that some nobles who turned to writing on politics after 1918 constitute an interesting case of conversion of one type of social privilege into

<sup>9</sup> A. Gerstner, *Neuer Adel. Aristokratische Elitekonzeptionen zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Nationalsozialismus* (Darmstadt, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> S. Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer. Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat* (Berlin, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> On Keyserling's influence on Tagore, see M. Kämpchen, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore and Germany. A Documentation* (Calcutta, 1991); J.L. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor. An intellectual biography* (Paris, 1971); A. Kaminsky, *Argentina. Stories for a Nation* (Minneapolis-London, 2008); W. Lipgens and W. Loth, ed., *Documents on the History of European Integration* (Berlin, 1988), esp. correspondence between Coudenhove-Kalergi and the British section of the European Parliamentary Union.

another through the narrative of a new European identity. Despite attempts to reduce the influence of nobles by political leaders such as the German Chancellor Gustav Stresemann or the Austrian Chancellor Karl Renner, nobles retained a special status in their social circles.<sup>12</sup> In their function as increasingly professional journal editors and public speakers, nobles transformed the challenge to their identity into a form of intellectual authority constituted by their practice as public intellectuals.

The aristocratic writer on future political identity as a type – German-speaking, of formerly noble status, and concerned with the future of Europe as a geopolitical whole – can be best analysed emblematically. The public intellectual Count Hermann Keyserling, a Baltic nobleman who made Germany his home after his loss of status in newly founded Estonia, is an interesting case for the study of twentieth-century reconfigurations of noble identity. First, as a philosopher with vitalist leanings, interested in exploring and asserting the importance of blood, race, and climate on ideas, Keyserling had already formed a theory of identity before he lost his noble status in 1918. Second, as a political thinker, Keyserling engaged in an open, yet ambivalent dialogue first with the liberal and socialist politicians of the early Weimar Republic, and then subsequently with Nazi officials, notably Goebbels himself. Finally, Keyserling also found an institutional expression for his desire to reinvent both nobility and German politics with his idiosyncratic *School of Wisdom*, which will be analysed at the end.

### The case of Hermann Keyserling (1880-1946)

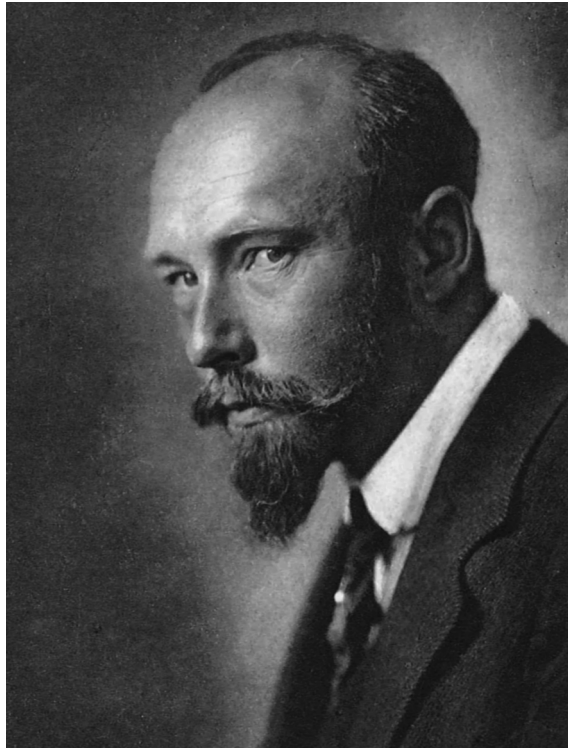
Born in 1880 on the ancestral estate of Könno in Livonia, Hermann Keyserling was a descendant of the first Teutonic knights who had migrated to the Baltic region in the fourteenth century. Although German nobles who formed the knights only comprised some 3.5% of the population, they dominated the cultural, political and economic life in the region.<sup>13</sup> Their power was displayed on family crests covering on the walls of the Protestant Cathedral of Tallinn. The knight orders, which Keyserling would later compare to the Chinese Mandarins or the Indian Brahmins, were not only in charge of the education of leading political personalities at the regional and imperial level; but also the bearers of the local administration and judiciary power. Keyserling's family on the father's side had a long tradition of political involvement within a number of polities which encompassed the Baltic region between the thirteenth and the twentieth century, including the Swedish Kingdom and the Russian Empire; many of his mother's ancestors, the Muraviev family, had been civil servants and scientists at the Russian court.<sup>14</sup> Keyserling grew up with a sense of detachment from the dominant culture of the Russian Empire, whose administrative bodies were suspicious of German nobles despite the long history of their involvement in Russian affairs of

<sup>12</sup> Such approaches include G. Müller, '“Europa” als Konzept adlig-bürgerlicher Elitendiskurse', in: Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, II, 235-68; and E. Glasheim, *Noble Nationalists. The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy* (London-Cambridge Mass., 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See Census of the Russian Empire of 1897, cited at [www.estonica.org](http://www.estonica.org). (Checked 31 Aug. 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt (ULB), Nachlass Hermann Keyserling, Nr. 0084, 061.15. Keyserling, 'Autobiographische Skizze vom Herbst 1925'. See also H. Keyserling, *Reise durch die Zeit* (Vaduz, 1948), and U. Gahlings, *Hermann Graf Keyserling. Ein Lebensbild* (Darmstadt, 1997).

Hermann Graf Keyserling  
 (picture from: *Hermann Keyserling*,  
*Das Reisetagebuch eines*  
*Philosophen*, seventh edition, first  
 volume, Darmstadt, 1923)



state in the military or as civil servants, from serving for Russia in the Napoleonic Wars to performing ambassadorial functions. After inheriting his father's property, he dedicated himself to managing his estate.

In 1911, he discovered that the income from his estate permitted him the life of an independent scholar and writer and embarked on a trip around the world as the 'shortest path to myself'.<sup>15</sup> Formulating a first version of his theory of identity, he travelled through the Middle East, Asia and India, motivated by a 'desire to self-fulfilment' because Europe had ceased to 'stimulate' him.<sup>16</sup> His travelogue, which was published in 1919, almost simultaneously with Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, attracted much international attention. It was, as one student of Keyserling's put it, a 'sensational success', a book 'more widely read than either travel books or

<sup>15</sup> H. Keyserling, *Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* (2 vol.; Darmstadt, 1920), I, 18-24. Keyserling wrote most of this book in 1911, but publication was delayed due to the war. The book is still in print in German, French and Italian. H. Keyserling, *Diario de viaje de un filósofo* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1928); idem, *Diario di viaggio di un filosofo: l'India*, G. Gurisatti, ed. (Vicenza: Pozza, 1997); idem, *Journal de voyage d'un philosophe* (Etrépilly: Bartillat, 1996); idem, *Le journal de voyage d'un philosophe*, A. Hella and O. Bournac, ed. (Paris: Stock, 1928-1929). For reviews of Keyserling's work, see E. Troeltsch, 'Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen von Graf Hermann Keyserling', *Historische Zeitschrift*, CXXIII (1921) 90-96; 'Keyserling's Europe', *Time*, 3 Sept. 1928; Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse read the Travel Diary with care. Arnold Schönberg also had it in his library (See [www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/schoenberg/asbooks.htm](http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/schoenberg/asbooks.htm) (checked 21 Sept. 2011)). The American writer Waldo Frank was influenced by Keyserling. So was the modernist photographer Edward Weston. E. Weston and N. W. Newhall, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (New York, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Keyserling, *Reisetagebuch*, I, 5-8.

books by philosophers'.<sup>17</sup> Its anti-occidental stance and its problematization of Europe's future after the crisis of World War I captured the spirit of the time. With the travel diary, which sold some 50,000 copies by 1933 in Germany alone, Keyserling had produced a new format of travel writing. The purpose of the journey was to expose to himself to radically different cultural environments and climates, which, as Keyserling hoped, would then reveal his identity as a European personality.

The Europeanness of Europe became the subject of Keyserling's second bestseller. In *Das Spektrum Europas*, published in Heidelberg in 1928, Keyserling explained considered several national and identities of Europe from the standpoint of an outsider or God, a 'distance' he cultivated in virtue of belonging to one of the 'lordly peoples' [Herrenvölker] of the world, and within this people (the German cultural heritage), of belonging to a particular social caste that gained leadership status outside the confines of a German state – i.e. the Baltic nobility.<sup>18</sup> The book was written to provoke all 'Philistines' and 'bourgeois' – people who seek to deny that Europe had obtained a new unity in diversity by pursuing either forms of an explicit liberal internationalism, or by endorsing a policy of rigorous nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Europe, Keyserling argued, would be reinvigorated again through a reinforcement of the tensions between its peoples, and through openness towards racial mixture. Eventually, this may lead to a rejuvenation of humanity.

Between those two books lay two events, one of which changed the life of most Europeans, and one that changed Keyserling's life more specifically: World War I and the expropriation of German nobles in Estonia and their expulsion from the state in 1919. Historians of ideas have previously situated Keyserling in the context of chauvinistic German intellectuals. For instance, as Walter Struve put it, after World War I, it 'was left to two others besides Spengler to seek and to preach a new German type in the hour of crisis and collapse: the world-rover, Count Keyserling, and the poet-prophet, Stefan George.'<sup>20</sup> But Keyserling's case, when situated in the context of other Baltic and Bohemian thinkers of German and noble background, is in fact quite different. During the war, Keyserling had made a (bad) name for himself as a critic of German nationalism. Among his first political works was an article entitled 'A philosopher's view of the war', published in 1915 in the British *Hibbert* journal, in which he criticised the nationalist sentiments fuelling the war.<sup>21</sup> Defending himself against charges of anti-German propaganda during World War I, he underlined that

<sup>17</sup> R. Landau, *God is my Adventure* (London, 1935) 25.

<sup>18</sup> H. Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas* (Heidelberg, 1928) 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 16.

<sup>20</sup> W. Struve, *Elites Against Democracy. Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890-1933* (Princeton, 1973) 453.

<sup>21</sup> H. Keyserling, 'On the Meaning of the War', *The Hibbert Journal*, LI (1915) 533-546. The Hibbert Trust was founded in 1847 by Robert Hibbert, a Unitarian. Apart from maintaining a journal with a Christian perspective on world politics, the trust to this day also sponsors the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford Universities, whose lecturers have included Ernest Renan, Albert Schweitzer, and Rabindranath Tagore. The journal offered a Christian (Unitarian) perspective on world politics. Keyserling also published his views on the war in the US-American political journal *The Atlantic Monthly*, both of which would later cause him a lot of problems with German nationalists who accused him of a lack of loyalty. See also note: 'Graf Hermann Keyserling als Urheber und Verbreiter der Kriegsschuldfrage entlarvt!', *Der Hammer*, Sept. 1932, 725-726. See also HKN, folder 'Pressehetze', for example article 'Die Wahrheit über den Grafen Keyserling' by Keyserling's former publisher Otto Reichl, 18 Dec. 1933.



in 1915 he spoke out as a 'Russian citizen' and directed his critique of the war to the attention of the Entente.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, in 1919, when he fled the newly founded Estonia following his expropriation, Keyserling chose to settle in Germany and now had to develop new forms of justification for this attachment. He founded the *School of Wisdom*, a 'philosophical colony' with himself 'at its centre', which was deliberately remote from the educational institutions of the state because, as he wrote in a letter to Count Harry Kessler, 'all that was ever significant in Germany always began and will emerge only beyond the boundaries of the state.'<sup>23</sup> His *School of Wisdom* became an internationally renowned centre for cultural critics, mystics, psychoanalysts and Orientalists. It can be located within a larger circle of private educational reform associations positioned between cultural sceptics, neo-religious and Lebensreform movements of the post-World War I period, such as the Eranos group, or the anthroposophical school around Rudolf Steiner.<sup>24</sup> Similar projects included the elite *Salem School*, founded by the German Jewish pedagogical reformer Kurt Hahn and the politician Prince Max von Baden in 1920. Keyserling himself compared his new political initiative with English semi-private institutions serving a public end, such as the Bank of England and Oxford and Cambridge.

The political goals of the School were threefold: First, *analytically*, to assess the present situation of European politics as a decline into anarchy and mass culture. Secondly, *performatively*, to 'create a new, higher culture from our current internal collapse'. Looking explicitly beyond the differences between 'races, parties and faiths', the aim was to instil in his students an 'atmosphere of high culture' [Kulturhöhenatmosphäre].<sup>25</sup> Thirdly, *politically*, to emphasise the importance of aristocratic and intellectual leadership in overcoming this process of decline; and to learn from other cultures in preparing for a future transformation in the hand of aristocratic sages. In this sense, the School constituted, as Suzanne Marchand put it, a 'breathtaking' break from its humanist foundations, which rested on the superiority of Western civilization's Greek roots.<sup>26</sup> It was not just a break from humanism, but above all a radically different project from that of bourgeois intellectuals. After the over-democratised state it was in now, Keyserling concluded, the future belonged to a 'supranational European idea', which would overcome the extreme democracy of America and Russian Bolshevism.<sup>27</sup>

During the Nazi period, Keyserling was initially able to continue his work, despite having conflicts with Nazi authorities. Although he went along with a number of requirements, such as registering with the Chamber of Writers, and proving his Aryan descent in 1935, he was also openly critical of Nazi ideology. As a consequence, a

<sup>22</sup> HKN, Pressehetze 1933 ff., 'In eigener Sache' vom Grafen Hermann Keyserling, notice to be circulated to various newspapers. Precise date unknown.

<sup>23</sup> Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA), A: Kessler, Briefe, Keyserling to Count Harry Kessler, 9 July 1919.

<sup>24</sup> For this comparison, see B. von Reibnitz, 'Der Eranos-Kreis. Religionswissenschaft und Weltanschauung oder der Gelehrte als Laien-Priester', in: R. Faber and Ch. Holste, ed., *Kreise – Gruppen – Bünde. Zur Soziologie moderner Intellektuellenassoziation* (Würzburg, 2000) 427–428 on Keyserling.

<sup>25</sup> Keyserling, 'Die Schule der Weisheit', *Der Weg zur Vollendung* (1920) 1.

<sup>26</sup> S. Marchand, 'German Orientalism and the Decline of the West', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXLV (2001) 472.

<sup>27</sup> Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas*, 194.

ban on foreign travel was imposed on him, and in 1937, his *School* had to close. Keyserling's library was partially confiscated, and local authorities withheld his passport so that he could not emigrate. In 1939, the German government banished him to a small resort in the Austrian Alps. His last books – the memoirs *Reise durch die Zeit* and the more spiritual instruction book *Das Buch vom Ursprung* – were banned from publication in Germany and only appeared posthumously, in Liechtenstein in 1948 and in Austria in the late 1940s. In 1946, the year he died, Keyserling was preparing for a new life (and began to organise a revival of his *School*) in Innsbruck in Austria, in a region occupied by French forces, issuing a radio broadcast about a revival of the School and sending letters to his old membership lists.

### From the declining old nobility to a supranational Europe: making future leaders

For Keyserling, the assessment of the decline of the European order was intimately connected to his belief in renewal. This belief was grounded in two principles: a recovery of the ideal of aristocratic leadership in European culture, and an assertion of the primacy of German culture in Europe. This is where he saw his own task. He espoused a form of neo-aristocratic 'supranationalism' that was attractive to a number of nobles in his position, and argued that a new aristocracy would be necessary in order to give shape and cohesion to a new political structure of the future, which would no doubt be 'supranational'.<sup>28</sup> Only a reformed aristocracy could offer such a structure.<sup>29</sup> Keyserling argued that Europe, which was currently in a period of historical decline and overtaken by many rival civilizations, would again reach an historic high in the future. Germany and Austria, fused in an ideal 'chord of Vienna-Potsdam-Weimar', would play the greatest role in bringing about this new constellation – not as a pan-German state, however, but as the heart of a new Holy Roman Empire.

Keyserling thought of himself as a sage and public educator, who appeared both as a critic and a saviour of European civilization in crisis. Focusing on the double importance of his insight as a superior outsider, his noble family and his rootedness in the Baltic region, Keyserling demanded a leading role for Germany in a future European state, because the 'representatives of German culture' have displayed the least attachment to the 'idea of a nation-state'. Instead, they were more at home with the notions of a 'tribe or a party' than that of 'peoplehood', just as in the times of Arminius as Tacitus has described it.<sup>30</sup> The future, Keyserling argued in later works, would bring about a 'Pan-European, if not a universal Western solidarity the like of which has not existed since the Middle Ages.' As he put it in a manuscript version of a public lecture to be given at the Salle Pleyel in 1937, to which he was not admitted by the Nazi propaganda authorities, the role of the intellectuals was to 'anticipate the best possible future on the basis of fulfilled Destiny'.<sup>31</sup>

The new aristocracy, Keyserling argued, was to rely as much on tradition and

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 454.

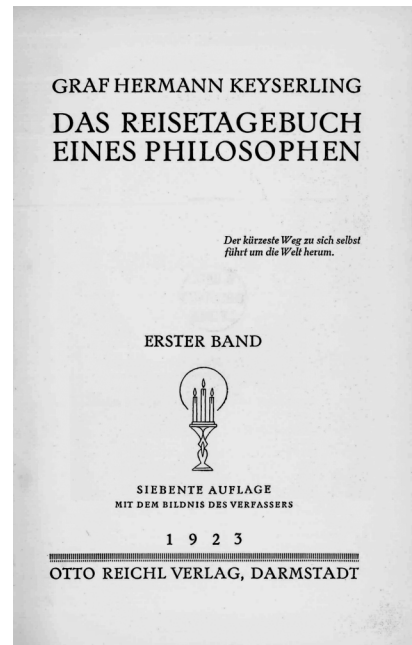
<sup>29</sup> HKN, in: *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 Jan. 1925; Keyserling, 'Eine Vision der kommenden Weltordnung', 5 Jan. 1925, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas*, 190.

<sup>31</sup> HKN Nr. 0093, 061.25, p. 10. ['Ils peuvent devancer les événements, anticiper l'avenir meilleur possible sur la base du Destin accompli. S'ils font cela, leur rôle aura été plus important que celui d'aucune élite du passé.']



‘Der kürzeste Weg zu sich selbst führt um die Welt herum’ (The shortest path to oneself is a trip around the world). Title page of the seventh edition, first volume, of Keyserling’s travelogue, Darmstadt, 1923



inheritance, as on education and excellence. Like his contemporary Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, Keyserling had a racist view of the ideal nobleman, but one that was grounded in the belief that intellectual superiority stems from racial mixture, not racial purity. In addition, Keyserling fused his ‘pathos of distance’ regarding nationalism with socialist and Marxist critiques of bourgeois values. As he put it in 1937, for ‘the foundation of the new aristocracy of his dreams, Nietzsche hoped for a preceding era of socialist convulsions; and at this very moment we are passing through it. In this double sense of an emotional superiority and an overcoming of bourgeois narrow-mindedness, Keyserling published an article advocating socialism as a necessary ‘basis’, perhaps also a necessary evil, for the transition to a future aristocratic politics.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, Keyserling appropriated the prominent discourse on a ‘new nobility’, which was common to the elite circles of German and Austrian sociability in the interwar years, albeit by infusing it with theoretical reflections on his own life.<sup>33</sup> Despite Keyserling’s emphasis on renewal, however, his School was also an enactment of the old, pre-revolutionary order in which the Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig appeared in his function as a patron of art and culture.

### Social networks and the reinforcing of noble identity

A central part of Keyserling’s project was his cultivation of a vast and international social network through which his project of aristocratic renewal was propagated and developed. His *School of Wisdom*, which persisted until 1937, was partially financed

<sup>32</sup> H. Keyserling, ‘Der Sozialismus als allgemeine Lebensbasis’, *Neue Europäische Zeitung für Staat, Kultur, Wirtschaft*, 26 Nov. 1918.

<sup>33</sup> Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*.

through its summer conferences and membership lists, which were managed through subscriptions to two journals associated with the School: *Der Leuchter*, and *Der Weg zur Vollendung*. Informal networks were to provide an alternative to official collaborations, since Keyserling was willing to ‘collaborate with all parties’ who wanted to come to his ‘centre of influence’. The purpose was to ‘form a new human type, who is the bearer of the future’.<sup>34</sup> Keyserling argued that his School was designed to become a ‘movement’ whose ‘economic substructure is the Society of Free Philosophy’.<sup>35</sup> It ‘addresses itself not to philosophers only, but rather to men of actions, and is resorted to by such.’<sup>36</sup> As one reviewer commented,

The community of Keyserling’s pupils is being united by his publications. [...] From the impulse of Count Keyserling’s personality – this is the firm goal of the Society for Free Philosophy – there will arise a circle of men and women in all of Germany which will smoothen the path towards the eternal goods of life for our people.<sup>37</sup>

Keyserling also promoted his School by lecturing abroad. Such lectures were paid and frequently guaranteed him his income, and they were organized by professional concert agencies.<sup>38</sup> He corresponded with scholars interested in his work and actively invited them to visit his School. Among those who paid attention to the project was the Flemish socialist and in later years Nazi collaborationist Hendrik de Man, who taught at Frankfurt University in the early 1920s, became interested in Keyserling’s project. He classified him as one of ‘Germany’s New Prophets’, a generation inspired by Nietzsche’s role as a philosopher lecturing to his contemporaries while also addressing a future humanity. Notably, these three thinkers identified by de Man – Keyserling, Oswald Spengler and the philosopher of fiction, Hans Vaihinger – had also received the Nietzsche Prize of the Weimar Nietzsche society in 1919. De Man was surprised that ‘K. the aristocrat’ was ‘a democrat’, while ‘Sp. the plebeian Oberlehrer – a monarchist’ and a ‘worshipper of aristocracy’ – this, to him was a ‘a vindication of the psycho-analytic theory of “compensations”!’.<sup>39</sup> For de Man’s own elitist vision of socialism, Keyserling’s work was of central importance.

Keyserling’s influence on like-minded younger intellectuals such as Prince Karl Anton Rohan had not only intellectual, but also institutional significance. Rohan founded two institutions in the spirit of Keyserling’s school: the literary and political

34 H. Keyserling, ‘Eine Ansprache an die radikale Jugend’, *Der Weg zur Vollendung* (1921) 2.

35 HKN, Nr. 0604, folder 15 of 54, 218.15, p. 2.

36 HKN, Nr. 0604, folder 1 of 54, 218.01, p. 8.

37 O. Schabbel, ‘Die Schule der Weisheit’, *Hamburger Nachrichten*, 1 Dec. 1920, in 0604, Konvolut Presse zur Schule der Weisheit, folder 27, 220.03.

38 HKN, V-4, 205.08, Vorträge Europa – 1930, Konzertagentur Paul Neff, Inh. Walter Guttman, Guttman to Keyserling, 27 June 1930. See also Memoranda re Count Hermann Keyserling’s visit to Harvard, Hoover Institution Archives (HA), John Davis Lodge Papers, Box 2, Folder 2-3. For Keyserling’s lecture notes abroad, see HKN, V-4, Keyserling, Lecture in Rome (1925), 07.612; lecture in Vienna (1927), 076.14; lecture in Madrid (1930), 076.09; lecture in Spain (1934, 1935), various locations, 076.13; lecture in Paris (1931, Salle du Trocadéro), 076.10, and 1933, Salle Pleyel, 076.11.

39 IISG Amsterdam, Hendrik de Man papers, II.88 (Spengler) and 89 (Keyserling).

journal *Europäische Revue*, and the *Kulturbund*, a Viennese branch of the Paris-based *Institut international de coopération intellectuelle*. While the *Revue* eventually succumbed to Nazi propaganda efforts and eventually ceased publication during the War, the *Institut* became the institutional progenitor of UNESCO after World War II. Keyserling encouraged Rohan ‘under conditions of utmost secrecy’ to work with him on a ‘vision for all the peoples of Europe’.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, he sought to encourage Rohan to use his private circle of ‘friends’ for studying the ‘problem of nobility’ under his ‘guidance’, which was supposed to contribute a chapter on ‘Germany’s Task in the World’ to a forthcoming publication on *Germany and France* to be edited by the Prince.<sup>41</sup> In the proposal for an edited book on *Germany and France*, Rohan lined up not only well-known historians and legal theorists like the German nationalist historian Hermann Oncken and the constitutional theorist Carl Schmitt, but also now forgotten German and French authors who fall into the suggested category of *aristocratic writers*. They included names such as Wladimir d’Ormesson, Alfred Fabre-Luce, Henry de Montherlant, or Knight Heinrich von Srbik. Keyserling, in turn, also used Rohan’s network of relatives and acquaintances among the German-speaking Habsburg nobles in Bohemia to promote his own work. In this connection, he approached Rohan’s elder brother Prince Alain as well as members of the oldest Austro-Bohemian noble families like ‘Count Erwein Nostitz’, ‘Count Karl Waldstein’, ‘Count Feri Kinsky, Countess Ida Schwarzenberg, Count Coudenhove’, ‘Senator Count Eugen Ledebur’ and other, exclusively noble, families that he wanted to win over as ‘donors’ for his own project of a ‘School of Wisdom’ for the creation of future European leaders.<sup>42</sup>

Rohan, who chose to publish his works in Berlin rather than in Vienna, pointing out that in Vienna ‘there is no Prince Rohan any more, only Karl Anton Rohan’, thought that the old ‘nobility’ now had the task ‘to transform the old values in a conservative way, according to its tradition, using the new impulses of the revolution.’<sup>43</sup> He wanted to create ‘unified Europe’ instead of an ‘ideological brotherhood of mankind’.<sup>44</sup> The new Europe, saved from Spenglerian decline, as well as the threats of Bolshevism and Fascism, would be a fusion of aristocratic leadership and collective action by workers who, as he put it, not mere ‘prols’ but conscious of belonging to a collective. The bourgeoisie, by contrast, ‘today already rare, will probably slowly disappear altogether’.<sup>45</sup> Rohan’s reading of Keyserling’s project captures its intellectual character as a form of aristocratic post-socialism.

But Keyserling also affected intellectuals outside Europe. Following his trip to South America in 1929, he published his *South American Meditations*, which Carl Gustav Jung praised as ‘a new and contemporary style of “sentimental journey”’, and in another instance he characterised Keyserling as ‘the mouthpiece of the

<sup>40</sup> HKN, Correspondence, R-3 172.01, Keyserling to Karl Anton Rohan, 14 July 1927.

<sup>41</sup> HKN, Correspondence, R-3 172.01, Rohan to Keyserling, 16 Aug. 1927.

<sup>42</sup> HKN, Correspondence, R-3 172.01, Keyserling to Rohan, 1 March 1923.

<sup>43</sup> K.A. Rohan, ed., *Umbruch der Zeit 1923-1930* (Berlin, 1930), introduction by Freiherr Rochus von Rheinbaben, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Cited from G. Müller, “Europa” als Konzept adlig-bürgerlicher Elitendiskurse’, in: Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, II, 251.

<sup>45</sup> K.A. Rohan, *Europa* (Leipzig, 1924) 35.



Karl Anton Prinz Rohan  
(picture from: *Karl Anton Rohan*,  
*Schicksalsstunde Europas*, Graz, 1937)

*Zeitgeist*'.<sup>46</sup> Not least due to the personal connections to the influential literary editor Victoria Ocampo, Keyserling's work found wide, albeit critical, reception among Spanish-speaking, particularly, among Argentinian readers, such as Eduardo Mallea and Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>47</sup> While much of Keyserling's influence was due to his own idiosyncratic ideas and his personal social network, his case is also representative of the character of nobles as public intellectuals in the interwar period. Their social background and doubly exotic status as nobles and as former nobles from a Europe that was rapidly changing opened more doors for nobles than for other intellectuals engaged in neo-aristocratic and internationalist projects of a future world order.

#### Nobles as objects and subjects of neo-aristocratic reconfiguration

The idea of a reinvention of nobility was a dominant paradigm of German thought since the turn of the century; it attracted novelists, poets, political theorists, reformers, and political ideologues. In the interwar period, German governments experimented with different approaches to the question of noble status. In this context, nobles played a double role as objects of redefinition and as subjects who contributed to ideational formations that shaped neo-aristocratic policies. There were two conflicting paradigms, one of which could be described as the abolitionist, and the other, as the restorationist idea of nobility. The jurist Carl Schmitt described the desire to abolish the nobility as a modern form of 'Jacobinism'; it began with the Weimar

<sup>46</sup> A. Jaffé, ed., *C.G. Jung. Letters* (2 vol.; London, 1973), I, 84. Jung to Keyserling on 13 August 1931. For the 'mouthpiece of the *Zeitgeist*', see C.G. Jung, Book review of Keyserling's *La révolution mondiale et la responsabilité de l'Esprit* (Paris, 1934), first appeared as 'Ein neues Buch von Keyserling', *Basler Nachrichten, Sonntagsblatt*, 13 May 1934, 78-79. Reprinted in C.G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition* (2nd ed.; London-Henley, 1970) 501.

<sup>47</sup> Kaminsky, *Argentina*, esp. 70-99.

government, but in fact, some policies of early Nazi rule, such as the *Reichserbhofgesetz* of 1933, continued working under this paradigm.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, however, the restorationist paradigm also influenced German politicians. The early SA under Röhm, and the Nazi idea of racial purity, each took ideas of nobility, such as chivalry and genealogical purity, as the foundation for the creation of a new political elite. For this purpose, Nazi civil servants both in the ministry of the interior, such as Hans Günther, and in the propaganda ministry of Joseph Goebbels, actively sought to invite nobles and noble organisation to cooperate.<sup>49</sup>

The case of Keyserling demonstrates the path of a noble intellectual who throughout the 1930s, reacted to the legal challenges of noble status with his work on European and global societies. Nobles themselves had to find a way of responding to them. Some, like members of the DAG (Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft), aligned themselves with political groups that offered them high status in a new society, or promised them to maintain a permanent condition of privilege in a society organised on national socialist principles. Others turned to a conservative stance and responded by preserving remnants of old noble identity through reminiscences, published memoirs, and an inward cultivation of noble values through small social circles and the family context. The Stauffenberg circle and the Kreisauer Kreis could be considered examples of this phenomenon. A third group, finally, and one that has received less attention, consisted of intellectuals who sought to turn the challenges of the present into visions of a future European society for which they, as an international elite, would become indispensable.

Within what Gramsci described as the 'new intellectualism' of European societies after World War I, nobles turned public intellectuals, who theorised on a new departure for European politics, formed a small but significant group of authors. The figure of Keyserling was emblematic of a typical trajectory of a highly educated German-speaking nobleman in search of new spheres of influence after the abolition of noble status in Central and Eastern Europe. While the period between 1917 and 1920 saw similar challenges to the nobility as a political institution across all of Central and Eastern Europe, it affected nobles of a German cultural background in peculiar ways. This had to do with two factors. The status of the nobility in the two 'Germanic' Empires was still far higher around the time of World War I than anywhere else in Europe. Secondly, many nobles of German cultural background who lost status in areas that did not become part of Germany or Austria still chose Germany and Austria as their home after 1919.

German noble families of old lineage like the Keyserlings descended from the Teutonic knights that served a number of changing polities from the Swedish and Lithuanian Kingdom to the German and Russian Empires, as well as European noble families that historically had been loyal to the Austrian Habsburgs, formed the core

<sup>48</sup> In Germany, the Constitutional Assembly ratified the abolition of the nobility as §181 and §109 of the Weimar Constitution, according to which noble privileges were abolished '129. Sitzung des Reichstags am 2. Dezember 1925'. Carl Schmitt addresses these policies critically in: *Unabhängigkeit der Richter, Gleichheit vor dem Gesetz und Gewährleistung des Privateigentums nach der Weimarer Verfassung. Ein Rechtsgutachten zu den Gesetzentwürfen über die Vermögensauseinandersetzung mit den früher regierenden Fürstenhäusern* (Berlin-Leipzig, 1926) 13-14, 25-27.

<sup>49</sup> See Bundesarchiv (BA), 'Adel' 1925-38, R 43 II 1554-5.

of the political elite in regions formerly belonging to the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and the German Empire. Fragments of these empires now formed new nation-states. After 1918-20, in the new Baltic nation-states and in Czechoslovakia, such families no longer epitomised a functional political elite. The high proportion of nobles from these regions among the aristocratic writers whose subject was the idea of Europe was a response to this geopolitical and social transformation.

The phenomenon of the aristocratic intellectual as a type to emerge in the inter-war years offers insights into the construction of new political identity at the level of smaller social circles. The conversion of noble identity in a new era of nation-states, or what Monique de Saint Martin called 'inscrire l'avenir dans la continuité du passé' can be studied particularly fruitfully through publishing networks, which mirrored nobles' own social networks in the interwar years.<sup>50</sup> The unifying feature of the group of nobles under consideration was their desire to seek out a future community in which their social status could be recreated through educational projects and journal communities.<sup>51</sup> Some of the new professional writers were propelled by a sentiment of general 'nostalgia' and a political 'agnosticism', while others turned the nostalgic reminiscence of a past age itself into a form of political criticism of the present.<sup>52</sup> Their choices of publishing houses such as Kurt Wolff's *Der Neue Geist*, or *Eugen Diederichs*, which Hans-Ulrich Wehler aptly described with the term 'Weltanschauungsverlage' [ideological publishing houses], offered nobles alternatives to the affiliation with a political party or even a state. It also publicly displayed membership in an identifiable circle of beliefs, and broadened this circle to establish connections with thinkers of a different intellectual and social background, including international socialists, as well as international scholars of the Orient and cultural identity.<sup>53</sup>

Considered in this light, we can see that nobles' commonality of 'consciousness', cultivated in print, constituted a significant part of their 'symbolic capital'.<sup>54</sup> The sphere of publishing allowed nobles not only to convert their own identity by reinterpreting the meaning of aristocratic leadership, but also, to influence non-noble discourses on the social renewal of Europe – be it socialist, neo-aristocratic, or racialist. This explains both nobles' capacity for adaptation, and their ambivalent displays of cooperation with and resistance to new ideological movements such as National Socialism. While their lifestyles and social networks continued to cultivate a more traditional sense of *nobilitas* marked by a sense of social rank and particular traditions, their published work began to constitute a particular type of *auctoritas* in which the originally bourgeois idea of education as *Bildung* was merged with the noble idea of *character*.

<sup>50</sup> M. de Saint Martin, keynote address at the conference 'Nobility in Europe during the Twentieth Century', EUI, Fiesole, 15-16 June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Müller, 'Europa' als Konzept adlig-bürgerlicher Elitendiskurse', 235-268.

<sup>52</sup> L. Höbelt, 'Nostalgic Agnostics. Austrian Aristocrats and Politics, 1918-1938', in: K. Urbach, ed., *European Aristocracies and the Radical Right 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007) ch. 10.

<sup>53</sup> H. von Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa* (Leipzig, 1924).

<sup>54</sup> On a reading of 'visibility' as a form of 'symbolic capital' in Bourdieu's sense, see M. de Saint Martin, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties, de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007), esp. Postface by P. Bourdieu, 'La noblesse: capital social et capital symbolique', 385-399.