

# **Secret Nazi Plans for Eastern Europe: Geography and Spatial Planning in the Third Reich**

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## **1. Introduction**

National Socialism and the end of the Second World War led to the end of the German Reich and to the division of Germany into four parts. The events of 1989 and 1990, the weakening of the iron curtain and the separation of Europe into East and West let us think of the whole story in a new way and leads us to a new reflection of the history of Germany in the European context.

The focus of my paper is the practice of geography as a discipline, geographers as experts and the professional practice during the creation of the national socialist living space in the East as well as the creation of Germany after 1945.

Specifically, I would like to point out three issues:

1. The ideological sphere, that is the intellectual origins of geographical concepts, the ever-wider public debate on the during the Weimar Republic, and finally their place within National Socialist Ideology.

2. How these concepts were transformed and translated into reality within the political influence of academic experts during the period 1933 to 1945, that is the realization of these ideas with the Second World War and the Expansion to the East.

3. The situation in 1945, when the same geographers were hired by American agencies

to draw the maps of the divided Germany and to be involved in the creation of a post-war-Europe.

## 2. Geographical Concepts in the Weimar Republic and the Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism<sup>1</sup>

From the turn of the century, geographers both developed, and helped shape, concepts which after 1933 had a considerable public and political utility. All these complex developments can be described as a form of «geographical-political discourse».

«Land, sea and most recently air space constitute the ways in which the state organizes its territorial power over a populated part of the earth's surface. Geographical-political discourse was a product of the 19th century colonial imperialism. In the course of the 20th century this discourse assumed in the form of geopolitics in the broadest sense, which in turn was directly associated with the apparatus of the state, and represented the strategic articulation of the relationship between political power and the organization of the earth surface.»<sup>2</sup>

Under the Nazi regime, geographers shaped one of the most controversial and dubious concepts ever to emanate from the discipline as a whole, namely «*Lebensraum*», a concept which Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) introduced into political-geographical discourse. The concept was adopted by numerous academic geographers, and political pundits, and, in the form of a popular political slogan within national socialist ideology, it assumed practical importance for expansionist policies in the East.

Here, I would like to concentrate upon the specific relationships between the key concepts and metaphors «*Lebensraum*», «*Drang nach Osten*», and «*Volks- und Kulturboden*» the latter created by the eponymous Leipziger «*Stiftung für Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung*». These three concepts enjoyed wide currency under the Nazi regime, and by the same token among contemporary geographers, too. During the Weimar Republic geographers were much in evidence in a number of important lobby groups founded in the 1920s, among others, the Colonial Society, the Pan-German League, the German National Peoples Party and the Fatherland Party, many of which were either led or influenced by prominent academic geographers. Their academic work increasingly corresponded with their political objectives. Public political discussion of the concept of «*Lebensraum*» affected academic work in this area, as the concept gradually was permeated with new ideas. This was particularly the case with racial-biological ideas, which originally had no connection with the academic concept of «*Lebensraum*», except in so far as racism was more or less latent in all imperialistic ideologies of the 19th century. The basic assumptions of *Lebensraum* focused on culture and environment, but the functional link with biological racism was made in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of its adoptions as aspect of Nazi ideology, the concept became intertwined with two other crucial elements, firstly the racist doctrine of a *Herrenvolk*, a superior race (that was the nordic germanic tribe over all other races) and secondly the direction to the East. The final form of the Nazi concept of *Lebensraum* was then developed during National Socialism with the occupation of Poland and the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Scientific and political discourse: The geographers debate on *Lebensraum* in 1942

At the time of the greatest extension of the German *Reich* in 1942 geographers started a debate on the concept of *Lebensraum* in the well known German Geographical periodical «*Geographische Zeitschrift*».

The debate was opened with «An attempt to clarify the term «*Lebensraum*»<sup>5</sup> suggesting that this term had been transformed. The author defined a hierarchy of people, a relationship to the Volk and more concretely, that a *Lebensraum* exists only for a Volk. The Jews, for example, were for him not to be regarded as a Volk in a true sense because of their «lack of spatial relationship».<sup>6</sup>

He made a distinction between «*Lebensraum*», «*Ergänzungsraum*», a wider area with no real root, and «*Scheinlebensraum*», a apparent *Lebensraum* in relation to foreign trade. Geographers at that time believed that it was essential to use their knowledge to establish the new borders of the Greater German Reich (*Grossraum*).

In the earlier academic debate, Schmitthenner had argued for a new «Western» *Grossraum*, a major region, linked with an extension towards tropical Africa.<sup>7</sup> Obst, another geographer had also argued for a major regional block including Europe and Africa, but Flohr declined the use of the term *Lebensraum* for such a large area. In addition, Heinrich Schmitthenner contributed his own idea of *Lebensraum*. He put forward his concept of 'active' and 'passive' living space and *Lebensspielraum*, which means a wider area of the state and the *Lebensraum*.

A further contribution was provided by Hans Schrepfer under the title «What is meant by *Lebensraum*. An essential definition?»<sup>8</sup> In his article he criticized the usage of the term, as highly dubious and wished to limit it to the biological and economic fields. He concludes with the following words: «German Geography today is proud to make its results and its work available to the service of the Volk and the leadership of the state... Even more important than pure geography is its application and usefulness... In this connection the use of this term by geographers brings out the danger of using scientific language in a popular sense, which cannot reach the level of scientific debate.»<sup>9</sup>

These geographers attempted to save the term «*Lebensraum*» as an academic concept at a time when their colleagues in the field of military and applied geography had a much more practical engagement in fighting for German space. This space for in the course of the Second World War went far beyond the *Lebensraum* concept of the «*Volks- und Kulturboden*» of earlier years.

### 4. Research and execution of the *Lebensraum* Policy

Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the way in which the ideological sphere is linked with practical matters, that means the concrete contributions of geographers to the developments of the Nazi state in the Second World War.

Although the Nazis did not create a single chair for geopolitics<sup>10</sup> in the occupied Eastern territories, and although there was no seminar for geopolitical studies and only a handful of essays on the subject were produced, the state had nonetheless a keen interest in a number of research institutes which included departments of geography.<sup>11</sup>

The main geographical concept used in these institutions was the «*Volks- und Kulturbodentheorie*», the theory of peoples and cultural soil, which was already developed by prominent geographers during the 1920s.

It consisted of three assumptions:

1. The German *Reich*, in principle the state borders
2. The German ethnic territory, the *Volksboden*, meant a wider area mainly settled by German people.
3. The German cultural area, *Kulturboden*, a wider area, where their cultural influence in the broadest sense was predominant.

This last concept, which stood in marked contrast to the actual national-political frontiers, was of fundamental importance to geographical research until 1945.

Both the frontier created by the Treaty of Versailles,<sup>12</sup> and the complex ethnic interrelationships in the lost Eastern territories of the German Reich became a central concern within academic research, a state of affairs which persisted after 1933. This research received considerable financial support from the state in both the Weimar Republic and under the Nazi regime. For example, the *Nordostdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (NODFG) was responsible for numerous interdisciplinary studies of ethnic «*Germandom*» in both Poland and the Baltic region.

In 1943 these «ethnic research associations» were incorporated, under the leadership of a geographer, and into the Reich Main Security Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) of the SS, where they were known collectively as the «Reich's Foundation for Geographical Studies».

These agencies were involved in the multi-layered evaluation of territories to the East of the German Reich. Concretely, this involved the collection and analysis of population statistics, the calculation of optimal population density, and how this material thus assembled could be displayed in the form of maps and charts. Studies of this type existed prior to the German invasion of Poland, but with the conquest of ever-wider areas in the East this type of research was intensified.

The Nazi regime's need for accurate and detailed knowledge of the occupied lands in the East directly benefitted this area of research: several new research teams and entire institutes came into existence. To mention only one example, the «East European Research Community» was established in 1942 as an extension to the NODFG. It was particularly concerned with research on ethnic *Germandom* in Russia or in the Ukraine.

The ethnic German Research Associations in turn created so-called Publication Offices, which produced, among other things, detailed maps of ethnic relations in the USSR, or maps showing the proportion of ethnic Germans in the various constituent states of the

USSR, including maps of individual ethnic German villages. These had considerable importance for the planned, and partially realized «resettlement» of ethnic Germans under the slogan «home to the Reich». Ethnic-geographical research was one of the most important fields of study during both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.

After 1945 however, research in a form so closely compromised by its involvement with the Nazi regime, was not pursued further. In 1947 Carl Troll wrote, «Today, where the ordering of ethnic relations throughout Central Europe has undergone an ethnic migration of such vast dimensions, a large part of the facts produced by regional and ethnic research has become history with one blow. How will future generations regard the published results of such careful research, which even shortly before the great transformation was set down on paper.»<sup>13</sup> Finally, one should mention a further organization, namely the «Reich Study Group for Area Research», which was founded in 1936 under the Four Year Plan, to carry out regional evaluations of the various parts of the «Old Reich»,<sup>14</sup> the *Altreich*, itself. This brings me to a further field of studies, that is area research and spatial planning.

In so far as the study of Raum (space) was interdisciplinary and concerned with concrete ethnic-political goals, it broke new ground and represented a departure from the traditional organization of a discipline like geography in the universities. *Raumforschung* was soon practiced in every German university, and already by 1939 a research project existed with important military ramifications, namely a project called «the German East».

As an economist wrote in 1944, «*Raumforschung* and *Raumplanung*» were confronted with «mighty tasks» at this time.

«If German Raum formation is to measure up to the new economic, logistical, social and demographic-political objectives, then changes in the composition of towns on a huge scale, the dispersal of major cities and industrial centers, the relocation of factories and the resettlement of people and other transformations will have to be tackled.»<sup>15</sup>

In view of the far-reaching scope of these plans, it is hardly surprising that the «anarchy of competences», the conflicts over competence and power, or bureaucratic in-fighting, which was so characteristic of the Nazi regime, was soon in evidence in this area, too. Although officially the «Reich's office for Spatial Organization» was responsible for this field of research, its significance was soon attenuated both in regard to its own subordinates research organizations as well as vis a vis the new research and planning agencies created by Himmler, Rosenberg and the German Labor Front.

A particular theoretical model had already assumed considerable significance in the context of Nazi planning activities, that is the «central place theory».<sup>16</sup> This was soon in evidence in the endeavours of the various planning agencies responsible for the occupied East.

In 1940 Konrad Meyer summoned Walter Christaller, the founder of this theory, to his own Institute for Agricultural and Political Studies in Berlin, where he was to work within a research team including geographers, rural sociologists and landscape planners. In this contexts, Christaller researched the «cultural and market centers» of the Warthegau, and hence endeavoured to apply his theories to occupied Poland.

Significantly, Meyer simultaneously employed Christaller on the staff of the Main office for Planning and the soil, an agency within Himmler's Reich's Commissariat for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germandom.

Himmler had such a planning office, because Hitler had entrusted him with «the reorganization of ethnographic relations and the creation of settlement areas in the East». Himmler's planning agency was also responsible for the overall plan for *Lebensraum* in the occupied East, which became notorious later as the «General Plan of the East», *Generalplan Ost*. Here too, one encounters Christaller's theory of a hierarchy of places, referred to in this context as «settlement pearls», which appear in graduated zones of settlement. Academics of the staff of Meyer's planning office worked on the General Plan, making calculations concerning cost, available settlers, and the spatial transformation of the area concerned.

The *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit* in Cracow represented a model for German «cultural» and academic policy in the occupied East. The geography section of the IDO was initially concerned with purely descriptive studies of occupied Poland, including a Baedeker guide to the General Government.

Soon, however, they were also involved in planning questions. For example, studies of regional transport and market networks in the various districts of the General Government, studies which formed the basis for transport and economic planning with military and logistical effects.

Further institutions were founded at the Reich University of Posen, where they had a Department of Geography, a chair for «Ethnic studies, Frontier and Ethnic Germandom» and a Geographical Research office of the Warthegau, which was involved with the germanisation and settlement of the Warthegau.

A further institution was founded in the occupied USSR: the institute for Geographical Studies in Kiev, which was concerned with economic and regional geographic studies of the Ukraine. As the war was going on, numerous geographers were involved in the newly created military-geographical agencies: Mil-Geo and Mar-Geo. From 1943 onwards there was also a specialist for geographical research in the Reich Research Council with various field study groups and research units.

## **5. What happened in 1945? Nazi Geographers employed by American Agencies**

A subdivision of the office of Military Government for Germany (OMGUS) took over the old «*Abteilung für Landeskunde*», division for geographical studies of the «*Reichsamt für Landesaufnahme*», the Reich's office for land studies,<sup>17</sup> which was led by one of the most prominent geographers during the Third Reich, Emil Meynen. He was the leader of the «Ethnic Germandom Research Units» in Berlin and involved in the whole *Lebensraum* research after 1939.

At the end of June 1945 the «*Abteilung für Landeskunde*», division for geographical stu-

dies, was brought to a little town Scheinfeld by the American military geographers Lieutenants Thomas R. Smith and Loyld. D. Black.<sup>18</sup>

Surprisingly, the American administration needed regional and topographical information for the division of Germany. Nevertheless, the Americans had during the Second World War one of the most important agencies for regional information, the Office for Strategic Services, the O.S.S., where in a so-called Research and Analysis (R&A) Branch geographers and social scientists worked together.<sup>19</sup> From 1941 to 1945 there were over 3.000 original maps produced, mostly on Europe as well as hundreds of regional studies. Therefore, in principle, there was no need to employ German geographers for the production of maps, charts, landscape and vegetation maps as well as «*Kreislandeskunden*», the geographical description of administrative units.

The American officer Black wrote later:

«The Abteilung für Landeskunde... represents the greatest actual and potential force in German geography today. It was re-established financially in December 1945, with a mandate to initiate and coordinate geographical research in Germany and has now been organized into eleven subdivisions, each responsible for a certain part of the program.»<sup>20</sup>

For the British officials, the whole story was highly dubious. Therefore the E.P.E.S came in August 1946 to Scheinfeld and imprisoned Meynen and his staff. They were brought together with the staff of Albert Speer, the *Stab Osenberg* (founder of the *Wehrforschungsgemeinschaft*) and parts of I.G. Farben officials to a camp, which was the castle Kranzberg, where they were interviewed first. This procedure was called the «operation Dustbin».

Meynen and his staff were interrogated by the British Major Tilley and forced to write «homeworks» on their work during National Socialism. One of them a report on their Eastern research, entitled «Der Drang nach Osten» with over 300 pages.<sup>21</sup> This manuscript, a team work by seven geographers, was a white wash paper on their research for the Lebensraum policy in the Third Reich.

## 6. Epilogue

The American agencies helped to reestablish the «Abteilung für Landeskunde» in 1945, a research unit, which was involved in the Lebensraum policy. Its leader, Emil Meynen, was at the same time (1941-1945) the head of another *Volkstums*-organisations connected with the realization of the *Lebensraum* ideology.

The Scheinfeld office was the first step towards an institution of the Federal Republic of Germany: the «*Bundesforschungsanstalt für Landeskunde und Raumordnung*»<sup>22</sup> led by Emil Meynen for a long time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Smith 1986.  
<sup>2</sup> Prigge 1986, 99.

- <sup>3</sup> See Smith 1986, 212.
- <sup>4</sup> See Burleigh 1988, Rössler 1990 and Smith 1986.
- <sup>5</sup> Flohr 1942, 393-404.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> See Rössler/Sandner 1991
- <sup>8</sup> Schrepfer 1942
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> My thesis is, that geopolitics was much more important for the creation of the Nazi imperialist ideology during the Weimar Republic than after 1933. Haushofer did not have that influence during the Third Reich, which especially American scholars thought he had.
- <sup>11</sup> See Rössler 1990 for geography and the parallel study by Burleigh 1988 on historians.
- <sup>12</sup> The frontiers were created by American and French geographers. The Americans hired a ship with 30 geographers under the leadership of the very influential Isaiah Bowman and drew the maps for the Paris peace conference. From the French side it was Emanuel de Martonne and his team.
- <sup>13</sup> Troll 1947, 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Germany in 1937.
- <sup>15</sup> Hesse, 1944, 89.
- <sup>16</sup> See Rössler 1989.
- <sup>17</sup> The Abteilung für Landeskunde was founded in April 1941, when especially topographical material for the occupation of the East was needed. See Rössler 1990, 154.
- <sup>18</sup> See Böhm 1991, 309.
- <sup>19</sup> See Rössler 1991 (in preparation).
- <sup>20</sup> Black 1947, 148.
- <sup>21</sup> Public Record Office London.
- <sup>22</sup> On the whole story see Rössler 1987.

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