

PART II

The power of prestige

The subject of the following three chapters is the role of aristocratic intellectuals in shaping political discourse and social institutions in inter-war Germany, Austria, as well as Europe at large. When constitutional changes in central Europe and revolutions in Russia announced that old elites, such as the aristocratic families, would lose power in a new society of equals, some representatives of these social groups curiously became highly sought-after public speakers. In the age when aristocratic families were imbued with a sense of 'group disgrace', the aristocratic intellectuals became strangely appealing as global authorities on all things related to European identity at large.

Part of this perception came from the celebrity of particular intellectuals who became Europe's self-proclaimed ambassadors in encounters with non-Europeans. One contemporary called them 'Germany's new prophets'.¹ The photograph of one of these aristocratic celebrities, Count Hermann Keyserling, whom we last came across as a critic of the German war effort, shows him in such a role.

Characteristically, he is not in the centre of this image. The main protagonist is the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose global popularity in the 1920s had much to do with the appeal of his verdict that Europe was in need of revival.² To the left of Tagore is Keyserling's wife, Goedela Bismarck, the German Iron Chancellor's granddaughter. The image represents not just a meeting of different worlds, but a joining of two kinds of continental celebrity: the Indian sage and the former Baltic Baron both speak of Europe's future from the vantage point of aristocratic outsiders.

¹ Norbert Elias, 'Group Charisma and Group Disgrace', in Elias, *Essays III. On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2009), 73–82; Henry de Man, 'Germany's New Prophets', in *Yale Review*, 13:4 (July 1924), 665–683.

² On Rabindranath Tagore's global appeal, see Michael Collins, *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World. Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2011).



Figure 8 Hermann Keyserling with Rabindranath Tagore and Goedela Keyserling
(b. Bismarck).
HKN, ULB Darmstadt

Tagore, a Brahmin, observed Europe from an Indian perspective, while Keyserling, a Baltic aristocrat, considered himself above all nationalities due to his family's relationship to more than one empire. He represented the kind of conversion of elites with inspiration from the Orient, which Max Weber had spoken about in his lecture of 1919. Keyserling's celebrity in interwar high society, not only in Germany but, like Tagore's, also in Britain and in Argentina, was the product of a particular kind of prestige, which was connected to the idea of European decline. This prestige of 'former people' is also the context in which the next chapter places Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's initiative of a Pan-European federation.