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## WORLD CONQUEST THROUGH HEROIC LOVE HOW THE FORTE-KREIS INSPIRED DIMITRIJE MITRINOVIĆ

**Abstract:** Dutch writer, social reformer and utopist Frederik Van Eeden came in contact with Mitrinovic in the summer of 1914. They shared mutual intellectual interests and Van Eeden was already involved with a group of like-minded European intellectuals who aimed to form aspiritual elite that would bring humanity closer together. The author offers a glimpse into the intellectual biography of Van Eeden and Eric Gutkind. With six other German and Dutch intellectuals, they formed a circle in June 1914 in Potsdam that came to be known as Forte Kreis and discussed the future of Europe. The Great War with its national antagonisms put a huge burden on the members of this group, which disintegrated in 1915. The author analysed the correspondence of the members of this group both during the Great War and in the 1920s and 1930s. Its members combined conservative ideas about the aristocracy of the mind with progressive ideas about the unity of peoples. Van Eeden and Mitrinovic shared a cosmopolitan and supranational vision that opposed *nationalitis*. They both wished to see a synthesis of Asian and American cultures. Mitrinovic also worked during the Great War to achieve the same aim as Van Eeden to gather the Kingly of Spirits. The author analyses how the legacy of Forte Kreis influenced the thought and activities of Mitrinovic after World War One and views Forte Kreis as a very important source of inspiration for various activities that Mitrinovic undertook in Britain.

**Keywords:** Frederik van Eeden, Eric Gutkind, Forte Kreis, Kingly of Spirit

*Wir alle, die an das gottvolle Europa von Morgen glauben, und die es vorbereiten und begründen, mitbegründen wollen [...] Wir alle also, von ganzem Kontinent, aus England, aus Russland, auch aus Amerika und aus ganzer Welt müssen gleich den Weltbrände allzerstörend und allschöpferisch zusammen lodern. Das Neue Europe, das Gesamteuropa eigener synthetischen Vollkultur und einer anarchischen Föderation wird sich auf Grundlagen einer des gesamteuropäischen Selbstmordes und Selbstneuschaffen der Religion der Kultur, der Gottmenschheit bauen können. Dimitrije Mitrinović to Frederik van Eeden, 15 August 1914.<sup>1</sup>*

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1 “All of us who believe in the godly Europe of tomorrow, and who want to shape it and justify, and want to build it [...] all of us, from the whole continent, from England, from Russia, also from America and from all over the world, we all must let this all-destroying and all-creating fire blaze. The New Europe, the whole of Europe, as a synthesis of the whole culture and an anarchic federation will be built on the foundations of a pan-European suicide and self-creation of a religion of culture, of a divine humanity.” Frederik van Eeden Archief – Allard Pierson Depot (APD) OTM: hs. XXIV C 58.

## Introduction

The archives of the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam contain a number of letters that Dimitrije Mitrinović wrote to the Dutch writer, psychologist and social reformer Frederik van Eeden in the summer of 1914.<sup>2</sup> The letters provide an interesting picture of the tense atmosphere surrounding the outbreak of the First World War, and reveal how the young Serbian thinker and activist responded to all of this. The letters are also an important historical source for research into the years in which Mitrinović went through a metamorphosis from a South Slav activist and propagandist to a cosmopolitan oriented cultural philosopher, who, both in thoughts and deeds, balanced between the Right and the Left, Avantgarde and Conservatism, the profane and the enchanted and the East and the West. The letters also provide insight into Dimitrije Mitrinović's international networks. After a trip through Germany, which took him to the British racist writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain in Bayreuth and to the Russian avantgarde painter Wassily Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter in Munich, he fled to England – on the eve of the Great War.<sup>3</sup>

Why did he write these letters to the Dutchman Van Eeden? The intellectual interests were definitely mutual. The Dutch utopist saw something special in Mitrinović. He considered this wild, young Slavic thinker a kind of ‘messenger’ he could mobilize for his new, grandiose plans to found a union of geniuses that would save the world from degeneration by using ideas, visions and a ‘kingly spirit’. Mitrinović was eager to get involved in that project. He wrote to Van Eeden, in strange, outlandish German: “I expect your intervention in my loneliness and despair as a release from my chaos and my longing to make myself meaningful and productive during this earthquake of history, and amidst the distress and hell of suffering and ugliness, from all sides.”<sup>4</sup>

The contacts between Frederik van Eeden and Dimitrije Mitrinović developed during a historical period in which the so-called Forte Kreis (*Forte Circle*) was formed, a group of like-minded European intellectuals who aimed to form a spiritual elite that would bring humanity closer together, and eventually, accelerate the realization of a New Man.<sup>5</sup>

2 Ibid.

3 Guido van Hengel, *De zieners* (Amsterdam: Ambo|Anthos, 2018), 27–42. Serbian edition: Idem, *Vidovnjaci* (Belgrade: Klio, 2020), 30–32; Andrew Rigby, *Initiation and Initiative: An Exploration of the Life and Ideas of Dimitrije Mitrinović* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1984), chapters 2 and 3; Predrag Palavestra, *Dogma i Utopija Dimitrije Mitrinovića* (Belgrade: Zavod za Udžbenike, 2003), 248–249.

4 Frederik van Eeden Archief – Allard Pierson Depot (APD) OTM: hs. XXIV C 58.

5 Richard Faber and Christine Holste (eds.), *Der Potsdamer Forte-Kreis: Eine utopische Intellektuellenassoziation zur europäischen Friedenssicherung* (Würzburg: Königshausen und

How can we understand the Forte Kreis, and what was the significance of this circle for the life and work of Dimitrije Mitrinović? In this article I present a picture of the interactions between Frederik van Eeden, the chairman of the Forte Kreis, and Mitrinović. Additionally, I will contextualize these interactions both in the Zeitgeist of the 1910s and 1920s, and, additionally, in the biography of Mitrinović.

### Frederik van Eeden: Evolution into Angels

In 1914, the novelist, poet and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden was not that young anymore. Already in the eighties of the nineteenth century, when Mitrinović was yet to be born, van Eeden had been the voice of a new generation of *literati*. Together with poets such as Willem Kloos and Albert Verwey, he formed the so-called ‘Tachtigers’ (‘Men of the 1880s’), who – as is often the case with rebel movements in literature – stood up against the previous artistic generation. The poets and writers of the Tachtigers wanted to make art for art’s sake, and to develop a lifestyle that was more in line with the complexities of modern life. They were very much inspired by the European Symbolists – a fashionable movement in the literature of the time.<sup>6</sup>

It must be mentioned that, in this group of stargazing bohemians, Frederik van Eeden always remained an outsider, as a man of science. He had studied medicine and acted as a father figure among the rather maladjusted and often drunken and confused poets. His charisma made him a born leader, respected by many. Moreover, he rose above the literary world, as a *homo universalis* with a wide range of interests beyond the genre of literature.

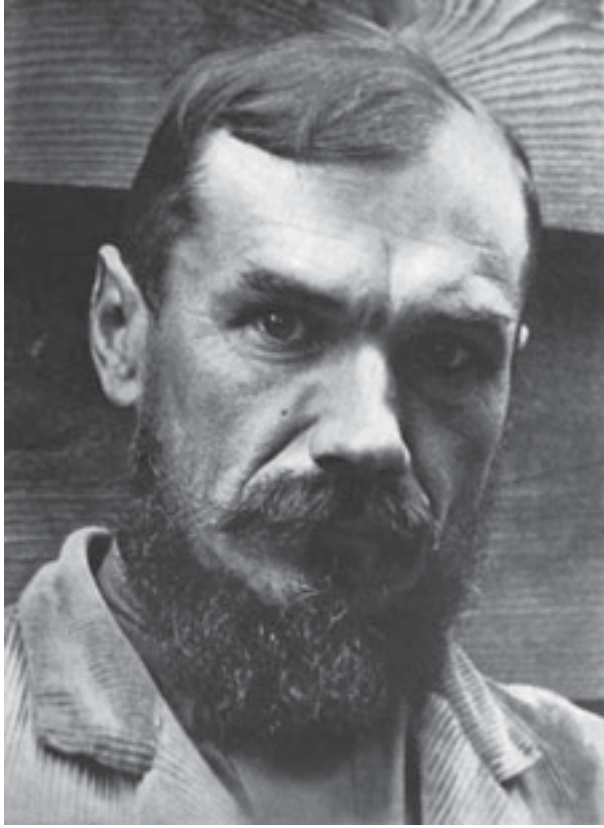
Besides in poetry, he also made a career in science. Van Eeden was an admirer of Charles Darwin, and he devoted much time and energy to reflecting on the evolution of humans and animals. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, Van Eeden linked his knowledge and understanding of evolution to socio-political ideas and even pseudo-religious ideas.<sup>7</sup> Thus,

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Neumann, 2001); Marcel Poorthuis, “The Forte-Kreis: An Utopian Attempt to Spiritual Leadership over Europe“, *Religion and Theology*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1–2 (2017), 32–53; Jan Fontijn, *Trots verbrijzeld: Het leven van Frederik van Eeden vanaf 1901* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1996), chapters 13 and 18; Anna Wołkowicz, *Mystiker der Revolution: Der utopische Diskurs um die Jahrhundertwende* (Warszawa: WUW, 2007).

6 Bart Slijper, *Hemelbestormers: De revolutie van de Tachtigers* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2017).

7 Leonieke Vermeer, *Geestelijke lenigheid: de relatie tussen literatuur en natuurwetenschap in het werk van Frederik van Eeden en Felix Ort, 1880–1930* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2011), 59–81.



*Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932)*

he was convinced that evolution could also mean that man would step-by-step become an increasingly better being, and eventually evolve into a heavenly, good-natured angel. In resonance with the themes of his time, he associated Darwinist evolution with spiritual progress. It should therefore come as no surprise that Van Eeden was one of the early advocates of theosophy in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> In 1900 he wrote a widely discussed article in which he stated that theosophy would tread an important third path between, on the one hand, irrational, traditional and dogmatic religion, and, on the other hand, the rational, cold and technological sciences. He wrote: “The most important thing the Theosophists are trying to popularize is this: that the spiritual stands above the material. That the spiritual is to the material what a maker is to his creation, what a composer is to his composition.”<sup>9</sup>

8 Frederik van Eeden, “Het ontstaan der theosophische beweging” (1900), cited in: Jan Fontijn, *Leven in extase: Opstellen over mystiek en muziek, literatuur en decadentie rond 1900* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1983), 132–33.

9 Ibid.

Around 1900 Frederik van Eeden was an intellectual of European and global stature. His books were translated and widely read in the British Empire and the United States, as well as in the intellectual circles of Vienna and Berlin. He toured and traveled these countries and places, and everywhere his public lectures were attended by many. This also meant that he formed an important link with European networks, leading to friendships with doctors such as Sigmund Freud in Vienna or social reformers as the anarchist Prince Kropotkin, in London.

Van Eeden's ideas could be described as a mix of optimistic, utopian plans, with gloomy reflections on modernity and the modern man. In that respect, Van Eeden was a figure who embodied the European Fin-de-Siècle. It was a time of spiritual fading and lighting, a period of shifting values and ideas, of vitalism and doom-mongering, and of radicalized rationality as well as irrational outbursts. Van Eeden's ideas, therefore, cannot be easily pigeonholed. As a social reformer, he detested the Marxists. As a womanizer, he struggled with his sexuality, his atheist image of God was ambiguous and multi-layered; he was a militant pacifist; he denounced most seers, but he had a great interest in the occult. For Van Eeden, Utopia and the Apocalypse went hand in hand.

An important, if not essential period in Van Eeden's life were the years when he was involved in ecological and agricultural communes. From 1898 onwards he led a colony in Bussum, called "Walden" (named after the famous book by David Henry Thoreau), where artists and nature lovers tried to live autonomously, while regaining contact with both their inner spirit and with Mother Earth. The project garnered much praise and criticism. According to his critics, the intellectual Van Eeden made a mockery of himself by giving meaning to his elitist wish to get in contact with the peasant's world. The colony, in the end, was not a success. Walden went bankrupt in 1907.

It is precisely at this time between the end of Walden and the beginning of the First World War that Van Eeden went through a dramatic change, both in his personal and professional life. He transformed from an optimistic idealist with a keen eye for social problems, to a more elitist, aristocratic intellectual – much less practical, and much more spiritual. He no longer pinned his hopes on the masses, but on a New Type of Man that would elevate the masses to a higher consciousness. Hence, it was during the heyday of the Nietzsche craze in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Van Eeden started thinking about a utopian commune of so-called 'spiritual aristocracy'. He found a kindred spirit in the young philosopher Erich Gutkind. This Berlin-based writer was the man behind the pseudonym 'Volker', who in 1910 had written a mystical *tractatus* promoting the coming era of the 'Deed' (*Die Tat*). The book was titled: *Sidereal Birth: A Seraphic Wandering from the Death of the World to the Baptism of the Deed* (*Sidderische Geburt Seraphische Wanderung vom Tode der Welt zur Taufe der Tat*).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Erich Gutkind (Volker), *Sidderische Geburt: Seraphische Wanderung vom Tode der Welt zur Taufe der Tat* (Berlin: Karl Schnabel, 1910); Marcel Poorthuis, "Erich Gut-

*Siderische Geburt* can best be described as an eclectic mix of theosophy, esotericism and Christian symbolism, all covered under layers of modern Nietzschean thinking about the *Übermensch* and the ‘*Tat*’ (Deed). One of the principles of Gutkind’s philosophy was language criticism. Gutkind thought that one should ‘experience’ (*Erfahren*) the words of *Siderische Geburt*. After all, he believed that language could not capture the (underlying) reality, and hence paranormal perception was necessary to get there. Only initiates, or seers, could capture and understand language. (This way of thinking would later return in the *New Age* columns written by Mitrinović, in his London years throughout the 1920s and 1930s).

On Wednesday, July 13, 1910, Van Eeden wrote in his diary: “In Volker’s *Siderische Geburt* I keep on finding new, invigorating beauties. He continues the line of German Thinkers – from Eckhart to Nietzsche. Like all his predecessors, he writes with a lot of *Wortschall* and makes too much noise in order to be better understood, which is not the way it should be. However, he fully understands that truth is not in words, and he knows what he is doing and how his words are flawed.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Siderische Geburt* would later become one of the most important sources of inspiration for Mitrinović’s work and life, well into the twenties and thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that respect, this book – and its author – formed the link between the world of Frederik van Eeden and that of Dimitrije Mitrinović.

## Erich Gutkind: Heroic Love

Gutkind, the man behind the mysterious ‘Volker’, was born into a wealthy and culturally distinguished Jewish family in Berlin. His father had an empire of textile factories, among other things. In this upper bourgeois environment, much attention was paid to *Kultur* in the broadest sense. Young Erich had studied many disciplines with a private tutor and attended classes at the University of Berlin. The famous Kaballa researcher Gershom Scholem would later describe Gutkind as “a mystical soul who had delved into all disciplines with the aim of finding their secret core”.<sup>12</sup>

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kind, ‘Magical Jew’ and his apocalyptic Visions before the First World War“, *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte*, 110.110 (2016), 177–191; Henry C. Rutherford, *Erich Gutkind as Prophet of the New Age*, 18<sup>th</sup> Foundation lecture of the New Atlantis Foundation, 1975. Available at: [http://www.pkgodzik.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Gutkind/Rutherford\\_\\_Erich\\_Gutkind.pdf](http://www.pkgodzik.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Gutkind/Rutherford__Erich_Gutkind.pdf).

- 11 Wednesday 13 July 1910. Frederik van Eeden’s diaries (Dagboeken DB 1878–1923) can be accessed online via: [https://www.dbnl.nl/tekst/eede003hw-va04\\_01/eede003hwva04\\_01\\_0010.php](https://www.dbnl.nl/tekst/eede003hw-va04_01/eede003hwva04_01_0010.php).
- 12 Gershom Scholem, *Van Berlijn naar Jeruzalem*. Translated by Yge Foppema (Amstelveen: Amphora, 1982), 79.



*Upton Sinclair, Frederik van Eeden and Erich Gutkind in Berlin, 1912*

In 1910, the *Siderische Geburt* was read in many cultural and intellectual avant-garde circles in Germany. Besides Scholem and Van Eeden, the members of the Blaue Reiter in Munich also read the book. Gabrielle Münter, Kandinsky's muse, wrote about it to the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg: "[...] I must definitely draw your attention to a book that I think will also give you pleasure and satisfaction. And to the author, who is certainly a remarkable, special person. [...] I plow through it slowly, unfortunately with interruptions. I take as much as I can take. I can't quite go along with it, and at the end it gets too vague for me. But it goes through my hands like the links of a heavy gold chain, piece by piece, sentence by sentence..."<sup>13</sup> This reading took place when Mitrinović regularly visited Kandinsky and Münter, and was in close and regular contact

13 Letter of Gabriele Münter to Arnold Schönberg, 20 August 1912, in Jelena Hahl-Koch (ed.), *Arnold Schoenberg – Wassily Kandinsky – Letters, Pictures and Documents* (London/Boston: Faber & Faber, 1984), 55.

with the Avantgarde of the Blaue Reiter and the bohemia of Schwabing – Munich’s legendary artistic quarter.

Van Eeden and Gutkind started a correspondence and exchanged warm-hearted and complicated letters about the future time and the future man. After a few letters, the two met in Berlin. Many years later, Gutkind described the encounter as a kind of cosmic fusion. He wrote: “Very rarely had I met a human being with such an enormously powerful presence and reality. Van Eeden was full of “Orenda”, an ancient word of the magical cultures, which means a mixture of overwhelming power, leadership and enchanting power. [...] A beautifully strong body, like that of a panther. The hand – the pressure of this hand I will feel forever – was like the Earth glowing with the Sun. Most overwhelming, however, were the eyes, which incessantly sprayed sparks and flashes.”<sup>14</sup>

Van Eeden was also delighted about meeting Gutkind. He wrote to a friend in a letter: “I am here [in Berlin] in daily conversation with Gutkind, the author of *Siderische Geburt*. There is your man, our man, the man this world seeks, or rather waits for, without knowing whom they’re looking for.”<sup>15</sup>

Van Eeden and Gutkind found common ground in the plan to found a new community, this time not for people with interest in ecological or agricultural communes, but for the kind of people like themselves, which they baptized the ‘Kingly of Spirit’. In 1912 they wrote the book *World Conquest through Heroic Love (Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe)*, which was supposed to become the blueprint of the commune to be founded for the Kingly of Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Who were these people, the Kingly of Spirit? “We know them from history as prophets, poets, wise men,” wrote Gutkind and Van Eeden. Humanity, and certainly that of the then early twentieth century, is like a herd. The exceptions quickly stand out; these are the people who are not formed by the herd, but vice versa: they form the herd. The energy that springs from “their inexhaustible spirit” forms rivers from which all mankind is “spiritually and materially nourished”.<sup>17</sup>

14 Erich Gutkind, “Von Freundschaft”, in J. Terpstra (ed.), *Liber Amicorum Dr. Frederik Van Eeden: Aangeboden Ter Gelegenheid van Zijn Zeventigsten Verjaardag, 3 April 1930* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1930), 68.

15 Letter of Frederik van Eeden to Lady Welby, 7 October 1910, in Frederik van Eeden, “Briefwisseling met Lady Welby”, *Mededelingen Van Eeden Genootschap* 14 (1954), 88.

16 Frederik van Eeden and Volker, *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1911).

17 *Ibid.*, 101.



They describe the dynamics between those wholly unique individuals and humanity in terms of 'growth' and 'growing up', but also as parts of one organism, which matures in its entirety. This could be understood as a metaphor: the individual great minds are a kind of brain that controls the rest of humanity as limbs of one body. At the same time, humanity is again an organ of the world, of the earth, which we cannot perceive in its entirety.

The tone of *World Conquest through Heroic Love* is strongly reminiscent of what Mitrović himself would later write, and the eclectic, sometimes bizarre mix of theosophy, socialism, Christian mysticism, Nietzschean thought, psychology and cultural criticism was an important source of inspiration.

This is illustrated in the letters Mitrović wrote to Van Eeden as early as 1914: "Through *World Conquest through Heroic Love* I realized that there is willpower to internalize, and a belief in the future, an urge to rebuild our culture, and the idea of a collaboration of the highest culture-bearers (*Kulturträger*) of Europe and the world..."<sup>18</sup>

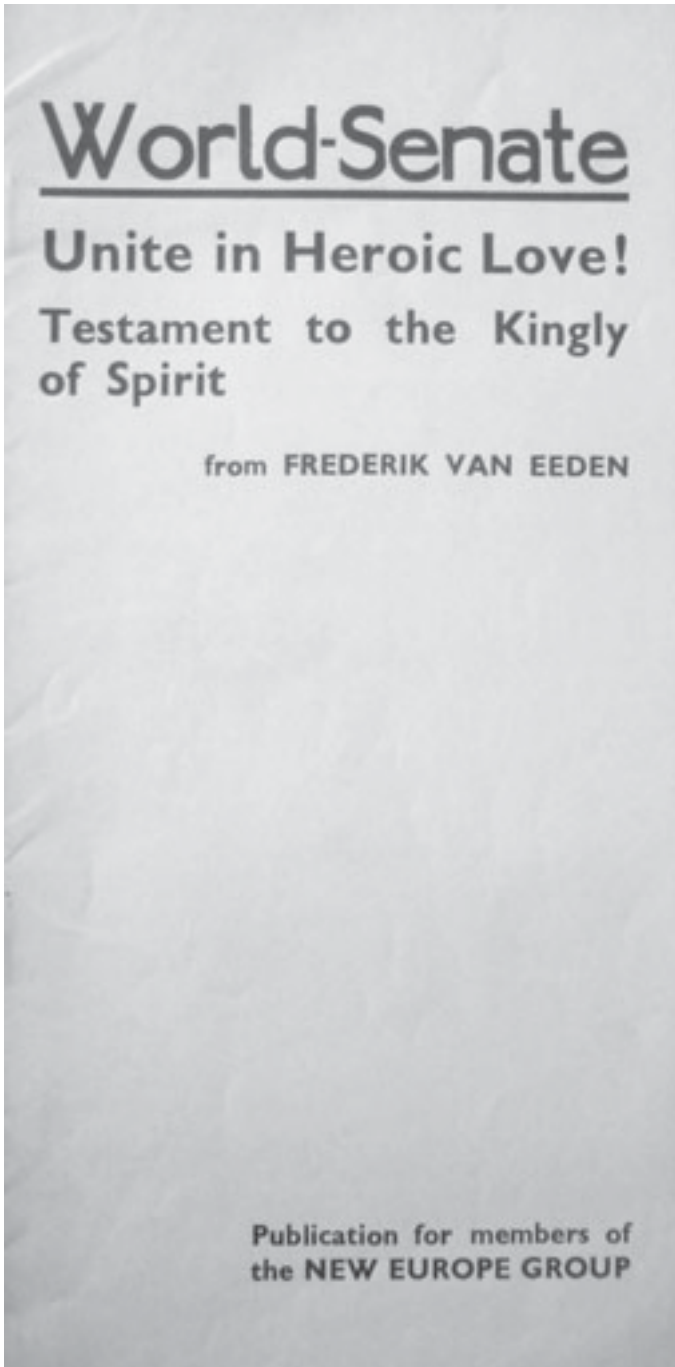
### Kingly of Spirit

It was not a dream after all. The gathering of Europe's chosen *Kulturträger* did take place in Potsdam, outside of Berlin. In June 1914 Van Eeden and Gutkind welcomed the Kingly of Spirit to talk about forming a circle. Indeed, the list of attendees included a few notable names, also for those times, such as the anarchist Gustav Landauer and the Jewish writer Martin Buber. Not so well-known names were the Dutch sinologist Henri Borel and the German writer Florens Christian Rang. A total of eight persons were present, all men, and mostly from Germany and the Netherlands. The program of the meeting included long discussions about the future of Europe, the role of women or the metaphysical encounter between the Germanic and Jewish races, but also practical matters, such as how the circle would develop further and who would fund it. The group later went down in history as the Forte Kreis, because of the planned follow-up meeting in Capri, at the Forte dei Marmi (which never took place). It must have been a special encounter, there in Potsdam. Afterwards, van Eeden wrote in his diary that the mind hovered over these 'Knights of the Round Table'. It was "the spirit, the spirit of God, the spirit of liberty in community, of humility in pride, of riches in poverty."<sup>19</sup>

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18 Letter dated 15 August 1914. Frederik van Eeden Archief – Allard Pierson Depot (APD) OTM: hs. XXIV C 58.

19 DB 1878–1923, 13 June 1914.



*The English translation of Frederik van Eeden's booklet "World Senate. Unite in Heroic Love! Testament to the Kingly of Spirit", published by the New Europe Group*

That same month, Gutkind set out in search of new members for this group. Hence, he visited Jena to meet Mitrinović there. It is not known exactly what they discussed in Jena, but afterwards Gutkind wrote to Van Eeden that Mitrinović might be the key to the Slavic world for the predominantly German-Dutch circle. He wrote: “Dear friend, we had very nice days in Jena. We had a very curious and at the same time very useful appointment with a Serb: [Dimitrije] Mitrinović. A young, real Slavic hothead, a deep mind, who has very strange plans and wants to publish a yearbook for the most important people to contribute to. [...] After two days of pleasant debates in Jena, I was able to commit [...] it is about proposing a united Europe, a Unified Europe...”<sup>20</sup>

In that same month, however, the Great War broke out, and the plans for a ‘Unified Europe’, of course, came to nothing. As an Austro-Hungarian citizen, Mitrinović had to flee his military service, and with the help of Gutkind he disappeared to Ostend to take a boat to England from there. Gutkind promised Mitrinović that his friend Van Eeden, who was well acquainted with all kinds of intellectual and artistic circles in London, could help him find something to do in England, at least for the upcoming months.

The different Kingly of Spirits continued to correspond with each other during the war months, first enthusiastically, but increasingly in bitter wordings. Because the correspondence was intended to feed further discussions at the next meeting at the Forte dei Marmi in Capri, they forwarded everything to each other. For that reason, it is actually possible to get a good picture of the correspondence in which many famous names took part: Landauer, who later became minister in the Bavarian republic of Munich, and Buber, but also Romain Rolland, the French writer. The entrepreneur Walter Rathenau, who later would become the interwar minister of the Weimar Republic, was involved in these correspondences as well.

Studying the Forte-Kreis correspondence – which reads as a chaotic interaction, not unlike a 21<sup>st</sup> century WhatsApp group chat, though written in a more elaborate, well-educated vocabulary – emerges that three major themes were central: first, what the outcome of the Great War for the future of Europe would be. Would Europe’s culture be purified or destroyed? Regeneration or degeneration? Second, would violence be the solution or the problem of the coming European culture? And three: how do individual developments and characters relate to collectives, both nationally and ideologically? To what extent does the individual contain or represent the seeds for the wholesome, new-to-be realized culture?

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20 Letter of Erich Gutkind to Frederik van Eeden, 26 August 1914. Frederik van Eeden Archief – Allard Pierson Depot (APD) OTM: hs. XXIV C33.

## God-Human

Van Eeden was the chairman of the group. He coordinated and distributed all the letters that went back and forth between the Netherlands, Germany, England, France and Sweden. As chairman, he was unambiguously outspoken against the violence of war, while some of the other intellectuals rather took on an ambivalent or even enthusiastic attitude. Martin Buber, for example, the calm teller of Chassidic tales, mused on the violence as ‘purification of the mind’. He wrote to Van Eeden that he should see the war as a kind of ‘plough’ that would plow the earth of Europe. “After the war, the big task begins, but now the plough is doing its job. The plowed earth will catch the seeds that will fall into it.”<sup>21</sup> In the same time, a similar remark was also made by Mitrinović in his letter to Van Eeden in December 1914: “The war has done half of what the very best of all mankind and of all peoples in long centuries would not get done: the war has destroyed what was god-less in Europe. Now a new race will come that will build and live.”<sup>22</sup>

Gutkind was even more enthusiastic about the war. The way to the ‘God-Human’ was now open, and the “wild, chaotic destruction is a necessary and creative organ for that”. Rang, the Prussian philosopher, saw in the outbreak of the war a *Stunde der Welt* (World-Hour) and decided for himself to go to the front, even though he was already in his fifties. He wrote the following to his fellows in the Forte Kreis: ‘I am wearing the uniform of a German officer ... I cannot shut down my soul for a few days; I now live in the foreground of my being, I am all blood and nerves, I am trembling, a slaughter horse [...]’<sup>23</sup>

A more pacifist, neutral approach came from Frederik van Eeden, and the German anarchist Landauer. They were shocked by what they called the ‘nationalitis’ of their fellow circle members. Van Eeden counterattacked, and Landauer largely stood aside – in disgust. The first friendships were broken during the first months of the war. This also immediately brought up an important theme: how do individual characters relate to collective communities, be it national, ethnic, as well as ideological, or social?

21 Letter cited in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Early Year 1878–1923* (New York: Dutton, 1981), 194.

22 Letter dated 15 August 1914. APD-OTM: hs. XXIV C 58.

23 Letter of Florenz Christian Rang, December 1914. Cited in Fenneken van Doesum, *Koninklijken van Geest: De vriendschap tussen Frederik van Eeden en Erich Gutkind* (Groningen: uitgave eigen beheer, 2006), 104. The correspondence of the Forte Circle is kept in the International Institute for Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam, in the Gustav Landauer Papers (GLP), 24–26.

In a heated exchange between Romain Rolland and Erich Gutkind they addressed each other as respectively a Frenchman and a German. It appears that all circle-members transformed into symbols and representatives of different European cultures, not just in terms of belonging, but also as spiritual entities. Gutkind wrote to Van Eeden that the ‘French Soul’ had once contributed to the deepening of the European soul, but that it had ceased to be relevant in modern times. For him, the ‘German understanding of life’ would be decisive for the future of the European man, and the acclaimed *Sidereal birth*, which made it possible to arrive at deeper insights and higher truths. Rolland responded in a letter to Gutkind: “It’s nice to be an *Übermensch*. But it is more beautiful and much more difficult to be human. Germany, since Nietzsche, has been living in a kind of perpetual delirium. His apoplectic mysticism has troubled their view.”

Van Eeden and Gutkind, the founders of the circle, got into a fierce debate. The Dutch writer wrote bitter letters to his former friend: “O you unfortunate man! Your letter of the 14th touched me like on a battlefield. I look into an abyss... your soul is sick, and because I love you I must tell you, sincerely. After all, I know your weaknesses. I know how easily you can be impressed. When I got to know you it was Franciscus of Assisi, now it’s the Prussian General Staff.[...][The idea of] calling the English Empire ‘money’ and the German Empire ‘spirit’ shows enormous ignorance and narrow-mindedness, just like the view that Jews are just obsessed with money. [...] your hatred and anger are idiotic and criminal, [...] and I call it blasphemy to associate Johann Sebastian Bach and Meister Eckhart to this slaughter and fire.”

These interactions show how national culture was, one way or the other, impersonated in the individual members of the circle. The meaning of that national culture was, as the cited letter shows, disputed. Van Eeden decided to turn his back on Gutkind – the misguided German. He wrote: ‘If you speak of “growing karma”, I will tell you where I found it. Rather with the Serb Mitrinović [...] than with a German.’”

## World-Synthesis

The discussions in the correspondence of the Forte Kreis crisscrossing Europe provide an excellent illustration of the complex ideas that still belonged together around 1914–1915, but that would crystallize further in the following years, and certainly in the 1920s and 1930s. As such, the Forte Kreis combined conservative ideas about the aristocracy of the mind with progressive ideas about the unity of peoples. The desire to bridge national differences by creating a ‘New Man’ collided at the same

time with the question of whether a particular nationality (the German, the Dutch, or the ‘Slavic’) would be leading towards the realization of that ‘New Man’.

Frederik van Eeden, however, did not want to see the contradictions in the context of national identities. He believed, above all, that there was a contrast between elevated and less exalted spirits. Similar, although not identical, thoughts can be found in Mitrinović’ letters. Mitrinović wrote about the ‘Synthesis of the Whole Culture (*Vollkultur*)’ and the struggle against lower-spirited people. The discourse he used for this appears rather awkward to a reader in the twenty-first century. He spoke of the “Untermenschen” who had drawn the world into the most short-sighted racial hatred, that of “Aryans against Aryans”. Yet it is a matter of debate how Van Eeden’s idea of ‘spiritual royalty’ and ‘Kingly of Spirit’ resonated with Mitrinović’s ideas about the ‘God-Mankind’. However, what definitely did overlap was their shared focus on the *supranational* and *cosmopolitan* perspective, and their vision of a Europe that goes beyond national identities, and the curse of the *nationalitis*.

This global, cosmopolitan view that went beyond the very national struggle of Europe brought Van Eeden and Mitrinović closer together. Unlike a synthesis of Germans and the French, they sought a synthesis in which Asian and American cultures would also play a role. Mitrinović wrote of the “synthesis of the culture of Europe, a whole culture re-established or even first-established by India and the Slavic World, building on an Americanized Europe.”<sup>24</sup>

In light of this, there was in 1915 still talk of Mitrinović joining the Forte Kreis. Van Eeden thought it was a good idea, but Gutkind was skeptical. He wondered if Mitrinović was a mature enough thinker for the Forte Kreis. It did not work out anyway. The group broke up in the same year, and would never get back together. After the First World War, Right-wing paramilitaries (*Die Freikörper*) in Germany would end the lives of both Gustav Landauer and Walter Rathenau. The members of the Forte Kreis went their own separate ways.

After the First World War, Van Eeden would continue his career in other fields: first in the peace movement, then in journalism, and subsequently in spiritualism, trying to make contact with the non-visible world, while looking for wisdom. Eventually, in the 1920s he converted to Catholicism. Only Gutkind would try many more times to revitalize and regroup the Forte Kreis, each time without success. The Jewish thinker would lead a rather miserable and troubled life in the Weimar Republic, partly in the company of his friends Walter Benjamin and Gershom

24 APD-OTM: hs. XXIV C 58.

Scholem.<sup>25</sup> When the Nazis came to power, he fled to the United States, where he taught at the New School in New York.<sup>26</sup> He died in 1965.

## Dimitrije Mitrinović and the Forte Kreis

Retrospectively, the tale of the Forte-Kreis seems like a tragicomic footnote in the history of the First World War: it started with great ideals, and it ended in a silly failure. It all happened indoors, in expensive salons or summer residences. The men of letters attacked each other with words, while at the same time hundreds of thousands of men died in the trenches of the European front lines. In short, the Forte Kreis produced very little. Yet in those years of rapprochement between these European intellectuals, there were a few thought-provoking and relevant ideas that shaped the personal worldviews of the persons involved, including Mitrinović.

The archives of the New Atlantis Foundation in Bradford clearly show how Mitrinović took up his task as ‘messenger’ of the Forte Kreis and the Kingly of Spirits. He approached countless intellectuals across Europe to contribute to that spiritual aristocracy who would be at the forefront of shaping a new man, a new Europe, and a synthesis of the Whole Culture. It appears from the letters to Van Eeden that he had made contact with various people, from H.G. Wells to George Bernhard Shaw, and from Paul Selver to Stanisław Przybyszewski, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Rudolf Eucken, Emile Verhaeren and Ivan Mestrovic. He showed great zeal to gather the Kingly of Spirits, in the same way as Van Eeden and Gutkind had aimed to do so.<sup>27</sup>

After the First World War, Mitrinović would find a new life destination in England. He had not found that destination in the Forte-Kreis, but indeed he would forever work on building circles and initiating groups, communities, clubs, associations and societies. In that respect, he had learned something from the especially German need to come together in *Bunden* and *Kreisen*, a fashion that had inspired Gutkind and Van Eeden too.<sup>28</sup>

25 Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 173.

26 Letter of Erich Gutkind to Winnifred Gordon Fraser, 1933. Bradford University Library – New Atlantis Foundation, 3/3/2; *The New School for Social Research 1934–1935*. New School course catalogues; *New School Archives and Special Collections Digital Archive*.

27 It must be mentioned that the endeavors to collect intellectuals were supposed to contribute to both the *Forte Circle* (also known as *Blutbund*) and the *Aryan Yearbook* Mitrinovic had envisioned.

28 See: Richard Faber and Christine Holste eds., *Kreise-Gruppen-Bünde: Zur Soziologie moderner Intellektuellenassoziation* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000).

One crucial aspect of the Forte Kreis recurred later in much of Mitrinović's work. That was dialogue. Martin Buber later admitted that his concept of the highly influential book *Ich und Du* (I and Thou) had its origins in his experiences in the Forte Kreis.<sup>29</sup> The sharp and hot-tempered dialogues he conducted in Potsdam with the German-Prussian Rang about the Jewish-German relations had made him realize how a dialogue between man and man could also be a dialogue between culture and culture, or one humanity against another. In other words, if one really opens up himself to engage in a dialogue with the other, he can touch and get to know the meaning of the wholeness of humanity. Buber elaborated these ideas in *I and Thou*. There are no particular references in the Bradford archive that show whether Mitrinović appreciated or merely read Buber's work, but it is known that he received these ideas in a watered-down version through Gutkind, who continued to correspond with Buber well into the interwar period.<sup>30</sup>

Another crucial aspect of the Forte Kreis is the concept of a minor utopia. The Kreis saw itself as the seed of a new humanity. No force would be needed to make it grow. Van Eeden referred to the long-distance perspective of his *World Conquest through Heroic Love*: "A patient little booklet that will tolerate the cold gaze of thousands of skeptical eyes. That is entirely fine. Ridicule, disbelief, irony and skepticism only confirm its calm message. [...] Booklets do not seldom outlive their author – and there is also a coming generation."<sup>31</sup>

The idea that humanity could develop in a small room, in a small company, or even in one individual, was the basic idea of the Forte Kreis.<sup>32</sup> It was about the smallest possible utopia, that of the beginning, which can sprout up in the mind. In line with this, Mitrinović, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, would seldom aspire to founding a major popular movement. He preferred to penetrate the deeper meaning of cul-

29 Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Ditzingen: Reklam, [1923] 2010); Frans Hartensveld, *De mystiek van de ontmoeting: Over Martin Buber* (Utrecht, Kok: 2014).

30 Buber's influence is definitely recognizable in: Erich Gutkind, *The Absolute Collective: A philosophical Attempt to Overcome our Broken State* (London: C.W. Daniel Company Ltd., 1937).

31 Frederik van Eeden, *Geestelijke verovering der wereld* (Amsterdam: Arcanum, [1912] 1977), translated by Henri Borel (1933), 78.

32 No doubt the sinologist Henri Borel brought in elements of Taoism and the idea of Wu Wei ("action through non-action") into the Forte Circle. Borel was one of the pioneering researchers of Chinese philosophy in the Netherlands, and beyond. In 1903 he published: *Wu Wei, a Phantasy based on the philosophy of Lao-Tse* (London: Luzac). Martin Buber was influenced by Taoism as well. See: Irene Eber, "Martin Buber and Taoism." *Monumenta Serica*, Maney Publishing, Vol. 42 (1994), 445–64.



tures, eras, and spheres in the contact – yes, the dialogue – between man and man.

Van Eeden died in 1932, but Mitrinović lived through times when Great Ideas or seemingly absurd concepts about the *Sidereal Birth* or the coming of New Ages became disturbingly realistic. The Fascists, Communists and National-Socialists took the *Zeitgeist* by the throat and demanded and requested entirely *new* worlds, inhabited by a *new* type of people, having *new* territorial empires or territorial ambitions, and sharing or aiming at *new* forms of consciousness, togetherness and *new* hierarchies.

For that reason, it is as fascinating as it is terrifying to read an English translation of *World Conquest through Heroic Love* in one of Mitrinović's colorful cultural journals called *New Atlantis*, in 1934. The piece is ominously titled "A Testament to the Kingly of Spirit".<sup>33</sup>

This 'testament' could be explained in two ways. First, Frederik van Eeden had died two years earlier. Hence, it can be read as an ode to the Dutch utopian and writer. But one could also read it differently, as a farewell to an era when grandiose thoughts were not yet realistic, but mainly the fruits of dreamy, stargazing intellectuals in rooms, behind closed doors.

The same magazine also contains translations of Erich Gutkind's contributions to the blueprint of the Forte Kreis. It is titled "Our Religion of Steel". It states, in English: "Poverty merely hinders the coming of the new Necessity, that holy necessity which leads us to the End and Aim of our spirit and of our world: which will make us steep and electric, which produces by force a new race of mariners on new and dangerous seas."

In 1912, when *World Conquest through Heroic Love* was published, this fragment sounded vague and unclear, in a typical dreamy Fin-de-Siècle style. In 1934, the quote conjures up a very different, more realistic picture. After all, the same edition of the magazine *New Atlantis* included an open letter to the new Chancellor of Germany, whose name was Adolf Hitler.

## Conclusions

How did the Forte-Kreis, this footnote in the intellectual history of early twentieth-century Europe, inspire Mitrinović to his life's purposes in England? It is important to answer this question by looking beyond the networks of Van Eeden, Gutkind and Mitrinović, and put it in the context of the spirit of their time.

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<sup>33</sup> Bradford University Library: New Atlantis Foundation, *New Atlantis*, January 1934: 74–75.

First, the Forte Kreis gives insight into the intellectual networks of Mitrinović and how these networks were imbued with meanings. Members of the Forte Kreis and their like-minded companions across Europe all adopted and internalized the complicated and contradictory ideas of modernity around 1914. These ideas were paradoxical and contradictory because they combined progressive, avant-garde visions with very conservative ideas about human races and hierarchical societies. In the decades after 1914, that fatal mix would erupt, on the one hand in the modern arts, and, on the other hand, in the worst nightmares of the KZ-Lager and the Gulag. Mitrinović stood at that crossroads and had to make a choice.

Second, the Forte Kreis had been an example of how the philosophy of the ‘deed’ could be experienced to ‘experience’. Gutkind had, in his *Siderische Geburt*, combined ideas on time and epochs by adding the aspect of the ‘deed’. A new era could be entered by taking action, by reaching the future as it went ‘through’ the experience. From all kinds of articles and columns by Mitrinović well into the 1940s it appears that he had taken this interpretation of the new age, in line with *Siderische Geburt*, as a guideline. Utopia, basically, began by making the first step towards it.

But even more than idealistic and substantive inspiration, he had learned from the Forte-Kreis how to give meaning to life – the personal, individual life. He had initially put himself at the service of Gutkind and Van Eeden. But after that seemed to have failed, he realized that perhaps he could launch himself as a Kingly of Spirit. The circumstances for engaging in that endeavor were rather favorable: England offered him a clean slate, a new beginning. He was freed from his role in the Young Bosnian movement in Sarajevo, and he was no longer a Slavic student in the intoxicating bohemia of Munich. He could take his own position and choose his followers in London, the capital of a global empire. From the Forte-Kreis debacle, he understood that he shouldn’t look for the companion of H.G. Wells, George B. Shaw or Peter Kropotkin, who weren’t waiting for him, to say the least. Instead, he would improve humanity by gathering like-minded people who had not yet established a name in any artistic or intellectual discipline.

The Forte-Kreis, in all its inadequacy and unworldliness, thus formed the inspiration. He had learned to gather people around him, as followers, in order to discover and rediscover himself, over and over again throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. It was London, not Berlin or Potsdam, that became the setting for this personal and spiritual quest.

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