

*Shared horizons*  
*The sentimental elite in the Great War*

One day in early August 1914, Count Robert Keyserlingk-Cammerau, Prussian governor of Königsberg, was unpleasantly surprised by a knock on his door. His cousin Alfred, imperial administrator of *Tsarskoe selo*, Tsar Nicholas II's summer residence near St. Petersburg, was seeking his hospitality for the night. Under normal circumstances, the cousins would have been delighted to meet. This time, however, their meeting created an ethical dilemma. War had broken out in Europe only a few days earlier, a conflict in which the states whose imperial families they served were on opposing sides. Robert, a German imperial civil servant, was obliged to follow orders of his government, which was to arrest any Russian subject found in Königsberg. Alfred had been surprised by the war while travelling in Germany on personal business. He knew that his male staff, some 250 people, were about to be conscripted into the army, leaving the administration of the estates in his hands; he had to get back to St. Petersburg urgently. Finally, he managed to secure a makeshift seat in the toilet cabin of the last, overcrowded train leaving Berlin for Russia, but then got stuck in East Prussia, near the Russian border where, allegedly, Cossacks had disrupted trains passing to Russia. The guards on the train were instructed to take into custody and bring back to Germany all Russian subjects. Alfred narrowly escaped and made his way to Königsberg's *Altes Schloss*, where he knew his cousin was resident.<sup>1</sup>

For one night only, familial ties trumped political allegiance. Before sunrise Alfred departed in his cousin's official car, past the Prussian guards, to the train station. Having to seek an indirect route back to Russia, he returned to Berlin and took the train to Hamburg, then boarded a boat to Sweden. Personal connections to two famous Petersburgians, the Swedish petroleum magnate Alfred Nobel and the Petersburg delicatessen merchant

<sup>1</sup> William M. Salter, 'The Russian Revolution', in *International Journal of Ethics*, 17:3 (April 1907), 301–316, 303, citing Wolf von Schierbrand, 'Russia: Her Strength and Her Weakness' (1904).

Grigory Yelisseev, allowed him to board their private steamer, one of the few still operating on the route back to Petersburg. However, only a few days after his arrival there, he was arrested once again – this time, by the Russian gendarmes – and was taken to the Peter and Paul fortress on charges of espionage for Germany. During the ensuing Russian Revolution and Civil War, Alfred joined Kolchak's 'white' army in Siberia, which eventually lost to the Bolsheviks. Robert Keyserlingk became the German Commissioner for Lithuania and the 'eastern territories' before taking a post in St. Petersburg, now called Petrograd, as a military attaché, where he sought to promote German interests in Russian monarchist circles.<sup>2</sup> Moving to Berlin after the failure of this campaign, he eventually completed his political career in the Federal German Republic as a member of the Prussian Council of State and German agricultural policy advisor at the new World Economic Forum in Geneva.

Such foreign connections could be a curse and a blessing at the same time. For example, Alfred Keyserling, in addition to being a Russian subject and civil administrator of the *Tsarskoe selo* district, as well as a member of the Courland nobility, was also the founding co-owner of Baltic Lloyd, a commercial navigation agency originally co-financed by Bremer Lloyd and serving the ports of Libau, Emden, and Bremen.<sup>3</sup> By the twentieth century, the sort of internationalism that Keyserling and his cousins practised professionally and socially appeared to some, especially to Russians and Germans, like acts of treason.

Today, historians speak of the Great War in an increasingly cosmopolitan sense. The parties that went to war in 1914 were half conscious 'sleepwalkers', a reader learns in 2013, and the imperial or national interests they represented were at least one level of scrutiny removed.<sup>4</sup> The very idea

<sup>2</sup> Arved Freiherr von Taube, 'Die baltisch-deutsche Führungsschicht und die Loslösung Livlands und Estlands von Russland 1916–1918', in *Von den Baltischen Provinzen zu den Baltischen Staaten. Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Republiken Estland und Lettland 1917–1918*, ed. Jürgen von Hehn et al. (Marburg/Lahn: Herder-Institut, 1971), 97–217, 105. See his 'Militärpolitische Berichte' from 21 December 1917 to 1 February 1918 from Petrograd, in Winfried Baumgart, 'Die militärpolitischen Berichte des Freiherrn von Keyserlingk aus Petersburg Januar-Februar 1918', in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 15 (1967), 87–104.

<sup>3</sup> Heide W. Whelan, *Adapting to Modernity: Family, Caste and Capitalism among the Baltic German Nobility* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999); Eduard von Dellingshausen, *Die Entstehung, Entwicklung und Aufbauende Tätigkeit der Baltischen Ritterschaften* (Langensalza: H. Beyer, 1928).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of war has become broader, comprising the home front and the economic and cultural aspects of life in wartime.

But at the time of the First World War, having a cosmopolitan perspective on the theatre of war was the prerogative of the imperial elites. These included aristocratic families like the Keyserlings, whose familiarity with the administration and economic structure of more than one empire gave them multiple perspectives. Privileges were also incorporated in the institutional fabric of military careers in imperial Europe. Officers of the imperial armies had a shared cultural code and even exchanged institutions of honours. Members of the affluent middle classes could also fall back on experiences of cultural consumption and personal friendships, which could be rekindled after the war. Those among them who produced written accounts of their experience were among the first generation of writers of the First World War who continued seeing the war from the point of view of 'civil society'. Some of these authors did so while recognizing that their own armies had turned into perpetrators against civilians. In this sense human sympathy, patriotism, and cosmopolitanism were entangled in the writing of officer-intellectuals in ways that were quite different from the twenty-first-century historiography of the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

### **Selfie with a periscope: the experience of imperial horizons**

In one of his wartime photographs, we can see Count Kessler gazing at the horizon through a periscope.<sup>6</sup> This emblematic image of elite vision in the war might, anachronistically, be called a 'selfie with a periscope'. It is a curious photograph because, in a real situation of danger, an observer would not be standing in an open field. It is the reflexive character of the photograph that is of interest here: this is not a photograph of an officer in action, but one of an officer in narcissistic contemplation. The photograph simulates contemplation as a form of military action, since he is engaged in strategic analysis of the horizon. Yet the ultimate objective of this work is to provide a flattering portrait of the seer, not to communicate what he can see. In the background, the newly entrenched frontiers between the German, the Russian, and the Austro-Hungarian empires, blend into a common horizon of uncertain expectations. But for Kessler, the military frontier becomes a horizon, as he stages himself in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. III Civil Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Günter Riederer for drawing my attention to this photograph in his introduction to Kessler's war diaries. In Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 6.



Figure 5 Count Harry Kessler with a periscope on the eastern front.  
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Romantic pose. This perspective was familiar to his European contemporaries from such works as Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10), which a French admirer had once praised for its capacity to convey tragedy in landscapes.<sup>7</sup> Like in Friedrich's famous painting, in this wartime portrait, a monotonous landscape produces a mood and an expression, which traditional portraiture would have projected onto the face of the portrayed. Aside from inverting the relationship between the figure and the landscape, the portrait also deceives the viewers, who cannot see what the figure can see and are thus forced to think and imagine their perception in their own heads. Even more than Friedrich's monk, Kessler enjoys the privilege of looking through a technical device onto a detail that remains unknown to the viewer of the photograph.

As Kessler noted in his war diary from the eastern front, the periscope view revealed an odd image of Galicia:

a farmer's house, some three or four meters in front of it a trench occupied by the Austrians, and some thirty kilometres on the left [...] a Russian shelter, from which Russians were walking in and out. On the adjacent field between the Austrian trench and the Russians, some forty meters wide, a small girl was grazing a herd of sheep. As we watched, one of our grenades hit the ground near the shelter, and we could see the Russians rushing out quickly.<sup>8</sup>

The cold, cinematographic description of his own army's destruction of military targets along with civilian lives was the very opposite of the kind of 'flesh-witnessing', which is so characteristic of the soldier experience in the Great War, including authors such as Ernst Jünger.<sup>9</sup> The meaning of the experience derives from detachment, not involvement. Moreover, the tragedy of this experience is not a national one, or associated with any one empire. Before the war, Kessler, who had served as director of the influential German Artists' Union, promoted an idea of style in which there was

<sup>7</sup> The phrase belongs to the French sculptor David D'Angers, cited in André Bruel (ed.), *Les Carnets inédits de Pierre-Jean David d'Angers*, vol. I (1828–37) (Paris: Plon, 1958), 337. On Caspar David Friedrich and his reception among modernists in France and Germany, see Françoise Forster-Hahn, 'Text and Display: Julius Meier-Graefe, the 1906 White Centennial in Berlin, and the Canon of Modern Art', in *Art History*, 38:1 (February 2015), 138–169, and Pierre Wat, *Naissance de l'art romantique: peinture et théorie de l'imitation en Allemagne et en Angleterre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999). On Friedrich and landscapes, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd ed. (London: Bergahn, 2009), 143ff.

<sup>8</sup> Kessler, 18 February 1915, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience. Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

no contrast between being a ‘good German’ and a ‘good European’.<sup>10</sup> This photograph revealed a new dimension to this statement, transposing it from the realm of conflicts over styles to the realm of military conflicts between the European societies.

It was the desire to capture a complex reality devoid of meaning that prompted another officer who found himself in Galicia, Viktor Shklovsky, to reach further into the reservoirs of European literary history for a narrative model. Like Kessler, Shklovsky had begun his military service in an imperial army – of Russia, in his case – but gradually developed doubts about the logic of empire, without, however, ever fully endorsing the logic of revolution.<sup>11</sup> Shklovsky narrated his entire experience of war on the Galician front in the tone of his favourite English-speaking author, Laurence Sterne. His path through the eastern front was a *Sentimental Journey* with echoes of Sterne’s celebrated Grand Tour to France and the continent. It was meaningless if goals were defined in terms of geographic horizons; in telling about his life, he was merely ‘turning himself into a prepared substance for the heirs’. Yet, this experience of the imperial periphery also reminded him that in literature, it was the peripheral genres that had made breakthroughs in literature: ‘New forms in art are created by the canonization of peripheral forms’, he argued, just as Pushkin had developed the genre of the private album into an art form, as the novel had developed from horror stories like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and as modernist poetry drew inspiration from gypsy ballads.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, he hoped, the travelogue – particularly, *his* travelogue of a meaningless war on the periphery – would contribute to a new literary form, and a new way of thinking about literature. It did: it created the theory, which he described as *ostranenie*, or detachment.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Graf Kessler, ‘Nationalität’, in *Die Zukunft*, 14:27 (1906), 17–27. Reprinted in *Harry Graf Kessler: Künstler und Nationen, Aufsätze und Reden 1899–1933. Gesammelte Schriften in drei Bänden*, ed., Cornelia Blasberg and Gerhard Schuster, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1988), 117–130. More on Kessler’s conception of the nation and the influence of Wundt on his ideas in Laird Easton, *The Red Count. The Life and Times of Kessler, Harry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 162–163.

<sup>11</sup> On estrangement as a device, see Viktor Shklovsky, *Iskusstvo kak priem (1919)*, in Viktor Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy* (Moscow: Krug, 1925); on sentimentalism as a literary style and a mode of narrating wartime experience, see James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy. The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), and Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘The Problem of Sentimentalism’, in Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, ed. S.G. Bocharov, vol. 3 (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1996), 304–305.

<sup>12</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey. Memoirs, 1917–1922*, transl. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), 233.



To this day, historians refer to those parts of Europe which border on the eastern front and the nation states that flickered into and out of existence during the twentieth century as ‘borderlands’, as the locations of ‘vanished kingdoms’, as ‘half-forgotten Europe’, as ‘invented’ places, or even as ‘no-place’.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in all of its history, the geography, if not necessarily the languages and cultures of eastern Europe, has probably never been as well known as in the mid-twentieth century. The image of the East as a great unknown remained a shibboleth of the post-Enlightenment *philosophes*, a geographic metaphor for the separation between civilization and barbarism, between power and weakness, and, more recently, between primitive national freedom and the imperial domination of modern civilization.

Kessler had experienced the eastern front in the First World War in an ethnographic light that might also be familiar from accounts such as Winston Churchill’s *Unknown War*.<sup>14</sup> By contrast to the western front, the eastern and middle-eastern fronts required the use of more traditional elements in the organization of the army. Large distances had to be covered on uneven terrain, which required extensive uses of cavalry. In his letters, Kessler speculated about whether the former Pale of Settlement could be turned into a vassal empire of the Germans, to be ruled by a Jewish dynasty such as the Rothschild family.<sup>15</sup> The search for Europe’s internally colonized peoples, like the Jews and other eastern Europeans who looked exotic, drew artists and anthropologists to the area.<sup>16</sup> ‘Tomorrow I am going to the front to examine the battleground and collect details. I suggested sending Vogeler to accompany me so that he could make sketches’, Kessler remarked in his diary.<sup>17</sup> The painter Heinrich Vogeler (1872–1942) eventually emigrated to Soviet Russia in 1931, where he died in a labour camp because he was suspected of being a German ‘enemy’.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* [US Subtitle: *The Rise and Fall of States and Nations*] (London: Penguin, 2012); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Unknown War* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1931).

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, 22 December 1918.

<sup>16</sup> See Natalya Goncharova’s ethnographic depictions of Jews in Southern Russia, in the exhibition catalogue *Natal’ia Goncharova. Mezhdy vostokom i zapadom* (Moscow: Tret’iakovskaia galereia, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Kessler, 21 October 1915, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 5.

<sup>18</sup> After the operation ‘Barbarossa’ in 1941, Vogeler was deported to Kazakhstan as an enemy alien and died there in 1942.

War ethnographies and travel literature were modes of thinking about military violence that had developed greatly on the basis of experiences of the eastern front. In the west, tear gas and shelling were the most prominent instruments of war; in the east, where large distances had to be covered and the ground was insecure, cavalry continued to be important, even though contemporaries also report aerial attacks using Zeppelins being a constant danger. Being on the eastern front required a much deeper sort of military intelligence. Confusion was everywhere: Czech nationalists with German names, Poles who thought of themselves as Lithuanians but were socialists at heart, and so on.<sup>19</sup> This was still true in the Second World War. During his service for British intelligence, acclaimed historian Hugh Seton-Watson remarked that people in Britain were ‘aware of the existence of Zulus and Malays, Maoris and Afridis’, but eastern Europe with its ‘unpronounceable names’ remained uncharted territory, ‘another world’, full of wild plains and forests.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, not all of the encounters on the eastern front were confusing. Particularly officers could rely on having a shared cultural code with others of the same status. As Robert Liddell, a war journalist for the prestigious illustrated journal *Sphere*, who had just recently moved from the western to the eastern front, recalled, ‘[o]fficers of good family almost invariably could speak French. So could almost every Pole I met, and almost every lady doctor. [...] and certainly the soldiers from the Baltic Provinces spoke German as well as they spoke Russian; many, indeed spoke better’.<sup>21</sup> He recalled being greatly amused by the following anachronistic words of one Russian general Bielaiev: ‘My boot’, said the general, ‘was filled with the gore of my steed’. General Bielaiev, who had Scottish ancestors, had learnt most of his English by reading Sir Walter Scott. For the purposes of the job, the journalist Liddell served as an officer of the Russian army, travelling along the front line with the Red Cross trains. Even though English was rarely spoken in the Russian army, he could get by on the eastern front despite his relatively poor Russian: the Russian general even called Liddell his fellow countryman, referring to his own Scottish ancestry. The half-mystical eastern Europe, some of whose local cultures, such as that of the Carpathian mountains, were hardly known to western Europeans, became one of the topoi of the ‘war

<sup>19</sup> Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe between the Wars: 1918–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Scotland Liddell, *Actions and Reactions in Russia* (New York: Dutton & Company, 1918), 16.



experience' for German audiences at home, as for instance in the liberal *Vossische Zeitung*.<sup>22</sup>

Social scientists also became interested in analysing and representing the various European ethnicities of the eastern front, as in the work of the anthropologist Sven Hedin, *Eastwards! (Nach Osten!)*.<sup>23</sup> Hedin, who collected ethnographic observations of the peoples of Europe, was another civilian assigned to Kessler on the eastern front. Kessler, himself once a tourist in search of the exotic, followed Hedin's activities as he was taking pictures of local churches. The last person to study the wooden architecture of Galicia had been Franz Ferdinand himself.<sup>24</sup> Work of ethnography in the eastern front was also produced by German and Russian writers and artists. Arnold Zweig, who worked in German propaganda, provided illustrations of the eastern European Jews. The modernist artists Natalya Goncharova and Marc Chagall also made exotic-looking 'Jewish types' the main protagonists of their paintings.<sup>25</sup> In German prisoner-of-war camps, the anthropologist Leo Frobenius and a team of linguists 'worked' with interned Indians, Caucasians, Central Asians, and Africans from the British, Russian, and French armies to compare their intellectual faculties with those of Europeans.<sup>26</sup> Just as embedded photographers have become the order of the day in present-day wars, during the First World War, what might be called 'embedded war tourism' attracted a number of journalists and other intellectuals to war zones.

The officer's role provided opportunities for sentimental detachment thanks to privileged access to such devices as periscopes. Traditionally, the officer class had the advantage of riding on horseback. During the Great War, the horse, the earliest 'technique' of aristocratic detachment, was gradually replaced by the airship. Other devices of this kind included special weaponry as well as periscopes and cameras. The mechanisms of detachment were only available to the higher army ranks. They were not limited to technologies but included such practices as the use of embedded artists and journalists assigned to officers. All this enabled members of the

<sup>22</sup> 'Die deutschen Truppen in den Karpathen', in *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 112, Abend-Ausgabe, 2 March 1915, 3. See also Charlotte Heymel, *Touristen an der Front. Das Kriegerlebnis 1914–1918 als Reiseerfahrung in zeitgenössischen Reiseberichten* (Münster: LIT, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Sven Hedin, *Nach Osten!* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1916). <sup>24</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 29 April 1915.

<sup>25</sup> On Goncharova's ethnographic paintings of the Jews, see Cheryl Kramer, 'Natalia Goncharova. Her Depiction of Jews in Tsarist Russia', in *Woman's Art Journal*, 23:1 (Spring–Summer, 2002), 17–23.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Frobenius, *Der Völkerzirkus unserer Feinde* (Berlin: Eckart, 1916); on Frobenius and embedded ethnography with non-European prisoners of war, see Gerhard Höpp, *Muslimen in der Mark: als Kriegsgefangene und Internierte In Wunsdorf und Zossen, 1914–1924* (Berlin: das Arabische Buch, 1999).

officer class to remove themselves from the theatre of war itself, both psychologically and physically. Detachment was an institutionalized privilege.<sup>27</sup> Zeppelin airships not only opened up the privilege of being removed from the ground but also offered the freedom to transgress political borders. For the first two decades, flights were almost exclusively a privilege of the few.

One of the first Zeppelin fleets was founded in a Saxon royal regiment. The Saxon nobleman Baron Hans Hasso von Veltheim served during the war as a reconnaissance photographer. Veltheim was one of the first German enthusiasts of competitive hot-air ballooning, having joined the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* in 1905. Like the first British air minister, Sir Samuel Hoare, he was among the first generation of European elites to cross international borders by air.<sup>28</sup> He noted in his war diary that once he had flown as far as the imperial palace of Peterhof.<sup>29</sup> Before being deployed as First Officer of a Zeppelin airship, he had been responsible for photography on the Belgian front, for which he used unmanned tethered balloons as well as airplanes. Veltheim's panorama shots of the Belgian theatre of war, which he kept in his personal archive, are visual testimonies of this European apocalypse [Fig. 6].

The writing of stylized war diaries like Shklovsky's, the production of wartime self-portraits and the aesthetics of destruction in reconnaissance photography shot from the air: all these were forms of experiencing and representing horizons which invited reflections on conceptual frontiers. The meta-historical concepts of 'experience' and 'expectation', which the historian Reinhart Koselleck ascribed to the realm of theoretical reflections

<sup>27</sup> Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900–1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Hans-Hasso von Veltheim, *Meine handschriftlichen Original-Reiseberichte aus Indien 1935/36*, in LHASA, MD, H 173, II Nr. 103, 1–119. See also typescript, *Berichte meiner zweiten Indienreise 1937/38*, ULB Halle, 1–832; published versions under *Tagebücher aus Asien. Erster Teil. Bombay. Kaljutta. Kashmir. Afghanistan. Die Himalayas. Nepal. Benares. 1935–1939* (Cologne: Greveb, 1951); *Der Atem Indiens. Tagebücher aus Asien. Neue Folge. Ceylon und Südindien* (Hamburg: Claassen, 1954); *Götter und Menschen zwischen Indien und China. Tagebücher aus Asien. Dritter Teil. Birma. Thailand. Kambodscha. Malaya. Java und Bali*. Unter Mitwirkung von Maria Stephan (Hamburg: Claassen, 1858). Thanks to John Palatini and Georg Rosentreter for introducing me to these materials, and for their edited collection *Alter Adel, neuer Geist. Studien zur Biographie und zum Werk Hans-Hasso von Veltheims* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2012). On the history of the air force, see Viscount Templewood [Sir Samuel Hoare], *Empire of the Air. The Advent of the Air Age 1922–29* (London: Collins, 1957).

<sup>29</sup> Hans-Hasso von Veltheim, diary entry for 6 August 1916, *Kriegstagebücher* in LHASA, Mappe I, *Lebensdokumente*, 22.



Figure 6 Panorama of Chateau Wielttje, western front. Lt. von Veltheim. Feld – Luft. Abtlg. 1. 30. October 1915. Veltheim Archive, Ostrau. Depositum Veltheim at the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle (Saale)

on horizons, were rooted in the immediate experiences of imperial horizons.<sup>30</sup>

### The cosmopolitans in the German Society of 1914

As John Maynard Keynes and George Curzon, two lovers of post-impressionist art, arrived in Paris in late March 1918 to bid at an auction of post-impressionist art, the German army was bombing Paris. Count Kessler, German attaché in Bern and another collector of post-impressionism, wrote in his diary: ‘War is a tough thing.’<sup>31</sup> He feared the lack of precision in bombing would damage not only Notre Dame and the Bibliothèque Nationale, which were key sites of his intellectual formation, but also the cemetery of Père Lachaise, where his father and his grandparents lay buried.

Kessler’s father had made a fortune in banking, connected to the railway business in Europe and Canada. The German emperor Wilhelm I ennobled him, according to family legend, as a sign of deference to the beauty of his Anglo-Irish wife, Alice Blossie-Lynch. The connection to Paris came from Kessler’s mother, who chose to be based there. It was her side of the family, of Anglo-Irish nobility, with a home in Partrey House in County Mayo, which also made Kessler aware of British imperial history of the British Empire. His grandfather had been a British minister in Baghdad during Mehmet Ali’s rule.<sup>32</sup> In March 1925, Kessler met distant Irish relatives in Paris who reported about the effects of the revolution in County Mayo; in the afternoon of the same day, he was engaged in debates of Count Richard Coudenhove’s plans for a pan-European federation with the German ambassador in France.<sup>33</sup> Kessler used his connections to British and French contemporaries to foster greater understanding between what he called his three ‘Fatherlands’. His autobiographic cosmopolitanism, his ‘English, German blood, English, German, French cultural heritage’ became a foundation for a particular form of internationalism.<sup>34</sup>

Returning home after the war, he could barely recognize his own former self: that man from the Belle Epoque, who had commissioned from his French friend Aristide Maillol the sculpture of a cyclist, that furniture

<sup>30</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, ‘“Space of Experience” and “Horizon of Expectation”: Two Historical Categories’, in Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–277.

<sup>31</sup> Kessler, 24 March 1918, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 6. <sup>32</sup> Laird Easton, *The Red Count*, 1–6.

<sup>33</sup> Kessler, 30 March 1925, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Harry Graf Kessler, ‘Erlebnis mit Nietzsche’, in *Die Neue Rundschau* (April 1935), 391–507, 407, 402.

designed by Henry van de Velde, a Belgian, and commissioned the British artist Edward Gordon Craig to design illustrations for an edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – it was as if this man could no longer exist. In the aftermath of the war, Kessler began to view his background as a unique form of cultural capital. Before the war, friends called him the member of an anti-Wilhelmine 'Fronde' of good taste and anti-moralism.<sup>35</sup> As his views later radicalized, he earned himself the nickname of 'Red Count'.

War was a traumatic experience for him. He had witnessed it on the western front, where he saw the German actions against civilians in Belgium first-hand, before being transferred east, which had shocked him no less. Kessler kept a diary, wrote letters, and engaged in discussions to cope with the traumatic experience of war. With his bibliophile Cranach press, which he had founded in 1913, inspired by William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, Kessler turned from a Prussian patriot into a patron of doubt.<sup>36</sup> He began to publish poetry from the trenches, including by communist poets – 'Sulamith' by Wieland Herzfelde and 'Eroberung' ('Conquest') by the expressionist poet Johannes R. Becher, the latter, in collaboration with the communist publisher Malik.<sup>37</sup> Kessler's press was indeed 'cosmopolitan'.<sup>38</sup> But he also sponsored communist artists like George Grosz and John Heartfield to do the design, often in collaboration with established German presses such as the Insel publishing house.<sup>39</sup> In 1921, he published in German *War and Collapse. Select Letters from the Front* on paper handcrafted with his old French friend Aristide Maillol, with a cover by Georg Grosz.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 5 December 1931. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke*, ed. J. Dover Wilson, ill. Edward Gordon Craig and Eric Gill, printed by Harry Graf Kessler (Weimar: Cranachpresse, 1930).

<sup>36</sup> On Kessler's press in the context of interwar internationalism, see Dina Gusejnova, 'Die russophile Fronde. Mit Kessler zur bibliographischen Internationale', in Roland Kamzelak (ed.), *Kessler, der Osten und die Literatur* (Münster: Mentis, 2015), 41–67.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Kraus, 'Notizen: Was es in Berlin noch gibt', in *Die Fackel*, xxix (9 October 1917), 89. Kraus referred to Harry Kessler (ed.), Virgil, *Eclogae & Georgica, Latine et Germanice. Volumen prius: Eclogae* (Vimarinae: Impressit H. Comes de Kessler in aedibus suis Cranachpresse, 1914); Wieland Herzfelde, *Sulamith* (Berlin: Barger, 1917), Salomo and Eric Gill, *Das Hohe Lied: [Auf d. Handpressen d. Cranachpresse in 3 Farben gedr.]* (Leipzig: Insel-Verl., 1931).

<sup>38</sup> Brinks, *Das Buch als Kunstwerk: die Cranach Presse des Grafen Harry Kessler* (Laubach: Triton Verlag, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Henry van de Velde and Finanzamt Weimar, 1922, AZ RKW 27 A, in Bundesarchiv, R 32/90, 1920–27.

<sup>40</sup> For details of this publication, see Felix Brusberg and Sabine Carbon (eds.), *Krieg und Zusammenbruch von 1914–18. Aus den Feldpostbriefen von Harry Graf Kessler* (Berlin: Edition K., 2014). I thank Sabine Carbon and the Kessler-Gesellschaft for this image.





Figure 7 Frontispiece of Harry Graf Kessler (ed.), *Krieg und Zusammenbruch 1914–1918: aus Feldpostbriefen* (Weimar: Cranachpresse, 1921).

Image courtesy of Sabine Carbon



The war had blurred boundaries between nations and empires even more: 'politics and cabaret', 'trenches, storming regiments, the dying, U-boats, Zeppelins', 'victories', 'pacifists', and the 'wild newspaper people', Germany and its capital were surrounded by the least European of enemies, 'Cossacks, Gurkhas, Chasseurs d' Afrique, Bersaglieris, Cowboys'. If revolution did break out in this 'complex organism', Kessler thought it would be like the Day of Judgement. After all that the German troops had 'lived through, carried out in Luttich, Brussels, Warsaw, Bucharest' – Kessler referred to what is known in English as the 'German outrages' – these traumatic memories made it difficult to imagine a future for Germany.<sup>41</sup>

In Germany, Kessler belonged to a network of German elites who came together to discuss policy. Founded just after the outbreak of the war, the German Society of 1914 was a political club that had been initiated by prominent figures in German public life. Among its members were people such as the diplomat Wilhelm Solf, the landowner and industrialist Guido Henckel von Donnersmarck, the writer Richard Dehmel, the industrialist Robert Bosch, the painter Lovis Corinth, the theatre director Max Reinhardt, and the notorious Pomeranian professor of Classics Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff. The club represented German society as it had crystallized since the Franco-Prussian War and the founding of the German Reich in 1871, displaying the mutual influence between the feudal, the industrial, and the creative elites of German public life under the banner of German patriotism. Most of the German Society's key members remained committed to German politics throughout their life. Walther Rathenau, the liberal technocrat, served as Prussia's war supplies director, advocating the London air raids, which were carried out from Zeppelin airships, and later became foreign minister until his assassination by a right-wing paramilitary group in 1922; Hjalmar Schacht, the banker, directed German economic policy under the Weimar Republic and the Nazis up to 1937; the painters Liebermann and Corinth came to shape the public image of the German landscape with their plein-air paintings of Brandenburg and Pomeranian lakes; the publishers Samuel Fischer and Anton Kippenberg became representatives of the classics of German literature as such. Among the club's youngest members was the liberal Theodor Heuss, who would live to become the first German president of the Federal Republic after the Second World War.

But not all Germans in this society were patriots or defenders of its military strategy in the war. The philosopher Hermann Keyserling was

<sup>41</sup> Kessler, 18 November 1917, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 6.

another person Kessler met there on a regular basis. One of his first political publications was an article published in English titled 'A Philosopher's View of the War'. There, he criticized the nationalist sentiments fuelling the war from both a Christian and a universalist perspective.<sup>42</sup> Keyserling protested against the war as 'Russian citizen' and a pacifist.<sup>43</sup> He published this work in the journal associated with the British Hibbert Trust.<sup>44</sup> Founded in the previous century by Robert Hibbert, a wealthy Bloomsbury aristocrat who made his money in the Jamaican slave trade, it represented the ecumenical and largely pacifist values of the Unitarian Church. It regularly invited contributions on general topics discussed from a spiritual point of view. Among its contributors were the French historian Ernest Renan, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, and the German doctor and intellectual Albert Schweitzer.

When his friend, the sociologist Georg Simmel, heard about this, he warned Keyserling that he may have to cease their friendship if rumours about Keyserling's anti-German sentiments turned out to be true.<sup>45</sup> A subject of the Russian Empire, Keyserling had not been drafted into the army due to an earlier duel injury. By the end of the war, he was caught by the revolution on his estate in Russia's province of Courland. He spent this time working on an essay he titled *Bolshevism or the Aristocracy of the Future*. Between 1918 and 1920, he later remarked, 'centuries had passed'.<sup>46</sup> He had seen previous revolutions, like the one in 1905, when his estate was burnt, and he also witnessed a revolution in China and elsewhere. But unlike then, he saw that the old empires could now no longer hold on to their prestige. Among the voices heard at Brest-Litovsk, Keyserling remarked, it was not that of the old Prussian or Austrian diplomats but that of the Bolshevik Leon Trotsky that won the game. Much to the

<sup>42</sup> Keyserling, 'On the *Meaning* of the War', *The Hibbert Journal*, 3 April 1915, 533–546; 'Graf Hermann Keyserling als Urheber und Verbreiter der Kriegsschuldflüge entlarvt!', *Der Hammer*, Leipzig, September 1932, 725–726. HKN, folder 'Pressehetze', for example article 'Die Wahrheit über den Grafen Keyserling' by Keyserling's former publisher Otto Reichl, 18 December 1933.

<sup>43</sup> HKN, Pressehetze 1933ff., 'n eigener Sache' vom Grafen Hermann Keyserling', notice to be circulated to various newspapers. Precise date unknown.

<sup>44</sup> Hermann Keyserling, 'A Philosopher's View of the War', *The Hibbert Journal*, 3 April 1915. See HKN, 'Pressehetze', for example article 'Die Wahrheit über den Grafen Keyserling' by Keyserling's former publisher Otto Reichl, 18 December 1933, newspaper unknown but article contains a stamp from the German embassy, 'Deutsche Botschaft, eingeg. 18 Dec 1933'. See also note 'Graf Hermann Keyserling als Urheber und Verbreiter der Kriegsschuldflüge entlarvt!' *Der Hammer*, Nr- 725–726, Leipzig, September 1932.

<sup>45</sup> Georg Simmel, *Briefe 1912–18*, ed. Klaus Christian Köhnke, in *Gesamtausgabe*, 23 vols., vol. 23 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), Simmel to Keyserling, 18 May 1918.

<sup>46</sup> Hermann Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas* (Heidelberg: Niels Kampmann, 1928), 369–370.

confusion of his contemporaries, particularly of similar social background, he thought that listening to Trotsky was necessary in order to make room for a new, truly European aristocracy of the future.<sup>47</sup>

Defending himself against charges of anti-German propaganda during the First World War, Keyserling thought that idea of Germany could only survive as a 'supranational' idea: 'in the interrelated and correlated Europe of tomorrow, the spiritual root of that which once blossomed forth in the form of the Holy Roman Empire of German nationality – the supranational European idea – will once again become the determinant factor of history, in a greater, more expansive form, conforming to the spirit of the time'.<sup>48</sup>

### The other sealed train: chivalry in the Polish revolution

In early November 1918, the German government appointed Kessler as a German envoy. His task was to release the leader of the Polish legion, Jozef Piłsudski, from Magdeburg fortress, where he was held prisoner during the war. Piłsudski had been granted the right to lead a Polish legion within the Habsburg army, but as a Polish nationalist, he had been unwelcome to the Austrians. Now that it was clear that Austria-Hungary would not be resurrected, Germany had other ways of making use of this prisoner. At the end of the war, the legion became the nucleus of a Polish nation state.<sup>49</sup> As early as 1915, German officers had approached Piłsudski in Volhynia, soliciting his opinions on the future of eastern and central Europe.<sup>50</sup> At this point, Piłsudski's Polish Legion formed part of the multinational Habsburg army. At the same time, it was increasingly taking up the powers and duties of a future Polish state; as a representative of the future Polish nation, Piłsudski refused to give an oath of allegiance to the central powers and was therefore taken prisoner by the German imperial army.<sup>51</sup>

Railway networks had been crucial elements of European imperial growth as well as inter-imperial financial networks in the nineteenth century. While such projects as the Baghdad railway line brought together

<sup>47</sup> Hermann Keyserling, *Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen*, 2 Vols., vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl, 1920), 727, 603, 757, 850–854.

<sup>48</sup> Keyserling, *Europa*, 150.

<sup>49</sup> Harry Graf Kessler, 'Aus den Anfängen der Novemberrevolution. Piłsudskis Befreiung', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 7 October 1928 (*Zweites Morgenblatt*), 1–2; and Harry Graf Kessler, 'Piłsudski. Eine Erinnerung', in *Die Neue Rundschau*, 46 (Berlin, 1935), 605–612.

<sup>50</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 18 October 1918.

<sup>51</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 14 November 1918 and 28 December 1918.

private investors across different European states and beyond, they remained publicly associated with the imperial Great Game between the European nations.<sup>52</sup> But in the course of the war, trains also gained a key role in Europe's post-imperial transformation. During the war, members of the German diplomatic staff worked together with Swiss politicians to facilitate the arrival of Lenin and his entourage in Russia to promote revolution there in April 1917.<sup>53</sup> Immediately after the war, Kessler was involved in a similar, if more modest, undertaking. It paralleled Lenin's German-sponsored passage to Russia (the preparation of which Kessler also witnessed in Bern) insofar as the German executive powers had asked Kessler personally to escort Piłsudski from Magdeburg to Warsaw in a special sealed train.<sup>54</sup>

Kessler described this episode in one of several small memoirs that he would publish to great acclaim in the liberal German journal *Die Neue Rundschau*. The lens through which he chose to interpret this situation was the persistence of chivalric values at a time of revolution. When Kessler personally met Piłsudski upon his release from Magdeburg prison, he handed him his sword. Together, they travelled back to Warsaw on a luxurious personal train, which took off from Bahnhof Friedrichstraße and was equipped to the standards of an 'American billionaire'. Both the aristocratic and the oligarchic elements in this handover of power contrasted markedly with the executive powers that had entrusted Kessler with this task as the fate of the revolutionaries in Germany itself was far from clear.<sup>55</sup>

In December 1918, Kessler oversaw the withdrawal of German troops from Poland, and Poland established a nationalist government with closer ties to France than to Germany.<sup>56</sup> Kessler later recalled that the Polish leader gave him 'an oral declaration in the form of a word of honour because I had refused to demand a written declaration from him' that he would not claim

<sup>52</sup> On the railway and globalization, see Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History*, transl. Dona Geyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 85–86.

<sup>53</sup> The passage was described by the Swiss communist Fritz Platten, *Die Reise Lenins durch Deutschland im plombierten Wagen* (Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1924), but later popularized by Stefan Zweig in his miniature 'The sealed train' (1927), in Stefan Zweig, *Decisive Moments in History. Twelve Historical Miniatures*, trans. by Lowell A. Bangertner (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 19 November 1918. Kessler, 'Aus den Anfängen der Novemberrevolution. Piłsudskis Befreiung', 1–2, Kessler, 'Piłsudski. Eine Erinnerung' 605–612; Rom Landau, *Piłsudski and Poland* (New York: Dial Press, 1929). 'De breuk tuschen Polen en Deutschland', *Het Centrum*, 19 December 1918.

<sup>55</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 19 November 1918.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hoover Institution Archives, Poland Ambasad Papers (correspondence with French government from the 1920s).

German territory.<sup>57</sup> Piłsudski and Kessler probably shared certain characteristics, such as their background from lower nobility, the ‘Prussian’ sense of military honour, and a Mazzinian cosmopolitan nationalism.<sup>58</sup> Kessler saw it as the duty of persons of higher standing, such as Piłsudski and himself, ‘to lead our nations *out of their old animosity into a new friendship*’.<sup>59</sup> In the Polish, German, Dutch, British, and American press, rumours were circulating in December 1918 that Kessler was providing support for a ‘Bolshevik’ uprising in Poland using government money.<sup>60</sup> In fact, however, Piłsudski assured him that he was pursuing a policy of social democracy aimed at steering clear of Bolshevism. Indeed, Kessler dismissed all allegations of ‘Bolshevism’ as ridiculous, even though he indeed had sympathy for the revolutionary councils in Germany and Poland (Lodz) and the Caesarist social democracy of Piłsudski.<sup>61</sup>

Like many others in his position, Kessler had suffered a nervous breakdown in the course of his service on the eastern front. He was allowed to retire from active service and was given a unique position: to head the department for Cultural Propaganda in secret, in Switzerland. At this point, Kessler could deploy his expertise in the cultural internationalism of the pre-war era to serve a more concrete goal. As he put it:

Now I have finally reached the actual project of my life: to forge Europe together practically at the highest level. Before the war, I had tried it on the much too thin and fragile level of culture; now we can turn to the foundations. May it be a good omen that my appointment occurs on a day when perhaps through Germany’s acceptance, a new era of peace will start.<sup>62</sup>

Before the war, Kessler’s exposure to debates about national styles and tragic landscapes had been restricted to the realm of aesthetic contemplation. As a result of his wartime position, Kessler obtained a new perspective on these conceptual frontiers, a transformation that was facilitated not least because he was empowered to cross established frontlines. His experience of the German and the Polish post-imperial transformation made these revolutions appear like personal affairs, in which the populations of these states became mere secondary agents on the historical stage. The eastern European horizon became a visual concept that was highly suited for expressing his ambivalent position. Like others in his circle, Kessler

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. <sup>58</sup> ‘Ousted Envoy Tells of Warsaw Mobs’, *New York Times*, 22 December 1918.

<sup>59</sup> Kessler’s emphasis. *Diaries*, 21 November 1918.

<sup>60</sup> See reports in *Het Centrum*, 17 and 18 December 1918.

<sup>61</sup> Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security: The Chekist Tradition, from Lenin to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Kessler, 29 August 1924, in Kessler, *Diaries*, vol. 8.

recognized his complicity with German military violence in Belgium and in eastern Europe, but stopped short of endorsing the more radical form of the revolutions in Germany and Europe. Instead, he refashioned his long-standing, initially purely aesthetic critique of national chauvinism in Germany's imperial past into a new, liberal form of internationalism.<sup>63</sup>

### Imperial regiments after empire

With his transformation from a loyal officer of one of Prussia's elite army units into a sceptical and self-doubting witness of a European civil war, Kessler's voice was in the minority, but far from singular amidst a growing sound of disenchanted Europeans. To understand the genealogy of this disenchantment, we need to take into account the psychological effects of war trauma on the self-perception of the military elites in the war. As already discussed, members of elite officer corps were well positioned to understand the theatre of war not least due to having access to privileged forms of experience, such as airplanes. Being *cavalier* about war, and having a horse in wartime, are related not just linguistically. According to one historian, the cavalry was a 'cosmopolitan institution, and based upon the same general principles throughout Europe'. As a British historian commissioned by the Russian Tsar Alexander II to write a history of chivalry had put it, the privilege of service with the horse, or chivalry, 'was without doubt one of the most important causes of the elevation of society from barbarism to civilisation'.<sup>64</sup> In most European imperial armies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, officers generally came from aristocratic families and were educated at corresponding institutions, including the French Cadets schools, which emerged in the seventeenth century; the Cadet schools and the Theresianum academy in Vienna; Lichtenfelde in Potsdam; and Sandhurst in Britain.

Historically, the imperial armies remained connected with each other through mutual partnerships. For instance, the European royal guards had a tradition of conferring honorary leadership to monarchs ruling a different state. For instance, the first West Prussian Ulan Guard regiment was formally under the leadership of three Romanoffs between 1859 and 1901,

<sup>63</sup> Thus Kessler republished, with few changes, his old essay on Nationality in the new context of the pacifist journal *Die weißen Blätter*. Harry Graf Kessler, 'Nationalität', in *Die Weißen Blätter. Eine Monatsschrift*, 6:12 (1919), 531–546.

<sup>64</sup> Lieut.-Col. George T. Denison, *A History of Cavalry from the Earliest Times. With Lessons for the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1877), 116, 114.



even though the commanding officers were Prussian and not Russian subjects. The regiment was even named 'Kaiser Alexander III von Russland', after the Russian tsar. From 1896 to the outbreak of the First World War, Habsburg emperor Franz Josef was the formal commander-in-chief of a British regiment, the 1st King's Dragoon Guards. The Austrian Radetzky March is still its official song. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some British regiments consisted entirely of German auxiliaries, including both officers and soldiers.<sup>65</sup> The French army had foreign regiments (not to be confused with the Foreign Legion) serving under its banners from the *ancien régime* to Napoleonic times. Before the revolution, there were Swiss, German (particularly, from Saxony-Anhalt and Nassau), Irish and Scottish, and Wallonian regiments serving under the French king. The practice of renting out mercenaries to foreign armies, which came to be associated mostly with the Swiss mercenaries and with several German principalities, included non-European troops – the Napoleonic army had Circassian and Egyptian ('Mameluk') regiments, and subsequent French armies had troops from Senegal.<sup>66</sup>

Cross-imperial connections among the elites transcended the boundaries of Europe. One of the last cavalry regiments of the British army, which was deployed in the capture of Jerusalem during the First World War, had been co-founded by a former maharajah who had been dispossessed under the Raj as a child. Prince Duleep-Singh had briefly occupied the throne in one of India's richest states, the Punjab, when an uprising against the British Raj began. The uprising was put down, but with the insurgents, the British army removed the maharajah himself. Installed in Norfolk with a generous pension but no power, the young former maharajah began to live the life of an English gentleman. He assembled, among other things, a collection of portraits of East Anglian dignitaries in Thetford Forest. The Norfolk Yeomanry, which he co-founded, was a volunteer cavalry, which fought for the British war effort at Gallipoli, and later participated in the conquest of Jerusalem before finishing the war on the western front.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>66</sup> Eugène Fieffé, *Histoire des Troupes étrangères au service de France depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours et de tous les régiments levés dans les pays conquis sous la première république et l'empire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie militaire, 1854).

<sup>67</sup> Prince Frederick Victor Duleep-Singh. See his collection of East Anglia portraits in E. Farrer (ed.), *Portraits in Norfolk Houses*, 2 vols. (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons, 1929). On Singh, see also Obituary in *The Times*, 16 August 1926. On the Norfolk Yeomanry, see Samuel Hoare, *The Fourth Seal and the End of a Russian Chapter* (London: Heinemann, 1930). On Jerusalem and the dreams of a new

The dismantling of the imperial armies of Austria-Hungary and Germany under the Versailles treaty called into question the special hierarchical privileges of officers, which formed the very heart of the old armies.<sup>68</sup> The Habsburg Empire's officer corps was almost a caste, even though it had gradually become more permeable in the last decades of its existence.<sup>69</sup> The same can be said of the other German officer corps, above all, that of Prussia.<sup>70</sup> Even though changes in legislation following the reforms of the 1820s meant that new ennoblements created new military nobilities in all these states, access to officer posts had been strictly regulated and limited to specific trusted families. Those who trained with the cadet school were subject to harsh discipline, as described in some of the classical works of Austrian literature in which the cadet features prominently.

Whilst being strictly hierarchical by class, the ranks of the Habsburg imperial army effectively moderated the political impact factor of their subjects' ethnic and regional identities. Looked at horizontally, the Habsburg army especially was a thoroughly multilingual and, though to a lesser extent, also a multi-ethnic community. By contrast, the German imperial army, which had emerged, like the German empire, in 1870/71, after the Franco-Prussian War, gave Prussia de facto a leading role among the formally equal units of the German princes.<sup>71</sup> This difference was crucial for the structure of post-imperial conversion among the post-imperial officers.

In Austria, as Istvan Deák has emphasized, the disappearance of the Emperor as a unifying figure encouraged former career officers to seek a career in the national successor-states of the old empire.<sup>72</sup> For officers of the Polish and Czechoslovak legions, there was no contradiction between

chivalry, see G.K. Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem* (New York: George Doran, 1921). On the complex evolution of military identities under the British Raj, see Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2004), and Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> For a comparative analysis of the social impact of the war on Germany and Austria-Hungary, see Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914–1918* (London: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>70</sup> Wencke Meteling, 'Adel im preussisch-deutschen Weltkriegsoffizierkorps', in *Aristokratismus und Moderne. Adel als politisches und kulturelles Konzept, 1890–1945*, ed. Eckart Conze et al. (Weimar, Cologne and Vienna: Boehlau, 2013), 215–239.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Hermann Cron, *Die Organisation des deutschen Heeres im Weltkriege* (Berlin: Mittler & Sohn, 1923).

<sup>72</sup> Istvan Deák, 'The Habsburg Empire', in Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (eds.), *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 129–141, 134–135.

endorsing revolution in Austria, which gave their nations a long-sought form of sovereignty, and joining anti-Bolshevik military campaigns in the Russian Civil War and elsewhere in eastern Europe. By contrast, for the armies of the German states, the idea of a greater Germany continued to provide a source of aspirations for the future. Moreover, anti-Habsburg German nationalists like Adolf Hitler, who had already served in the Bavarian instead of the Habsburg armies in the war, now saw Germany and not Austria as their primary cadre of reference.<sup>73</sup>

Former officers had to adjust to an uncertain future in Germany, too: its army was now severely reduced in size after the Versailles peace settlement. But unlike Austria, Germany lost not more than one-seventh of its territory in the war, and thus remained a significant force in Europe. As critics of institutions such as the Prussian cadet training at Lichterfelde have suggested, such institutions produced forms of obedience to authority, which were inimical to a society of equals.<sup>74</sup> It has been a long-standing belief particularly among émigrés from Nazi Germany and Austria that radicalization among the disenchanting soldiers and officers had been one of the root causes of Germany's path to Nazism. The sociologist Norbert Elias provided the most succinct portrait of the army as a key case study for the decline of honour in German society and its descent into dehumanization.<sup>75</sup> Yet more recently, historians have highlighted that traumatic war experience and the abolition of privilege also produced less reactionary forms of doubt, and even served as the foundation for pro-republican beliefs.<sup>76</sup> A former officer of the Bavarian army, Franz Carl Endres, turned into a sociologist and remarked in the journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik* that the Prussian army had always been in the service of the Hohenzollern dynasty more than it had served the German people.<sup>77</sup> He thought that a future army

<sup>73</sup> On Hitler as a case study of post-war conversion, see Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>74</sup> Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, and Ludwig Marcuse (eds.), *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (Paris: Alcan, 1936).

<sup>75</sup> Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen. Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For a critique of Elias in the light of the First World War, see Mark Hewitson, 'Violence and Civilization. Transgression in Modern Wars', in Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *Un-Civilizing Processes?: Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 117–157.

<sup>77</sup> Franz Carl Endres, 'Soziologische Struktur und ihr entsprechende Ideologien des deutschen Offizierskorps vor dem Weltkriege', in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 58:1 (1927), 282–319.

had to develop other forms of commitment. The left-leaning magazine *Die Weltbühne* even had a regular column appearing throughout the year 1917, entitled ‘From a field officer’, which supplied ironic remarks on the deconstruction of the officer.<sup>78</sup>

Adjustment to the post-war world saw the former officers take on a variety of social roles, particularly in the wake of social unrest in Germany during the winter of 1918/19. What is most widely known now is the emergence of paramilitary groups, the so-called *Freikorps*, which took it upon themselves to fight against revolutionary movements in the German cities. This was not only done out of conviction but sometimes for pecuniary considerations as well. Baron Veltheim, for instance, after his service for the Saxon royal army, claimed that he joined a freecorps unit in Berlin to fight the ‘red’ revolutions there in January 1918 because he was short of money. In this way, the war continued, after only a brief intermission, in the form of a civil war on the streets of Berlin, including ‘Alexanderplatz, the police prefecture, Reichstag, Brandenburger Tor’ and other locations. The fighting parties, which he called the ‘white and the red’, were equally repulsive to him. But he was particularly shocked by the refusal of his comrades to have sympathy for the ‘wishes, feelings, and thoughts’ of the ‘revolutionary workers’. Whenever he tried to prevent what he called ‘excessive violence’ against them, he was suspected of being a ‘spy of the revolution’.<sup>79</sup>

Another example of a freecorps officer with more conviction for the cause of fighting the revolution was the Prussian officer Ernst von Salomon. He was convicted of murdering the German foreign minister Walther Rathenau and served a prison sentence in the Weimar Republic, during which he wrote a book about the times.<sup>80</sup> It is a fictionalized autobiography, in which his authorial self asks, ‘Was it worthwhile to attack these people? No, it was not. We had become superfluous [. . .]. All over! *Finis – exeunt omnes*. The world wanted time in which to rest comfortably.’<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Bernhard von Bülow and Graf Max Montgelas (eds.), *Kommentar zu den Deutschen Dokumenten zum Kriegausbruch*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1919).

<sup>79</sup> Veltheim, postscript to his war diary (1921–32) on the events of January 1918, with a quotation from a letter to his wife of 25 January 1919. In LHASA, Mappe I, Kriegstagebuch.

<sup>80</sup> Ernst von Salomon, *Die Geächteten* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1931); see also *ibid.*, *Der Fragebogen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1951).

<sup>81</sup> Ernst von Salomon, *The Outlaws* (London: Arktos, 2013), 301.

It is noteworthy that the paramilitary officers of the former armies turned to writing to make sense of their conversion as much as those who became pacifists or critics of military culture. The writer Fritz von Unruh came from a long lineage of Prussian officers. Around the turn of the century, his father had been the commander of Königsberg Castle in East Prussia. In his autobiographical novels and plays, however, he usually adopted the perspective either of plain cadets or of civilians: one of his protagonists is the poet Kaspar Friedrich Uhle.<sup>82</sup> Unruh consciously established an intellectual affinity between himself and an earlier Romantic disenchanted with Prussian military traditions, Heinrich von Kleist, whose *Prince of Homburg* was a modern-day Hamlet who consciously refused to exercise his duty as a Prussian officer. Unruh's relative Joseph von Unruh (or Józef Unrug, as he was known in Poland) served as an officer of a Prussian regiment in the First World War, but joined the newly formed Polish legion after the war, and in the Nazi era was an agent for the Polish government in exile in Britain.

Other former career officers became so radicalized that they abandoned their aristocratic identity altogether. The most familiar examples of such conversions belong to the history of the Third Reich. Prior to the abolition of the republican constitution in Germany, the SA, one of the paramilitary organizations which was initially in conflict with the Nazi party, had been particularly successful in recruiting former officers. The historian Karl-Dietrich Bracher called them *déclassé*, yet, at the time when this generation of officers served in the armies, the German aristocracy was no longer a class but merely a social configuration. In terms of class, they had long merged with the bourgeoisie.<sup>83</sup> By the time of the Second World War, a number of the old German officers in the post-imperial successor states also gravitated to the Wehrmacht, particularly in eastern Europe.<sup>84</sup>

Yes, this sort of aristocratic conversion at a time of institutional disorientation was also a phenomenon for the political left in interwar Germany. A particularly spectacular case was that of a Saxon aristocrat

<sup>82</sup> Fritz Unruh, *Die Offiziere* (Berlin: Reiss, 1911).

<sup>83</sup> For a classic analysis of this process, see Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Wolfgang Sauer, and Gerhard Schulz, *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung. Studien zur Errichtung des totalitären Herrschaftsystems in Deutschland*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 1962), 829–855.

<sup>84</sup> Isvtan Deák, 'The Habsburg Empire', 135. Karina Urbach, *Go-Betweens for Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On the cooperation of the old elites in the colonization of the East, see Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire. German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

who first adopted a fictional alter ego and a pseudonym, and then turned his pseudonym into his new proper name. The officer Arnold Vieth von Golßenau had served in a regiment of the Saxon Royal Guards during the war. Yet his own fictionalized account of the Great War, an interwar bestseller that was translated into English and French, was written from the perspective of an infantry man because, as he later recalled, it was ‘not the officer who had impressed me with his actions on the front, but the nameless soldier’.<sup>85</sup> Writing the novel, which quickly became a bestseller rivalling Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in popularity, he increasingly identified with the protagonist of the experiences he had himself created. He became the protagonist, Ludwig Renn. As he later recalled, he himself ‘lived through this time as an officer, a man with many traditions’.<sup>86</sup> After the war, Ludwig Renn, as the former aristocrat now officially called himself, joined the communist party, became a leading member of the republican troops in the Spanish Civil War, emigrated to Mexico with the anti-Nazi Committee for a Free Germany. After the end of the Second World War and the division of Germany, he eventually returned to what was now the GDR to become a professor of anthropology in Jena. This is perhaps the starkest example of the capacity for detachment particularly prevalent among the officer intellectuals of the First World War.<sup>87</sup> Yet Renn’s case was far from singular. Other examples of elite officers who became active on the international Left between the wars and in the Second World War included Count Rolf Reventlow, the son of a famous Munich Bohémienne, who was a journalist in the Munich republic and later joined the international brigades in Spain.<sup>88</sup>

In the light of the scholarship on Germany in the Third Reich, it is easy to overlook that in the interwar period, the German aristocratic officer could impersonate the idea of international reconciliation through the solidarity of elites, as it did in Jean Renoir’s now classic film of 1937, *The Grand Illusion*. Its title derives from a book by Norman Angell, a British economist, on the futility of war, called *The Great Illusion*, dating back to 1910, for which the author won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933.<sup>89</sup> The book centres on the futility of the Anglo-German arms race and has no special interest in the military

<sup>85</sup> Ludwig Renn, *Krieg* (Frankfurt: Societätsverlag, 1929), 519–20. <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>87</sup> Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>88</sup> For details on Rolf Reventlow, see the Rolf Reventlow papers at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bonn. For Reventlow’s role in the Spanish Civil War, see Arthur Koestler, *Spanish Testament* (London: Gollancz, 1937), 183–184.

<sup>89</sup> Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (London: William Heinemann, 1910).



elites, instead focusing on the idea of friendship between societies. But in the film, this abstract notion of friendship is made literal through the link between aristocratic aviators from France, which enables the viewer to draw Angell's conclusion emotionally. When the aristocrats in the film voice their own feeling of futility, they present a kind of first-person view of imperial decline. But Renoir did not invent this new social role for them. The officers-turned-intellectuals had already prepared it.<sup>90</sup>

For officers and members of internationally connected aristocratic families, war was not merely a sphere of extreme physical violence but also a field of symbolic interaction. The right of these officers to use horses and later airships in battle, literally and figuratively elevating their perspective, facilitated detachment from the experience of war as a struggle between nations or empires.

### The invention of tragic landscapes

In 1923, Kessler was enjoying a picnic in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. He was invited there to speak of Germany's place in Europe, and the constitutional changes which had occurred under the republic.<sup>91</sup> His hosts, men and women who had served in the First World War either as officers or as nurses, shared their memories of this still recent time. The beauty of nature reminded them of the Carpathian Mountains on the eastern front, while the 'moral indifference' of nature itself brought to mind the 'human atrocities' they had witnessed. Kessler remarked that there was a great feeling of mutually shared 'humanity' in these conversations.<sup>92</sup> Prior to the war, Kessler had been trained to believe, with Wilhelm Wundt, that landscapes evoked above all national sentiments and attachments. He now grew convinced that the 'meaning' of landscape was either tragic universalism or utter indifference to human identities. There was no ethical link between the shape or the beauty of a landscape and the actions and sentiments of the people taking root in it. For people of Kessler's circle, it was possible to think of the western front in terms of an affective geography, as a "tragic region" to be turned into a holy site for Europe as a whole and not

<sup>90</sup> Jean Renoir, *La Grande Illusion* (1937). I am grateful to Eckart Conze for organizing the screening of this film in the context of a conference on aristocracy and modernity in Marburg in September 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. the lectures in Williams Town, Massachusetts, were published almost immediately, as Count Harry Kessler, *Germany and Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923).

<sup>92</sup> Easton, *Der rote Graf*, 407. Kessler to Schubert, 14 August 1923. PA Dept III USA vols. 4 and 5.

for any one nation in particular, to draw pilgrimages each year from all parts of the Earth to condemn war and to sanctify peace, to show their devotion in front of this great, wounded cathedral!<sup>93</sup>

Publications like Michelin's *Guides to Postwar Europe*, published between 1919 and 1922, used images of war ruins on the western front in order to create a new type of mass tourism, which still exists today. As the introduction to the 1919 edition put it, 'ruins are more impressive when coupled with a knowledge of their origin and destruction'.<sup>94</sup> Yet until Franco-German cooperation developed joint commemoration events for the Great War in the 1980s, public memory of these sites remained tinted with national colours.

The idea of perceiving an entire landscape of war as 'tragic' required a cosmopolitan perspective. In the 1920s, psychiatrists dealing with cases of war trauma observed that certain cases of what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorder were much more likely to occur among the higher ranks. Some even ventured to suggest, as Robert Graves did, that officers had a 'more nervous' time than men, confirming some findings of new approaches to the sociology of war based on statistics from the Franco-Prussian War as well as the Great War.<sup>95</sup> He recalled a time when, before the war, he had been visiting his German relatives, the Rankes; at their house, presciently called 'Begone, anger', 'there was a store for corn, apples, and other farm produce; and up here

<sup>93</sup> Kessler, *Diaries*, 24 August 1928.

<sup>94</sup> *Michelin Guide to the Battlefields of the World War* (Milltown, N.J.: Michelin, 1919), 7.

<sup>95</sup> General Nikolai Golovin, *Nauka o voine: o sotsiologicheskoi izuchenii voyny* (Paris: Signal, 1938), with thanks to Pitirim Sorokin of the Harvard Committee for Research in the Social Sciences. On the greater danger of war for officers than soldiers based on statistics from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, see page 15ff; Ardant du Pic, *Etudes sur le combat* (Paris: Hachette et Dumaine, 1880); Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (Berlin: Georg Stielke, 1922–27); Jean Norton Cru, *Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs des combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928* (Paris: Ed. Etincelles, 1929); and materials from the congress 'Sociologie de la guerre et de la paix', in *Les annales de l'Institut International de Sociologie*, xvi, ed. Marcel Giard (Paris, 1932), based on a conference in Geneva in 1930. On elites and the sociology of war, see Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, transl. Andrew Bongiorno and Arthur Livingston, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1935). On psychiatric treatment of shellshock and war neuroses in Austria-Hungary, see the case of von Mattanovich and others in Hans-Georg Hofer, *Nervenschwäche und Krieg. Modernitätskritik und Krisenbewältigung in der österreichischen Psychiatrie (1880–1920)* (Cologne, Vienna, Weimar: Böhlau, 2004), 366ff.; on nervousness and officers, see John T. MacCurdy, *War Neuroses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 123; on war shock, see M.D. Eder, *War-Shock. The Psycho-Neuroses in War Psychology and Treatment* (London: Heinemann, 1917); see also Ernst Hanisch, *Männlichkeiten. Eine andere Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 2005); see also studies by the Psychoanalytic association, S. Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernst Simmel, and Ernest Jones, with an introduction by Sigmund Freud, *Psychoanalysis and War Neuroses* (London, Vienna and New York: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1921).

my cousin Wilhelm – later shot down in an air battle by a school-fellow of mine – used to lie for hours picking off mice with an air-gun'.<sup>96</sup>

Having access to education and technology gave elite participants in the war more devices through which to gain a more distant view of the war process. They could also rekindle their social connections after the war was over. It was easier for those who previously had social experiences in common. In the mid-1930s, Kessler and Graves became neighbours in exile on the Balearic island of Mallorca. Graves's exile from Britain was voluntary: he spent this time to rewrite his version of the Greek myths. Kessler, by then a refugee from Nazi Germany, wrote his memoirs on the island, which allow us to contextualize in social perspective how former German elites contributed to a new transnational sensibility after the war.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929) (London: Penguin, 1957).

