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ARTICLE

Loyalty and Allegiance in Baltic German Political Thought after the First World War

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the political thought of prominent authors belonging to Baltic German aristocratic families, examining their responses to the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the rise of the Third Reich. Focusing on the writings of authors such as the international lawyer Mikhail von Taube and the philosopher Hermann Keyserling, it examines the peculiar combination of uprootedness and cosmopolitanism which characterized the political thought of these unmoored elites. Lacking a definite attachment to specific post-imperial successor states, these authors demonstrate a recursive loyalty to their own family history. An elite group among the diverse sets of people and nationalities fleeing the Russian empire as it descended into revolution and civil war between 1917 and 1922, including Jews, people from the Caucasus, Poles, and many other nationalities, the Baltic German nobility stood out as representatives of an ethnic and religious minority whose ancestors had settled on the Baltic littoral long before the Russian empire or other states in the region had emerged. The article contributes to a new approach to the intellectual history of refugees from a global perspective, which emphasizes the importance of language, faith, nationality, and social class as factors shaping ideas about political attachment among displaced intellectuals.

When empires disintegrate, many people begin to look for alternative political loyalties. To a certain extent, this also affects historians of empires. In recent years, research on post-imperial succession of the British and French empires has focused on anti-imperial world-making through the lens of new nations, with the empires themselves being a distant vanishing point.[1] Much of this concentrated on the process of decolonization after the Second World War. For the Russian empire, things used to be different. Until very recently, political histories in this field were considered from the vantage point *ab imperio*.[2] Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022 caused deep rifts and soul-searching within Slavic studies, with many scholars rethinking their own complicity with post- and neo-Soviet Russian imperialism. Some of the louder voices urge others to follow the centripetal

[1] Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford, 2007); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

[2] *Ab Imperio. Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, founded in 2000.

stories of resistance and decolonization established by studies of the French and British empires.[3] So far, the newly revised approaches in Slavic studies appear to favour a lens of analysis which is either nation-centric in a way that decentres Russia itself, or decidedly 'decolonial'.[4]

While all these changes are valid responses to the shock of recent events, I am concerned that the demand to 'decentre' the focus on Russia also entails a risk of losing access to the complexity of the multiethnic character of imperial societies, which used to be a staple of the classical historiographies on the empire.[5] Keeping this imperial world picture to some extent intact as an object of study should not be confused with an affirmation of Russia's current role in contemporary geopolitics. However, in my view, it is necessary in order to understand problems such as the significance of the First World War, and not just the 'Russian' Revolution, as a major turning point for Eastern European political and intellectual history, with profound consequences for our present. Moreover, more reflection is needed on the social histories of transitional periods between regimes, which help to bridge the history of the Russian empire and its successors.[6] Looking at refugees provides an opportunity to address this, at first sight, because refugees appear to historians as people who indicate their allegiance with their feet. This view, in Peter Gatrell's words, of a 'whole empire walking', has enabled historians of Russia to transcend special path narratives long before the current crisis.[7] This newer historiography of the fallout

[3]On the colonial nature of the war, see Timothy Snyder, 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a colonial war', with Amy Goodman on Democracy Now!, 5 May 2022. web.archive.org/save/https://www.democracynow.org/2022/5/5/war_in_ukraine_is_colonial_war, accessed 9 Dec. 2024. See also Mariia Shynkarenko and Kateryna Ruban, 'On decolonization in Slavic studies', Interview at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, 16 Aug. 2023. web.archive.org/save/https://www.iwm.at/blog/interview-kateryna-ruban-on-decolonization-in-slavic-studies, accessed 9 Dec. 2024.

[4]For a collection of statements about the way the full-scale war has affected Slavic studies, see web.archive.org/save/www.academeblog.org/2022/02/26/slavic-studies-scholars-condemn-putins-ukraine-invasion/, accessed 31 Mar. 2024. For an example of a new association of Slavic and Eastern European studies in response to the war, see RUTA web.archive.org/save/https://ruta-association.org/mission-statement/, accessed 31 Mar. 2024. The search for a new approach which takes into consideration transnational as well as 'decolonial' perspectives is also echoed in Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings, 'Decolonizing the transnational, transnationalizing the decolonial: Russian studies at the crossroads', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 60 (2024), pp. 339–57.

[5]For the Russian empire in comparison, see the classic work by Dominic Lieven, *The Russian empire and its rivals* (London, 2000); Mark Bassin, 'Geographies of imperial identity', in Dominic Lieven, ed., *The Cambridge history of Russia*, II: *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917* (Cambridge, 2006); Jane Burbank and Frank Cooper, *Empires in world history: power and the politics of difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010). For the revolution, see the relatively recent books which continue this naming practice, such as Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921* (Oxford, 2017); and Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution: a new history* (New York, NY, 2017); in contrast with the more self-conscious use in Jonathan D. Smele, *The 'Russian' civil wars, 1916–1926: ten years that shook the world* (London, 2016). The neutral use of 'Russian' is likely to change in the near future. For a first critique of this Russian-centric approach of post-imperial studies, see Marc Raeff, 'Recent perspectives on the history of the Russian emigration (1920–1940)', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 6 (2005), pp. 319–34.

[6]Peter Gatrell, *A whole empire walking: refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, IN, 1999). See also the much neglected G. Ia. Tarle, ed., *Nacional'nye diaspory v Rossii i za rubezhom v XIX–XX vv. Sbornik statei* (*National diasporas in Russia and abroad in the XIX–XX centuries. Collection of articles*) (Moscow, 2001).

[7]See the journal *Ab Imperio*, co-founded by Il'ia Gerasimov, Aleksandr Semenov, Marina Mogilner, Sergei Glebov, and Aleksandr Kaplunovskii in 2000 and still going. On refugees within imperial historiographies

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from the First World War for the multiethnic Russian empire had already started to change the empire and nation-centric picture before the full-scale war.[8] It is now acquiring a different political importance.

In what follows, I will pursue this line further by looking at refugees from the disintegrating Russian empire in their capacity as political thinkers. Generally, refugees tend to be discussed as impersonal collectives even when the authors who analyse them are exiles. In Sebastian Musch's contribution to this issue, we see a different contextualization of the most famous example of this, Hannah Arendt – but here we encounter her not as a Romanticized, context-free exile thinking about refugees, but as a refugee herself, whose immediate social condition shapes a great deal of her thinking about the future. Indeed, the framework of a new political history of refugees, which Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen offer in the Introduction to this special issue, opens a possibility for acknowledging within the refugee milieu the existence of particular groups and configurations of people who shared alternative visions of post-imperial futures which do not fit a given palimpset. The majority of articles in this special issue are recovering these cases in the context of the Second World War and its aftermaths.

As thinking subjects of history, the Baltic German aristocratic refugees provide an opportunity to grasp the intellectual transformation of Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. One of the dimensions of this process is consciousness of the globality of the crisis itself. It expressed itself in the possibility which interwar thinkers saw in comparing their experiences of a rapid loss of social status across very different geographical areas, which they have either visited personally, or read about. The reflections of the Baltic refugees on their situation are a case-study that confirms that the mere dissolution of the old empires is not the only event that causes major population displacements. In fact, the political scientist Aristide Zolberg emphasized in an essay from 1983, which Banerjee and von Lingen rightly seek to recover, the solution to the problem of imperial decline – the emergence of new states (regardless whether national or multinational) – can generate refugees in itself.[9] This was not only true of the USSR, founded in 1922, but also of the Baltic states, Estonia (independent since 1918), Latvia, and Lithuania (both in 1920).

Another connection which my article is hoping to establish is the comparative history of partitions and borderlands – not only as events and locations, but also as contexts within which specific forms of thought and conceptual comparisons emerge.[10] From a global standpoint, the overall change of perspective on

in comparative perspective, see Tony Kushner and K. Knox, *Refugees in an age of genocide: global, national and local perspectives during the twentieth century* (London, 1999); Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, eds., *Refugees in Europe, 1919–1959: a forty years' crisis?* (London, 2017).

[8]Here, I agree with a similar argument made in Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin Von Lingen, 'Forced migration and refugee resettlement in the long 1940s: an introduction to its connected and global history', *Itinerario*, 46 (2022), pp. 185–92.

[9]Aristide Zolberg, 'The formation of new states as a refugee-generating process', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 467 (1983), pp. 24–38.

[10]For a comparative history of the borderlands, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, 'From borderlands to borders: empires, nation-states, and the peoples in between in North American history', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 814–41; Aleksandra Bakhturina, *Okrainy rossiiskoi imperii. Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie i natsional'naia polityka v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914–1917 gg.)* (Moscow, 2004);

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post-imperial transformations in Eastern Europe can be best compared to the way historians of South Asia have begun to look beyond national historiographies of Partition towards a more entangled perspective.[11] As Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson have argued elsewhere and in this special issue, the changes in the historiography of South Asia have also inspired historians of other regions to look for continuities of hegemonies under multiple regimes, to examine the changing subjectivity of former elites under new institutional formations, and to pay special attention to places such as borderlands in this context.[12] This allows the false Manicheanism of state-centred histories of partitions to give way to a more subject-focused history of people as they experience their history.

Looking at the Baltic case in a global framework, one can observe that comparative thinking itself often arose out of particular experiences of political crisis in multiple locations. As Shuvatri Dasgupta has argued elsewhere, the sources of global thought about 'caste' were intellectuals living through periods of rapid social and political change.[13] In this sense, elite refugees shared a peculiar sense of cosmopolitanism, which was both spatially rooted and self-consciously uprooted. Milinda Banerjee has also examined how the very idea of global comparisons emerge within transitional societies, such as when uprooted elite Bengali Hindu intellectuals began to compare their own situation to that of the Jews in the decade leading up to and during Partition.[14] There is a poignant analogy here in one of the thinkers that I will be discussing.

The main subject of my analysis are intellectuals of Baltic nobility, a group of people whose ideas, by the interwar period and the 1930s, had neither empires, nor these new nations as their object of attachment. As one of them, the philosopher Hermann Keyserling, underlined in a bestselling book about the state of European national identities, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution the true essence of 'Baltendom', of being 'Baltic', was not to become submerged in one of the new nations, but to recognize themselves as part of a growing and global set of minorities: ethnic, religious, stateless people, and others. In a comparison that meant to provoke his contemporaries of a different political bent, Keyserling outlined how the entire twentieth century was in fact turning into a century of 'minorities': the more they were uprooted and marginalized in the new states, the more likely they were to gain economic and political clout in the long run. Interestingly, like the elite Bengalis writing in the same period, as described by Milinda Banerjee, Keyserling ended up comparing his own social group, the Baltic German aristocrats, to the Jews,

Andreas Fahrmeir, 'Conclusion: historical perspectives on borderlands, boundaries and migration control', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 34 (2019), pp. 623–31; Sören Urbansky, *Beyond the steppe frontier: a history of the Sino-Russian border* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

[11]I am thinking of work such as Shruti Kapila, *Violent fraternity: Indian political thought in the global age* (Princeton, NJ, 2021); Joya Chatterjee, *Shadows at noon: the South Asian twentieth century* (London, 2023).

[12]See Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: a transnational history of twentieth-century territorial separatism* (Stanford, CA, 2019).

[13]Shuvatri Dasgupta, 'Can there be a global intellectual history of caste?', in *JHI Blog* (2020), /web.archive.org/savewww.jhiblog.org/2020/09/30/can-there-be-a-global-intellectual-history-of-caste/, accessed 15 May 2024. See also her contribution to this issue.

[14]Milinda Banerjee, 'The Partition of India, Bengali "New Jews", and refugee democracy: transnational horizons of Indian refugee political discourse', *Itinerario*, 46 (2022), pp. 283–303.

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identifying a broad commonality between the two in their status as minorities.[15] In fact, the English translation of his book on Europe was produced by Maurice Samuel, a Zionist, on whose book *You Gentiles* (New York, 1924) Keyserling had just published a glowing review.[16] There was no place for someone like Keyserling in the post-imperial Baltic states, which in itself seemed to be a strong motivation to look at other uprooted groups for comparison.

There is also another aspect which makes the Baltic noble intellectuals an interesting group in connecting different worlds. Traditionally, the Russian, the émigré, and the Soviet worlds have been presented in terms of rupture and separation. The dialectic between pre-Soviet and Soviet, and between Soviet and émigré, became almost artificially enforced by historians. Much of this separation had to do with the political thought of a small group of émigré thinkers linked to the list of philosophers expelled by Lenin in 1922, the so-called Philosopher's Steamer. However, ironically, the thinker of this bent who is most famous outside the Russian milieu had never been on the steamer – he left Russia earlier, before the USSR was founded, and ended up studying in Germany before moving to Paris and becoming a naturalized Frenchman just before the Phony War. In his lectures at the Sorbonne during the 1930s, Aleksandr Kozhevnikov (now known under his French name Alexandre Kojève) had used and popularized a reading of Hegel's vision of history which foregrounded the 'Lord–Bondsman' dialectic as Hegel's main intellectual device for historical progression. Now, Kojève suggested to his audience of French and international students who ended up in Paris in the 1930s, the new phase of history was to be written from the point of view of the vassal or bondsman, whose position in world history was being recognized.[17]

Kojève himself was in many ways an atypical 'white' Russian and in some respects as much a Russian refugee in Western Europe as he was a 'German' academic migrant in France, so the political thought of refugees from the Russian empire cannot be fully explained by adhering to a simplified dialectic between pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet, imperialist or anti-imperialist thinkers. As Banerjee and von Lingen demonstrate in the Introduction to this special issue, the category of the 'subaltern', introduced by Ranajit Guha largely in relation to the peasant class, is too rigid. It is important to conceive of the existence of what they call 'relative' subalterns, including some of these out-of-place elites who, perhaps strangely, begin to see themselves as minorities, victims, and downtrodden outsiders of a post-imperial world. Interestingly, as Milinda Banerjee argues elsewhere, theorists like Ranajit Guha can be situated in this intellectual world of uprooted Bengali elites in a new world dominated by ethnic and geographic allegiance.[18]

[15]Hermann Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas* (Heidelberg, 1928). Cited after the English translation, *Europe*, trans. Maurice Samuel (New York, NY, 1928), pp. 301ff.

[16]Hermann Keyserling, 'Ewige Grundhaltung', *Der Weg zur Vollendung*, 13 (1927), cited after web.archive.org/save/https://schuledesrades.org/palme/schule/erbe/sdr-q-4-7-38-112, accessed 5 May 2024. This is a wide-ranging review of several publications on Jews and Judaism in German and English.

[17]Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'esprit, professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes-Études* (Paris, 1947).

[18]Banerjee, 'The Partition of India', p. 8.

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In Banerjee's work on political change in modern India, it becomes clear how in the interwar years of the twentieth century, previously established hierarchies of class were replaced by other languages such as those of religious and ethnic conflict. Thus in eastern Bengal, where the *zamindars*, the agrarian landed magnates, dominated over peasant majorities, these elite figures were now seen as Hindu minorities oppressing Muslim majorities. For the Russian empire, similarly, the First World War and ensuing civil war signalled the emergence of a myriad of new quests for objects of loyalty. The most visible of these groups were the Bolsheviks of different nationalities, a radical international that established itself as de facto successor of the empire. This meant that the history of Russia's imperial ethnic minorities received less attention. The Baltic German nobles belong to the history of Russia's national minorities – in this case, the Germans. Yet, as members of the old European elite, they also stand apart from other minorities such as the Caucasian peoples, the Ukrainians, or the Baltic ethnicities.[19] There were several groups of 'Germans' in the Russian empire. The most numerous were the German settlers who had been known as Volga Germans, as well as merchants, and other groups. As representatives of an old European elite, the Baltic German nobility stood apart from ethnic groups such as the German settlers, the Caucasian peoples, or the Baltic ethnicities.

It is in this context of a more nuanced perception of attitudes towards the revolution that the history of Baltic Germans whose political thought I hope to recover needs to be placed. One of them, the international lawyer Mikhail von Taube, while also a refugee from the 'Russian' Revolution and in Paris in the 1930s, could not have been further from Kojève's reading of history. Against Kojève's dialectical, ultimately atheist and progressivist vision of history, Taube's understanding looked back towards a lost historical past and in ways which was strongly informed by his Catholic faith.

The political thought of elite borderlanders from the Baltic, where generations of Germanic families dominated a complex cultural area with loyalties to changing monarchical dynasties, and their displacement not only geographically, but also socially, remains to be examined in a more comparative context.[20] When the future of the Baltic states became particularly uncertain, in the interwar period, the regionally rooted German elite, with their deep knowledge of Russian affairs, became a very valuable asset for German intelligence circles in the interwar years. The writings of these uprooted Baltic intellectuals were launched primarily in German and in French, before being translated into other languages. Most of them belonged to the Baltic German *Ritterschaften*, medieval knighthoods which had changed loyalties as the regimes in the Baltic region changed hands, from the Polish–Lithuanian

[19]See the special issue of *Kritika*, 7:2 (2006), examining 'Subjecthood and citizenship, Part I. Intellectual biographies and late imperial Russia', with contributions by Eric Lohr, Peter Holquist, Richard Wortman, and Christine D. Worobec.

[20]See my framing in *European elites and ideas of empire, 1917–57* (Cambridge, 2016). A classic approach was undertaken 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, 1997). For recent approaches, see also Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Empire and after: toward a framework for comparing empires and their consequences in the post-imperial Middle East and Central Asia', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27 (2014), pp. 103–31.

kingdom, to Sweden and then Russia. Others had come to Russia more recently, under Catherine II.[21]

Following Peter I's conquest of the Baltic littoral in the Great Northern War, the Baltic German knighthoods became incorporated into the Russian ruling elite.[22] However, incorporation into the Russian empire between 1710 and 1795 never meant complete unification or dissolution of their institutional peculiarities. Their knowledge of their own cultural origins, their greater connections to the West, their worldview, and even their accents meant that they conserved their identities throughout the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. While many of those coming from their circles became loyal collaborators of the Russian tsars and their administration of the empire, some of them presented different forms of resistance. This became particularly pronounced in the nineteenth century, as the Russian empire was going through processes of Russification, placing the elite knighthoods in the position of a choice between national or imperial allegiance. Some Baltic families resolved these contradictions by defining their loyalty with reference to the tsar's family but not the idea of the Russian nation defined by its Orthodox faith and Russian language.

Thus Baltic German nobles were not easily 'converted' to German nationalism either. While the Baltic Germans of middle-class background defined themselves with the term *Altreichsbalten*, referring to the Holy Roman Empire as the old Reich, in contrast to the new and modern German Reich, and then progressively nationalized their identity in the twentieth century, the identity of Baltic nobles remained more ambivalent.[23] Their political allegiance involved ruling dynasties or rulers, as well as ancestral estates in Livonia or Lithuania, more than a 'national' or imperial homeland. Many of them had established themselves in the German empire following expulsions after the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia.[24] Following the expropriation of the largest Baltic estates, leading to a collective loss of property of some 2.7 million hectares of land in the 1920s, many Baltic Germans settled in Germany. The introduction of the republican constitutions in the German states making up the empire, all of which abolished aristocratic status in 1919, created feelings of uncertainty among all aristocratic families.[25] Some Baltic aristocrats joined associations such as the German Aristocratic Corporation (*Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft*), an interest group that had existed in the German empire since 1874 as a form of defence against liberal forces, but changed its focus after the collapse of the empire itself and the ensuing abolition of noble status in Germany in 1919.

Reconstructing interwar Baltic noble subjectivity as a form of privileged and cosmopolitan refugeedom sheds light on broader dimensions of this transitional period. In the first section, I focus on an anthology on Baltic nobles settled in

[21]For a Baltic German (though not noble) critique of Russification, see Carl Schirren, *Livländische Antwort an Herrn Juri Samarin* (Leipzig, 1869); and Boris Nol'de, *Yuri Samarin i ego vremia* (Paris, 1926).

[22]Gert von Pistohlkors, ed., *Baltische Länder: Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas* (Berlin, 1994).

[23]On Altreichsbalten, see e.g. Björn Hofmeister, 'Max Hildebert Boehm: Radikales Ordnungsdenken vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis in die Bundesrepublik', *German History*, 34 (2016), pp. 340–2.

[24]Michael Garleff, ed., *Deutschbalten, Weimarer Republik und Drittes Reich* (Cologne, 2008), II.

[25]Cf. Eckart Conze, 'Adel, Staat und Gesellschaft im 20. Jahrhundert', in Bernd Walter, Maarten Van Driel, and Meinhard Pohl, eds., *Adel Verbindet* (Berlin, 2010), pp. 275–90.

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Germany, Otto von Taube's *Das Buch der Keyserlinge*, before turning in more detail to two intellectuals who theorized on their displacement from the Baltic through divergent lenses. One, the philosopher Hermann Keyserling, made travel as a category of existential cognition about oneself the main approach of his work on identity. The other, the lawyer Baron Mikhail von Taube, conceptualized his views through the lens of his professional work in the field of legal internationalism. These authors represent the views of a small but vocal group of writers whose publications to a range of audiences – familial, national, and international – navigated between cosmopolitan, national, and nationally indifferent subjectivities. This happened at a time when their region of birth changed political regimes and geopolitical orientation – between the Russian Revolution and the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact.[26]

I

In 1937, the Baltic German author Otto von Taube published an anthology of Baltic writings on their own identity.[27] Members of the Baltic German nobility from the Keyserling family represented in the volume found themselves caught in a grey zone between loyalty and dissidence in the Third Reich. Their public-facing narrative was one of polite accommodation to National Socialism. Otto von Taube's path with respect to his German allegiance is indicative. Born on his ancestral estate in Courland, Taube was educated in Law and Art History at the University of Leipzig, and subsequently worked as an independent writer, affiliated with the prestigious *Insel* publishing house. His own political allegiance remained volatile. After it had become clear that his connection to the ancestral homeland was waning due to the new socialist regime in Estonia, his attention turned even more firmly on Germany. He flirted with the German conservatives, the DNVP, and even endorsed Hitler and the National Socialists' conception of the German *Volk*, becoming an early NSDAP party member between 1923 and 1926. Following his own 'Anschluss' to National Socialism of 1923, as he called it then, after 1933 he became closer to the authors of 'internal emigration'.[28] He then developed his own views of German history.[29] By 1940, he was connected to the anti-Hitler resistance groups among the nobility, and in 1943, the Taube family was hiding a Jewish child.[30] Taken together, these alternative sources of orientation explain the whole spectrum of the Baltic German situation among this elite group. Many Baltic authors shared a common anti-Semitism, but when it comes to Germany and other ideologies, their affinities retained their own idiosyncracies. Their worldviews comprised a range of Russian

[26]Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas*; Otto von Taube, ed., *Das Buch der Keyserlinge: an der Grenze zweier Welten. Lebenserinnerungen aus einem Geschlecht* (1st, 2nd, and 3rd edns, Berlin, 1937; 4th edn 1944); Michel de Taube, *La politique russe d'avant-guerre et la fin de L'empire des Tsars (1904–1917)* (Paris, 1928).

[27]Taube, ed., *Das Buch der Keyserlinge.*

[28]Otto von Taube, 'Mein Anschluß an die Nationalsozialisten', *Der Türmer*, 25 (1923), pp. 184–5, cited in Garleff, ed., *Deutschbalten, Weimarer Republik und Drittes Reich*. See also Otto von Taube, 'Nur im Widerstande wächst die Seele: Gedichte aus Hitlers Machtjahren', in *Beilage zum 20. Jahresbericht des Otto-von-Taube-Gymnasiums* (Gauting, 1986).

[29]Otto von Taube, *Geschichte unseres Volkes: Reformation und Revolution* (Berlin, 1938).

[30]Michael Garleff, *Zwischen Distanz und Anpassung: Deutschbaltische Autoren im Dritten Reich* (Frankfurt, 2008); Max Hildebert Boehm, 'Die Balten im Reich', in Hellmuth Weiss, ed., *Wir Balten (Heimat im Herzen)* (Salzburg and Munich, 1951), pp. 380–9.

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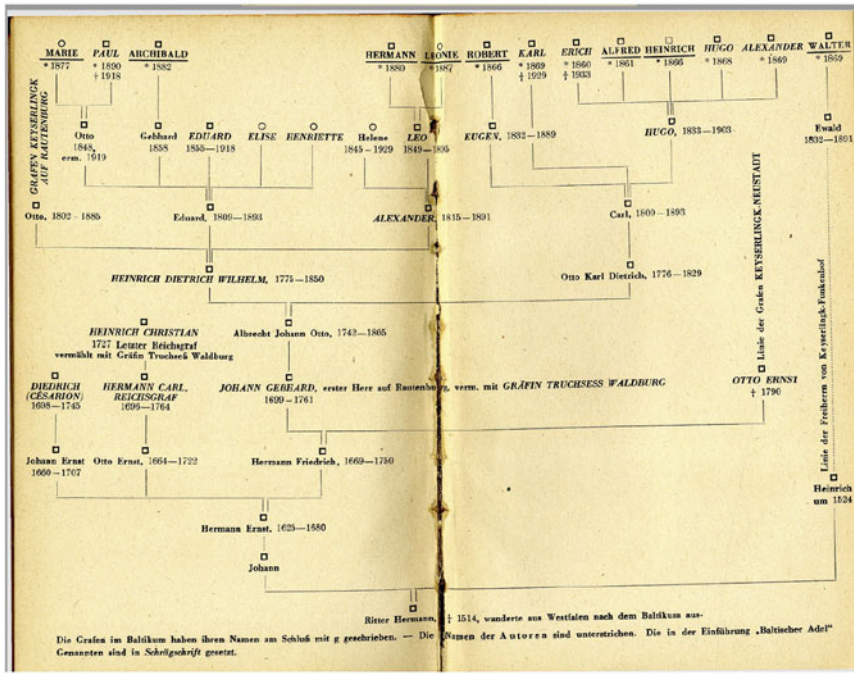

Figure 1. The genealogy of the Keyserlings and Taubes in Taube's *Buch der Keyserlinge*. Otto von Taube, *Das Buch der Keyserlinge: an der Grenze zweier Welten. Lebenserinnerungen aus einem Geschlecht* (1st edn, Berlin 1937).

imperialism, that is, displays of allegiance to the Russian empire, but also anti-Russianism when it comes to the folk traits of the Russians; anti-Semitism, but of a kind that was mixed with sentiments against the bourgeoisie as a class, and anti-vernacularism against all national movements more generally.[31] The emphasis throughout the anthology was on the continuities of the Keyserlings' presence as a quintessentially German elite in the Holy Roman Empire from the middle ages to the modern era. A genealogy of the Keyserling family adorned the volume (Figure 1).[32]

Taube contrasted the urbanity of the Baltic knights with Prussia's provincial 'Krautjunker'.[33] The qualities which made Baltic elites attractive to Prussian dynastic rulers since Frederick II also rendered them useful to other empires, including Russia. One of the authors in the anthology, Alfred Count Keyserling, described being caught '[b]etween Grand Dukes and Bolshevists'.[34] As a young man, he worked as an inspector of the penal colonies and prisons in the Russian Far East for the Russian imperial administration; one of his briefs was to understand if the Buryats and other categories of prisoners could be reliably drafted for military service in

[31] See Gert von Pistohlkors, '"Russifizierung" und die Grundlagen der deutsch-baltischen Russophobie', *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 25 (1976), pp. 618–31.

[32] Taube, ed., *Das Buch der Keyserlinge.*

[33] Ibid., p. 18.

[34] Ibid., p. 16.

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the Russian–Japanese War of 1905.[35] He was also responsible for securing the gold mine of Grand Duke Nicholas ('Nikolai Nikolaevich the younger', the head of the Russian empire's armed forces) on the Russian–Chinese border, witnessing the Battle of Mukden, a decisive Japanese victory. Russia's loss in the war eventually threatened the grand duke's assets, prompting Keyserling's entry into delicate communication with the Rockefeller family.[36] Keyserling also tried to save his brother's whaling company, but in the end, it entered into Japanese control and ownership along with the duke's gold mine.[37]

The issue of allegiance tormented the family in the following years, too. In the First World War, Keyserling's daughter served as a nurse under Empress Alexandra, his two sons were in the Imperial Russian Navy and Army.[38] Keyserling himself became involved as a representative of Prince Lvov's attempts to form a Union of Urban and Rural Zemstvos for the Protections of Sick and Wounded Warriors, a provisional committee of the Duma, which eventually formed the core of the provisional government. In the end, Keyserling had to flee all the way back to St Petersburg from the Red Army in the unfolding civil war, managing to reach his ancestral Latvian estate of Mitau thanks to the help of a former Russian lift boy in a Paris hotel, who had recognized him from past days but by now had risen up the Bolshevik ranks as assistant to a commissar. He also helped the Keyserlings with safe passage to now independent Latvia, where the train station was full of nationalist songs and flags. In retrospect, Keyserling wrote that the family were, in his words, 'loyal Germans at heart', but given his earlier commitments to reform in the administration of the Russian empire, it is legitimate to ask whether this assertion had been largely prompted by his adaptation to life in Germany under Nazi rule.[39]

Another Keyserling, Archibald, described his late attempts to bring 'the Baltic lands and Lithuania into a healthy relationship with the German Empire'.[40] He wanted to work for German diplomacy, but during the November revolution, decided to resign, listing his opposition to 'democracy and Marxism' as the main reasons.[41] Settling in Silesia, he wanted to focus on defending local governments from the 'Reds'. In 1920, this led to the creation of the Prussian state council, which persisted until 1933.[42] His view of 1933 was ultimately favourable.[43] A further family member, Walther Keyserling, shed light on his career in the German marine, noting that there was no 'shame' in being defeated in an honourable war, such as the one Germany had fought between 1914 and 1918.[44] The volume concluded with a contribution by the most famous of the Keyserlings of his generation: the philosopher Hermann Keyserling, whose work I will turn to in the next section.

[35]Alfred Keyserling, *Vospominaniya o russkoi sluzhbe*, Russian transl. of *Graf Alfred Keyserling erzählt. Aufgeschrieben durch Otto von Gruenewaldt* (Kaunas and Leipzig, 1937) (Moscow, 2001), p. 91.
[36]Ibid., pp. 72–3.
[37]Ibid., p. 78.
[38]Ibid., p. 16.
[39]Ibid., p. 81.
[40]Archibald Graf Keyserling in ibid., p. 256.
[41]Ibid., p. 258.
[42]Ibid., pp. 267–8.
[43]Ibid., pp. 282–3.
[44]Walther Keyserling in ibid., p. 353.

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Taube's anthology pointed to a more complex hinterland in the relationship between the Baltic nobility and European modernity. On the one hand, the Baltic knights were collaborators in imperial domination of the local indigenous population of the Baltic littoral, and feudal rulers of their estate. On the other hand, as a corporation, they were also defenders of some of the most democratic institutions in the Russian empire, at least if democracy is defined in a minimal way as representative self-government. They were a quintessentially feudal group, ruling over their peasants in ways not seen in Western Europe since the sixteenth century. Yet they also saw themselves as defenders of models of Western civilization associated with legal forms of authority and civic relations. In this sense, they could be seen as representatives of a Russian form of 'Liberalism in Empire' in the sense in which Andrew Sartori has conceptualized the function of the law in colonial settings such as Bengal.[45] As Lauri Mälksoo has recently argued, Taube belonged to a group of lawyers in the Russian empire who advanced international legal thought as a way to civilize Russia – using, not least, the special legal expertise of Baltic Germans like himself and his notable teacher, Friedrikh Martens.[46] The Baltic barons, thanks to an advanced system of regulating private property, both practically and theoretically, had mastery of areas of knowledge such as Roman law which was neither relevant nor taught in most of the Russian empire. Even stylistically, their lifeworlds looked Western – with castles ranging from fortresses to new neo-classical palaces that were not widespread in the rest of the Russian empire, except the western-facing St Petersburg and a handful of private estates.

Another important feature of this group was their relationship to the history of political representation, which in their view could be decoupled from the aspiration to grant democracy to vernacular groups. Unlike the rest of the empire, the Baltic states retained parliaments, or *Landtage*, which they had kept since the existence under Swedish suzerainty in the seventeenth century. While these parliaments only included noble families, structurally, they gave them competencies to make decisions on behalf of the *Ritterschaften* as well as the province as a whole. Principles of rotation were in place, though no separation of powers, as the president of the *Landtag* also had executive powers. The knighthoods were unsuccessful in institutionalizing the nature of these rights, but there is an archival record of their attempts. Other areas of control where the knighthoods were in continuous struggle with the tsars – with declining degrees of success over the course of the nineteenth century – were in religion and education. They managed schools, reinstituted a Swedish university in Dorpat (Tartu), and trained students in subjects such as Protestant theology and Roman law, which brought them into closer contact with their Western European contemporaries. On the negative side, they asserted a classically 'feudal' form of control over the indigenous peasant population and resisted any widening form of recognition of nationality or reform in these groups. On this, they found a constructive form of alliance with the ruling imperial dynasty, which shared their perception of national movements as a threat to their power. Baltic German nobles were frequently willing to co-operate with the imperial dynasty in

[45] Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in empire: an alternative history* (Los Angeles, CA, 2014).

[46] Lauri Mälksoo, 'The history of international legal theory in Russia', *European Journal of International Law*, 19 (2018), pp. 211–32 at p. 220.

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crushing vernacular resistance groups. Ironically, this meant that effectively, there were two sets of aristocratic families ruling in the Russian empire with Germanic roots: the Romanovs and the Baltic nobles. They collaborated on the fabrication of a new idea of Russia in the nineteenth century which helped sustain imperial hegemony.

This relatively stable power deal came under severe pressure in the course of the First World War, which was also a war for international public opinion and allegiance. Gradually, Germany as a modern nation-empire came to be seen as the single international rogue actor of the war. Each belligerent state was identifying its 'inner' German as a sort of danger from within that mirrored Germany's external aggression internationally. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the extent of this in studies of Germans as interned 'enemy aliens' around the globe.[47] Anti-German sentiments also put the Baltic German aristocrats under pressure, as they were increasingly perceived as a foreign influence on a fragile Russian state – something which the Bolsheviks, too, were able to benefit from in their media campaign.

The ensuing disintegration of the empire meant that the actual representatives of these elites were in a difficult situation. Should they side with the 'white' movement loyal to the Romanov dynasty and endure the Germanophobic populism? Should they jump ship and hope for a new role in a post-war German empire which was ready to reconquer the Baltic region? Taube's anthology provides insights into an attempt to persuade different audiences of the fidelity of the Keyserlings and the Taubes to their own family history above all other points of orientation. As I argue in the next section, the philosophical underpinnings of the specific dilemma of the Baltic German nobles can be best exemplified through the lens of the most eccentric of them all: the celebrity philosopher Hermann Keyserling.

II

In the 1920s, Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946) was a celebrated author and philosopher publishing in German, French, Spanish, and other languages. Having experienced the burning of one of his estates, in Könno, Keyserling saw himself as part of a global imperial crisis and dissolution which he had first witnessed before the Great War, in distant China. He then described how the revolution in Estonia meant that he now identified himself with Germany as the 'land of his origins'.[48] He described how in 1916 he attempted to advise Konstantin Päts, the future president of the Estonian Republic, to opt for a transnational Baltic alliance instead of an Estonian nation-state, a process which Keyserling described as 'Belgianizing' the Baltic to create a supranational union.[49] Keyserling promoted this plan in German diplomatic circles as well as in the English press. That this failed, as Eastern Europe was eventually influenced by Bolshevik (later Nazi) hegemony, propelled Keyserling to search for his own role in a new Germany. As he put it, if 'we Balts as Balts have a task in the German Reich, it must be one of imbuing it with our traditional lordship spirit (unserem

[47]Stefan Manz and Panikos Panayi, *Enemies in the empire: civilian internment in the British empire during the First World War* (Oxford, 2020); Rotem Kowner and Iris Rachamimov, *Out of line. Out of place. A global and local history of World War I internments* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).

[48]Hermann Keyserling, *Die Reise durch die Zeit* (Vaduz, 1948), p. 364.

[49]Ibid., p. 365.

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traditionellen Herrengeiste)'.[50] He also argued that since his 'return migration' to Germany he had become even more Baltic than before.

Many of Keyserling's ancestors were civil servants and scientists at the Russian court.[51] He came from a mixture of Protestant and Orthodox influences and a multilingual background, with Russian, German, and French as the strongest. There were also legends regarding some of his ancestors who allegedly practised piracy around the seventeenth century.[52] In 1905, he briefly contemplated a political career during Russia's liberal reforms. Keyserling's most renowned publication before *Europe* was *Travel diary of a philosopher*, a travelogue in which the writer championed his own status as an aristocrat uprooted in the course of the Russian Revolution to examine his experiences of travel to other places, including post-revolutionary China and India.[53] It formed the beginning of a tetralogy of Keyserling's ethnographic and autoethnographic writing.[54] Aside from the German-speaking countries, he was widely read in the francophone, anglophone, and Hispanic worlds.

Keyserling's approach combined ethnography, autoethnography, psychoanalysis, travel writing, and a pathos of philosophy and social distance. He had defined his journey-cum-narrative as the 'shortest path to myself'. Published in 1919, almost simultaneously with Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, the *Travel diary* had hit a nerve with post-war audiences seeking to question the self-assurance of Europeans, selling 50,000 copies by 1933 in Germany alone.[55] Keyserling was celebrated on his international lecture tours as an 'ex-hidalgo', making his expropriation the foundation of a peculiar form of celebrity.[56] As Fritz Heinemann had put it in a review article in the liberal journal *Die neue Rundschau*, Keyserling was a 'representative man' (in English), and 'one of the last representative characters of this age'.[57] He demonstrated the characteristic demeanour of an 'uprooted aristocrat, who would like to recreate the real power (Herrschaft) of his ancestors with the imagined spiritual power over people…Nonetheless it is clear that the stratum of Baltic nobility has stopped playing its splendid role in building European culture, despite the talents of some individuals.'[58] The liberal philosopher, theologian, and public thinker Ernst Troeltsch described Keyserling as a 'fashionable writer' rivalling only Oswald

[50]Ibid., p. 366.

[51]See Hermann Keyserling, 'Autobiographische Skizze vom Herbst 1925', Nr 0084, 061.15, in Hermann Keyserling *Nachlass*, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt (HKN).

[52]Ibid.

[53]H. Keyserling, *Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* (Darmstadt, 1919) (8th edn, 2 vols., Stuttgart, 1932). On Keyserling's orientalism, see Suzanne Marchand, *German orientalism in the age of empire* (Cambridge, 2010).

[54]H. Keyserling, *Südamerikanische Mediationen* (Stuttgart, 1932).

[55]For reviews of Keyserling's work, see Ernst Troeltsch, 'Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen von Graf Hermann Keyserling', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 123 (1921), pp. 90–6; 'Keyserling's Europe', *Time*, Monday, 3 Sept. 1928.

[56]Juan G. Olmedilla, 'Antiguo hidalgo de Estonia, hoy es el conde de Keyserling un errabundo descubridor de reinos espirituales…', *Cronica*, 11 May 1930, p. 2.

[57]Fritz Heinemann, 'Graf Keyserling und die Krise des Buergertums', *Die neue Rundschau* (May 1931), pp. 644–53 at p. 646.

[58]Ibid., p. 653.

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Spengler. His success had much to do with a lack of 'self-consciousness with which an aristocrat undresses and dresses in front of a chamberlain'.[59]

Keyserling's *Europe* was written with the same degree of detachment as his *Travel diary*. Skipping over the national identities of England (Britain), France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, it had three chapters dealing with regions and Europe as a whole: the 'Balticum', or Baltic lands, and the Balkans.[60] A separate chapter on the Jews remained unpublished, but is available in his archive in draft form.[61] The Baltic chapter begins with an account of Keyserling's surprising return, after one and a half year's absence, to his home estate in Rayküll, Estonia. He left it in haste at the height of the revolution, and was surprised to find everything unchanged upon his return, even 'his old people', the Estonian servants. Yet, something had changed irretrievably. As he put it,

> I had returned as a ghost…It was as if I was my own grandfather…For the Estonians centuries divided 1920 from 1918. Then, their people did not exist, they were just a lower stratum. Now, thanks to a unique historical conjuncture, their barely formulated dream of independence, the creation of small independent Baltic states as a bulwark against Bolshevism for the winning powers of the World War, had become a fulfilled reality.[62]

There was an irony here, for it was people like himself who had made contact with Germany to support the creation of Baltic independent states here in the wake of the peace of Brest-Litovsk; and yet due to their 'foreign' status, the Baltic German aristocrats were also the first victims of the newly minted national movements for self-determination. Interestingly, in this volume Keyserling omitted the fact that the Estonian revolution destroyed only one of his two estates: as he admitted in the Keyserling anthology, the other had been left intact. Paradoxically, the Estonian movement for self-determination, in Keyserling's view, was intellectually an offshoot of Bolshevism, even though it had emerged under the protection of Germany – which, in 1918 at least, counted itself among the winners of the First World War, a fate which soon turned at the Treaty of Versailles.

Thus, by contrast to contemporary Estonians, Latvians, or Lithuanians, for Keyserling the story of Baltic identity was a tragic one – 'the tragedy of my Baltendom'. No longer a Russian subject, he was free to choose his allegiance, and initially, he admitted, he was thinking about Monaco, 'because it has the lowest taxes and the danger of war is excluded. Unfortunately, I soon found out that this exemplary state does not offer naturalizations.'[63] Keyserling admitted that this was a century of 'minorities', especially formerly oppressed ethnic minorities of the old empires. The old elites had been culpable of oppression, but in his view the developmental legacies they had left in regions such as the Baltics had exculpated them:

[59]Ernst Troeltsch, 'Review of *Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen*', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 123 (1921), pp. 90–6.

[60]Keyserling, *Europe*.

[61]HKN Darmstadt.

[62]Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas*.

[63]Ibid.

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there were 'cultivated forests' as the 'main capital of the new states', which are 'our own creation'. If 'Eesti and Latwiya' become 'members of the western community of peoples against Russia', they will merely continue the political work of the Baltic knighthoods, he argued. The descendants of the old knights had made quintessentially Baltic identity recognizable. The aristocratic Balts had a long continuity of historical memory as the 'East of Western Europe'. Now, in the wake of the revolution, the aristocrats had themselves become 'minorities' of a different kind.

From the perspective of the German liberal press, Keyserling's philosophical musings were contradicted by his personal status. His wife was a granddaughter of Otto von Bismarck, and both were securely settled in Germany, even if much of his work was sponsored by the dispossessed grand duke of Hessen Darmstadt. Yet his moral authority as an internationally renowned commentator on world affairs was differently constituted. It stemmed from his ability to stand at a cosmopolitan distance from most forms of political allegiance. This came out most prominently in an article he published at the height of the Great War, in 1916, in the liberal American magazine *Atlantic*, in which he argued that the Germans 'invaded and run down neutral Belgium, applied the rules of their war-code all too strictly at first, and said, through the mouths of their statesmen, several things which would have been better left unsaid'. On the other hand, these actions gave the Allies 'an admirably moral working hypothesis ever since. Henceforth nothing could sound more plausible than the pretence that fighting Germany meant fighting war in itself, – unrighteousness, aggressiveness, bad faith, – and for the freedom and right of small nations.' The conclusion, therefore, was a critique of the Allies more than of Germany, and was unsparing towards Russia, the Eastern ally, calling it a 'Pan-Slavonic caliphate'. As he put it: 'Worse still: all these states agreed among themselves to make an end of Germany as such.'[64]

Keyserling's reflections on his existential uprootedness came out most clearly in global perspective, through his engagement with thinkers of comparable social status from countries such as India, China, and Argentina. He was particularly impressed with the ideas of Ku Hungming, author of the scathing critique of European education, *The spirit of the Chinese people* (1919), whom he met in person on his Grand Tour around the world.[65] Ku belonged to a generation of Chinese intellectuals who sought to reform the Qing empire through Western education. Yet, he was at odds with that generation.[66] Despite, or perhaps because of, his own education in Edinburgh, Ku rejected the idea of Westernization, seeking an alternative vision for China based on his conception of Confucianism. Like Keyserling's, his writings appeared shocking to multiple audiences at once: imperialists, reformers, and republicans.[67] At the same time, he was confronted by the existing reality of multiple revolutions and civil wars in China, beginning in 1911 with the end of the

[64]Hermann Keyserling, 'A philosopher's view of the war', *The Atlantic* (Feb. 1916), www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1916/02/a-philosophers-view-of-the-war/644991/, accessed 2 June 2023.

[65]Hermann Keyserling, *Politik, Wirtschaft, Weisheit* (Darmstadt, 1922); Keyserling, review of Hu-ming Ku, *Vox clamantis* (Leipzig, 1921), in *Der Weg zur Vollendung: Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für freie Philosophie. Schule der Weisheit* (Darmstadt, 1921), p. 2.

[66]Leigh Jenco, *Changing referents: learning across space and time in China and the West* (New York, NY, 2015).

[67]Chunmei Du, *Gu Hongming's eccentric Chinese Odyssey* (Phildelphia, PA, 2019).

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Qing empire. This was a period of 'elite activism' in late imperial China striving for reform at a time of rising radical movements.[68] Beginning with China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1890, intellectuals in China were mobilized to engage with the crisis of their country by rethinking its cultural foundations. In this process, many intellectuals were drawn to a more Western orientation and prepared to 'change their referents', as Leigh Jenco has described it. Movements such as the New Youth, gathered around an eponymous journal, called for a rejection of traditional Chinese values such as Confucianism.[69] In contrast to this contemporary fashion, Ku demanded a rejuvenation of the Confucian concept of good citizenship with its ordered hierarchy of loyalties, something he found missing in contemporary European radicalism. What evoked feelings of mutual affinity in Keyserling were not only Ku's ideas, but also his rhetoric. As Chunmei Du noted, Ku used linguistic expressions which likely shocked his readers or provoked them through unexpected judgements and associations – a characteristic which was also typical of Keyserling's writings in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.[70] Both drew on their personal formation in the older, imperial hierarchies, but remained highly attuned to the linguistic, political, and social changes of their time.

Another figure of relevance to Keyserling was Rabindranath Tagore, whose *Nationalism* provided a similar undertaking from an Indian perspective as that of Ku.[71] Keyserling was deeply impressed by Tagore's foundation of an alternative academy at Santiniketan (today known as Visva-Bharati University), founded in 1921 on the location of his father's *ashram*. Keyserling met Tagore in 1912, stayed at his house in Calcutta, then met him again in London in 1913. After the German Revolution of 1918/19, Keyserling was inspired to found his own alternative philosophical academy in Darmstadt, funded by the dispossessed grand duke of Hessen Darmstadt. In 1921, he duly invited Tagore on a lecture tour of Germany. Both men took inspiration from Leo Tolstoy, whose revolutionary peasant communities in Russia also inspired movements in South Africa. Both also positioned themselves as bridge-builders between East and West.

It is against the background of his global perspective on imperial decline that Keyserling's critique of the moral consequences of the Great War should be read. Acknowledging without regard the factuality of German atrocities in Belgium, Keyserling was just as quick in showing that this war crime was also a tactical mistake which enabled the Western powers in turn to mask their own expansionist aims in this war under the guise of a just war. Contrary to his self-centred existentialism which characterized writings such as his *Travel diary*, in his commentary in the *Atlantic* his form of philosophical cosmopolitanism appeared as a form of realism. With very different means and in a different style, this was also a feature of the second Baltic author whose work I want to turn to in more detail.

[68]Cf. Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite activism and political transformation in China: Zhejiang province, 1865–1911* (Stanford, CA, 1986).

[69]Hao Chang, 'Intellectual change and the reform movement, 1890–8', in John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu, eds., *The Cambridge history of China*, XI (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 274–338; Jenco, *Changing referents*.

[70]Chunmei Du, *Ku Hongming's eccentric Chinese Odyssey*, p. 47.

[71]Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London, 1918).

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III

In the conclusion to his book of memoirs analysing the errors of Russian foreign policy from 1904 to 1917, *Towards the great catastrophe*, Baron Mikhail Aleksandrovich Taube evoked the ruined city of Thebes through the eyes of the heroine in Sophocles' drama *Antigone*. Antigone, daughter from Oedipus' incestuous union with his mother, and herself in love with her deceased brother, confronts Creon, the king of Thebes, who personifies the power of the state, with the wish to bury her dead brother, who in turn had been disloyal to the king. Antigone embodies the subjectivity of an individual at odds with an established power; at the same time, her story sheds light on the limits of political obligation as such. The chief subject of tragedy is an individual confronted with a hostile state. In the end, Antigone kills herself, unable to honour her slain brother in an attempt to maintain at least basic forms of morality.

It might be odd at first to think of a successful civil servant such as Baron Taube as someone identifying with Antigone, rather than with Creon. Baron Taube's journey from the Russian imperial establishment into exile can indeed be seen as a curious way to conclude his account of the causes of the Great War and the particular responsibilities of the Russian imperial elite. Taube had a remarkable start to his career, holding prestigious positions and working on significant international cases. He was a professor of international law and played a role in the London Naval Conference of 1908–9, which aimed to regulate important matters in international disputes. He then became a senator and a deputy minister for education in the Russian empire. His international standing was evident when he participated in the inauguration of the Hague Peace Palace in 1913 and served as a judge in major disputes before the outbreak of the First World War.

However, the disintegration of the Russian empire and the subsequent civil war in the country had a profound impact on Taube's career, exposing deep differences between his own identities and those of other groups in the Russian empire. This explains to some degree why Antigone's allegiance to ancient rites of loyalty and to her brother, against the wishes of a brutal state represented by Creon, ultimately appealed to him.

The revolution brought Taube's career to an abrupt end. This might explain the appeal of Antigone's allegiance to ancient rites of loyalty and to her brother. Although he briefly served as the foreign minister of the Russian government in exile in Finland in 1918, this position was short-lived and did not provide a stable foundation for his future. Taube found himself navigating a new reality, where his previous positions and status held less significance. This shift marked a significant change from his earlier roles as a prominent civil servant and international legal scholar.

A loyal imperial subject, Taube belonged to a circle of moderate imperial reformers: fiercely loyal to the ideology of the Russian empire in the broad sense of its multicultural make-up officially represented by legislative and executive institutions that endorsed the Orthodox faith. But now, he was one of thousands of refugees from Eastern and Central Europe who had come to France in the hopes of finding security. Unlike many exiled Germans in German-occupied Paris who were political refugees from Nazi terror, he was living there in relative security. Reading *Antigone*

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through his eyes provides interesting insights into the conflicts between familial and political duties in the context of exile and refugeedom.

After the revolution, Taube taught for several years at the Russian Scientific Institute, a university in exile active in Berlin between 1922 and 1932.[72] His immediate sense of loyalty was therefore to the liberal Russian intelligentsia, represented in Berlin by a number of associations: the Russian scientific-philosophical society, the Union of Russian writers and journalists, the Union of Russian screen writers, engineers, and financial workers, associations of Russian publishers, students, artists, etc. Many of them appeared as lecturers in the Russian Scientific Institute. Its organizing committee comprised intellectuals of a liberal and conservative bent from different ethnic and social groups of the Russian empire, where Taube was the only Baltic German of noble background in a collective of about fifty intellectuals.[73] He was also a regular lecturer at the Hague School for International Law.[74] There were further publication opportunities on matters of international law in German, Swedish, and émigré Russian journals. Alongside another Baltic baron, Boris Nolde, he remained one of his generation's most distinguished scholars of international law, but that discipline was experiencing a hiatus.[75] Teaching at the universities of Dorpat (now Tartu, Estonia), in the province of Courland, and at the University of Kharkov (now Kharkiv, Ukraine), he believed that international relations had a history that began in the Byzantine empire in the tenth century and would culminate in the continuation of the Holy Alliance. His greatest success as a lawyer, historian, and political adviser was the Russian initiative of the Hague agreements on maritime law, in 1907. It built on the model of universal peace brokered by the great powers that had first emerged in the post-Napoleonic era with the Holy Alliance.

Dorpat (now Tallinn, Estonia) and Kharkov (now Kharkiv, Ukraine), were key institutions which mediated between Western and Russian scholarship particularly in the fields of law and philosophy, in which Russian scholarship lagged far behind studies of international law practised in Germany, Switzerland, and, increasingly, the United States. They also reached an audience of students who, for personal or financial reasons, were unable to study at the more prestigious universities in Germany or France. Dorpat had been a centre for the teaching of Roman law in the Russian empire, a place where liberally minded intellectuals saw a possible future for the development of a Russian system of civil law.[76]

[72]'Delegation in Germany', in Russisches Wissenschaftliches Institut: Various Correspondence, Financial Statements, Press Cuttings, etc., 1922–32, C1255/151/170.1, UNOG Records and Archives Unit, Nansen Fonds, Refugees Mixed Archival Group, 1919–47.

[73]'Details of the institute in Roman Gul', *Ia unes Rossiyu* (New York, NY, 1981–9). See also Mikhail Aleksandrovich Taube papers, 1890–1960, Columbia University Special Collections, Bakhmeteff Archive, box 4.

[74]'Lehrauftrag für Freiherr Michael von Taube', in Lieselotte Steveling, *Juristen in Münster: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Rechts- und Staatswissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster/Westf.*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Soziologie, 10 (Münster, 1999).

[75]Mälksoo, 'The history of international legal theory in Russia'; Peter Holquist, 'Dilemmas of a progressive administrator: Baron Boris Nolde', *Kritika*, 7 (2006), pp. 241–75.

[76]Zoran Pokrovac, *Juristenausbildung in Osteuropa bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Rechtskulturen des modernen Osteuropa. Traditionen und Transfers* (Frankfurt, 2007), esp. Anton D. Rudokvas and Aleksei Kartsov, 'Der Rechtsunterricht und die juristische Ausbildung im kaiserlichen Russland', pp. 273–317; Aleksei

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Forced into emigration during the revolution, Taube engaged in genealogical research as one of the ways of recovering this world he had lost – genealogies of his own families, of Germans in Russia, and of the Romanov dynasty in particular.[77] Coming to a similar conclusion about the First World War as Keyserling, Taube identified seven causes of the war, two of which had to do with Austria-Hungary's imperial overstretch in the Balkans and Serbian secessionism; one with Russia's imperial ambitions in Constantinople; one with French revanchism since the Franco-Prussian wars; and three with German imperial ambitions in the Middle East and the Orient and the Anglo-German naval struggle.[78] While he implicated the Russian leadership in a lot of the mistakes, overall on balance his view of the war centred on a critique of Germany. Unlike Keyserling's text, in Taube's analysis, a substantial section was devoted to a discussion of what he considered to be the 'regrettable' and 'unwarranted' Germanophobia which was rising in Russia at the time of the war and further obscured people's judgements of real events. The real trigger of the Russian misjudgement of its own catastrophe had to do with personal failings rather than those of groups.[79] Taube also blamed Wilhelm II personally for promoting beliefs in a cultural struggle between Slavs and Germans, one which fed an influential discourse within the Russian intelligentsia itself.[80]

Connecting to his sympathy for Antigone rather than Creon, his final assessment of the tragedy went beyond the tragedy of the Russian empire and concerned the status of German nobles like himself, who, along with other 'German colonists' who had civilized the Russian empire following the invitation of Catherine II, were now being 'hounded like traitors and spies'. The so-called 'patriotic' press of the Russian empire embarked on a 'national fancy' which culminated in a 'ridiculous hunting down of German Russians'.[81] This, together with new anti-Jewish pogroms, Taube argued, radicalized the population and prepared them for the advent of the Bolsheviks. In conclusion, he added that the final historical cause of the war was the agency of global groups, the world of 'international high finance'.[82]

IV

As they fled, successively, revolutions in the emerging Baltic states, the Russian Revolution more generally, and eventually also sought a space for themselves in a Europe controlled by a rising Third Reich, the Baltic thinkers adjusted their loyalties to different political entities. In a second wave of expulsions from the Baltic region, the remaining Baltic German nobles left the region after the 1939 agreements

Kartsov, 'Das Russische Seminar für Römisches Recht an der juristischen Fakultät der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin', pp. 317–53; and Marju Luts-Sootak, 'Der lange Beginn einer geordneten Juristenausbildung an der deutschen Universität zu Dorpat (1802–1893)', pp. 357–91.

[77]Baron M. de Taube, 'Les origines de l'arbitrage international. Antiquité et Moyen Âge', *Collected Courses of the Hague Academy of International Law*, 42 (1932). The manuscripts are at Columbia University, Special Collections, Mikhail Taube archive.

[78]Baron M. de Taube, *Der Grossen Katastrophe Entgegen Katastrophe* (Leipzig, 1937), pp. 360–1.

[79]Ibid., p. 316.

[80]Ibid., p. 336.

[81]Ibid., p. 354.

[82]Ibid., p. 361.

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Figure 2. The map and infographic titled 'Resettlement action' shows the resettlement of German populations to the new Reich from the Baltic lands brought under German control from the Soviet sphere of influence, and the simultaneous expulsion of Poles from the annexed territories of Poland. Produced by the Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of the German People), Bundesarchiv, R 49 Bild-0705/Autor/-in unbekannt/CC-BY-SA 3.0, in production from 8 October 1939 – 9 June 1941.

between Germany and the Baltic states in connection with the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact.[83] These sought to collect all the *Auslandsdeutschen* or ex-territorial Germans (regardless of their social status) to resettle them elsewhere in the growing Reich as part of the treaty. This graph illustrated what the Nazis described as the 'greatest resettlement action in world history', the 'bringing home' of Germans to what was considered their ethnic homeland from regions reaching from the Baltic to the Black Seas and now legitimately assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence (Figure 2). These sought to collect all the *Auslandsdeutschen* or ex-territorial Germans (regardless of their social status) to resettle them elsewhere in the growing Reich as part of the treaty.

[83]See Secret Supplementary Protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, 1939, accessible at https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/secret-supplementary-protocols-molotov-ribbentrop-non-aggression-pact-1939, accessed 2 June 2023. See also Ingeborg Fleischhauer, 'Der deutsch-sowjetische Grenz- und Freundschaftsvertrag vom 28. September 1939: Die deutschen Aufzeichnungen über die Verhandlungen zwischen Stalin, Molotov und Ribbentrop in Moskau', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 39 (1991), pp. 448–70; Michael Garleff, 'Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit in den unabhängigen Staaten Estland und Lettland', in Gert von Pistohlkors, ed., *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas: Baltische Länder* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 452–550; Jürgen von Hehn, *Die Umsiedlung der Baltischen Deutschen: Das Letzte Kapitel Baltischdeutscher Geschichte* (Marburg and Lahn, 1984).

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The secret treaty between the Third Reich and the USSR coalesced around a common German–Soviet project of 'nationalizing' the Baltic Germans without class distinction. Meanwhile, the active representatives of the Baltic vernacular populations of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were duly deported by Stalin to Siberia. In the Cold War, the Baltic German nobility fell under the so-called 'coalition ban' which was imposed in Germany by the Allies in 1950, when the Balts could not legally organize themselves as a collective group, except as private family lineages. Reconstructing Baltic subjectivities among this group is therefore a more complex process which is most promising for the interwar period.

The peculiar political thought of the Baltic nobles cannot be understood without this complex social history. As a displaced borderland group, this uprooted aristocratic elite from the Baltic lands of the Russian empire fits well within global comparative cases of uprooted elites from imperial borderlands, unmoored by the disintegration of empires. What was characteristic about them was their fixation on their own collective biographies and genealogies instead of projections of actual visions of Europe's future. One way to understand the existence of more ambiguous forms of allegiance among uprooted elites like Keyserling is to focus on their own reflections on their uprooted condition, an idiosyncratic form of existentialism. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the existing personal connections and mutual influences among the uprooted elites of multiple empires and imperial zones: the Baltic borderlands, British India, post-imperial China, and others. The historiography on the princely states in post-colonial and post-Partition India, of the Ottoman elites in both Turkey and Greece, and other elite families, have emphasized the limited degrees to which categories such as 'partition' or 'modernity' help understand these actors' experience of state collapse in their lifetimes.[84] The emergent historiography on contact zones between displaced populations coming from multiple vanishing empires – for instance, Russian Jews in China, Polish refugees in India, or non-binary histories of partition – has established further the contours of understanding cosmopolitan subjectivities in times of political instability.[85]

This article has shed light on the political thought of intellectuals from the Baltic borderlands of post-imperial Russia, looking at the way they connected to German and wider European intellectual traditions. The group in focus were intellectuals coming from the Baltic German nobility, whose provenance gave them peculiar access to multiple intellectual, legal, and institutional traditions. It was thus hardly a story written from the perspective of a 'Knecht', as the Introduction to this special issue has framed the engagement with refugees through Kojève's eyes; rather, it is the history of 'lords' unmoored, turned refugee, and someone who looked back to a past in a way which left no room for progressivist temporalities either in the sense of Kojève, or in Hegel's original formulation. The subjectivity of Russia's

[84]Biswamoy Pati, 'Interrogating stereotypes: exploring the princely states in colonial Orissa', *South Asia Research*, 25 (2005), pp. 165–82.

[85]See work also discussed by Banerjee and van Lingen, e.g. Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The second homeland: Polish refugees in India* (Delhi, 2012); Pan Guang, *A study of Jewish refugees in China (1933–1945): history, theories and the Chinese pattern* (Singapore, 2019); Swen Steinberg and Anthony Grenville, eds., *Refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe in British overseas territories* (Leiden, 2020); Dubnov and Robson, eds., *Partitions*.

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former aristocratic elites as a group could also be described with the term political 'derecognition'.[86]

In this context, research from outside the European historiography can help flesh out the phenomenon more fully. As Abdesalam Maghraoui has observed, in the 1920s and 1930s Egypt's intellectual elites were seeking to diminish Arab and Islamic influences in the countries in favour of European ones, thus contributing to an advancement of liberal values through culture without supporting democratic representation.[87] Under the reforming Russian empire, the Baltic German intellectuals similarly helped advance a kind of liberalism without democracy – perhaps it could be described as an anti-vernacular form of liberalism. Once the empire itself had disappeared, their ideas had lost their vision of a plausible future. If Kojève's neo-Hegelianism enabled him to join the group of thinkers advancing a new idea of European integration under Cold War conditions, for thinkers like Taube this path was not available.

For thinkers such as Keyserling, Tagore, Ku, and others, insisting on their own versions of Europe's place in world history was a crucial strategic narrative which allowed them to remain true to their own family history. Their sense of self-worth depended on getting across their way of seeing the past, which was orthogonal to the accounts claimed by the new post-imperial regimes. They felt committed to an idea of the West which they could no longer identify with any contemporary political regime. Were these Baltic intellectuals cosmopolitans? In the period in which they were writing, that is, the 1930s or 1940s, the very term cosmopolitanism, or 'rootless cosmopolitanism', had been instrumentalized and linked to anti-Semitic campaigns in both the USSR and the Third Reich.[88] Regardless of their attitudes towards them, it was thus not a term they could use neutrally.

Even the metropolitan cities which had enabled banal forms of cosmopolitan identity had profoundly changed. Located in former centres of power such as Paris, now under German occupation, some of these Baltic intellectuals operated in transitional 'refugee poleis' where they lived alongside other refugees but shared no sense of commonality with them. Others, like Keyserling, resided in demoted provincial seats of princely rule, such as Darmstadt, one of the cities where the dynastic family had lost power in the German revolutions. While the changing political landscape in Europe provided them with a variety of options for political allegiance ranging from opportunism to resistance, there was one area where these Baltic German nobles displayed greater consistency of orientation: their loyalty to their own family history. With these qualities, they remain indispensable witnesses to the unmaking of Europe's imperial worlds, and as such, self-conscious subjects of a tragic kind of global experience.

[86]Dina Gusejnova, 'Changes of status in states of political uncertainty: towards a theory of derecognition', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22 (2019), pp. 272–92.

[87]Abdesalam M. Maghraoui, *Liberalism without democracy: nationhood and citizenship in Egypt, 1922–1936* (Durham, NC, 2006).

[88]On this subject, see my introduction to Dina Gusejnova, ed., *Cosmopolitanism in conflict: imperial encounters from the Seven Years' War to the Cold War* (London, 2018), pp. 1–26.

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