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Lebensraum: Geography, Geopolitics, and The Third Reich

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## I. Introduction

To quote a remark once made by Sir Thomas Holdich, "The cost of geographical ignorance is immeasurable." History has shown that geographical ignorance in the twentieth century is a crime, and the bill is paid for not with dollars but with tears and with the life blood of youth on battlefields all over the world.

It is the author's purpose in this paper to examine the importance of understanding geography in connection with international relations. An attempt will be made to discuss the basic elements of political geography and geopolitics as well as the relationship between the two. The political geography of Germany after World War II will be examined as will the ideas of the German Geopolitik. An attempt will be made to relate these things to the policies of the Third Reich. The idea of Lebensraum, or living space, will be discussed as a motive for the territorial expansion of Germany. The contributions of Haushofer, Kjellen, Ratzel, Mackinder, and Hitler shall be included. The paper is limited in scope to a discussion of geopolitics in Germany; no mention is made of the geopolitics of Russia, England, and America.

## II. Historical Development

Since the conception of the first state there has been a direct relationship between man's practical and military maneuvers on the one hand and the factors of geography favoring or handicapping him on the other. "Geography" comes from a Greek word meaning literally "description of the earth." But geography is concerned with man as well as the earth alone, and with relationships and analysis as well as with description. The geographer analyzes the physical world and examines relations between places in order to throw light on the pattern and nature of human society. He investigates the interrelationship which exists between man and his physical environment. He examines regional differences, attempts to account for them, picks out regional patterns, and tries to draw regional lines and to discern regional relationships. The geographer concentrates this study of the earth and its spatial framework, or the pattern of distribution of things on the earth's surface, toward a better understanding of the human world. He sets man in the framework of the earth which he inhabits.

The recognition of the geographical factor in history and politics has its roots deep in the historical past. Greeks such as Herodotus, Plato, and Strabo raised questions concerning the interaction between the society and the geography of an area. Plato was intrigued by the relationship

of a state to its area. Aristotle was interested in the state and its physical environment. Among the Romans, Julius Caesar stands out for his early contributions. In his writing of Gallic Wars he combines political geography and history which indicates his recognition of the limitations imposed by the natural environment upon his conquests. The cognizance of the importance of the geographic factor is often cited as the reason for Caesar's successful expansion of the Roman state. Caesar never went beyond the limits imposed by geography but conquered a compact area bounded by strong frontiers. While Alexander was stopped just within the gateway to India and Napoleon was starved out at Moscow because they overlooked the geographic factor of space (long lines of supply) in their attempts to conquer the world, Caesar succeeded by retreating of his own will from those areas where geography seemed to indicate that such a cause was best.<sup>1</sup>

It was the Germans many years later who first recognized political geography as a separate discipline. It was Immanuel Kant during the eighteenth century who won the title "father of political geography." Kant's ideas found few adherents outside of Central Europe and Germany. However, among his countrymen there arose a number of followers whose contributions are noteworthy in one way or another. Among these were

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<sup>1</sup>Lucille, Carlson, Geography and World Politics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), p. 13.

Friedrich List, Karl Ritter, Alexander Von Nietzsche, and Friedrich Ratzel. Ratzel published the first methodical treatise on political geography and so became the actual originator of that branch of the discipline. The study of political geography is concerned with the interaction of geographical area and political process; it is the study of the spatial distribution and space relations of political process. Its attention centers on the part of the earth occupied by a given political system, subsystem, or systems.

As a part of geography, then, political geography deals with man's relationship to the earth, encompassing aspects of such physical sciences as the studies of climate, landforms, and soils. At the level of the state, political geography describes and analyzes the physical aspects of the area, the degree of political homogeneity of the state, and the state's external relations. Political geography is related to the broad field of power politics, and a few have concentrated on this aspect in terms of the national self-interest of a particular state.

### III. Political Geography Versus Geopolitics

The most extreme exponents of power politics were the followers of the German school of geopolitics who perverted political geography into a tool of Nazi policy. In the words of Karl Haushofer, "Political geography views the state from the standpoint of space, while geopolitics views space from

the standpoint of the state."<sup>2</sup> In other words political geography is a descriptive and analytical science dealing with spatial relations, boundaries, resources, and other aspects of the political area. Geopolitics treats the same general subject material but approaches it from the point of view of national self-interest. "Geopolitik," according to Haushofer, "is a dynamic science. Political geography is static and descriptive; it describes and explains a condition. Geopolitik probes the dynamics of world political change; it vivifies space."<sup>3</sup> A definition of geopolitics worked out by the editors of Zeitschrift fuer Geopolitik may be said to include the views of both Kjellen and Haushofer, who were so important in its development. "Geopolitik is the science dealing with the dependence of political events upon the soil. It is based upon the broad foundations of geography, especially political geography, which is the doctrine of political organisms of space and their structure...Geopolitik aims to furnish the armature for political action and guidance in political life...Geopolitik must come to be the geographical conscience of the state."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>G. Etzel Percy, World Political Geography (New York: McGraw Hill Co., 1962), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Strausz-Hupe, Geopolitics (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1942), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup>Lucille Carlson, Geography and World Politics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), p. 16.

Richard Hartshorne, an American geographer, has concluded that, "geopolitics represented simply the application of the knowledge and techniques of political geography to the problems of international relations."<sup>5</sup> According to the English geographer Geoffrey Martin,

Geopolitics may be regarded as a branch of political science which borrows its materials and techniques from political geography; it may be regarded as the discipline which popularized and helped systematize political geography; it may be regarded as a political instrument of the state. The differing natures of political geography may be attributed to a difference in kind---but geopolitics is not political geography; neither is political geography geopolitics.<sup>6</sup>

Ladis Kristof claims it is difficult to distinguish between political geography and geopolitics. He says,

The only real difference between political geography and geopolitics is in emphasis---in the focus of attention. Political geography tends to focus... on the geographical phenomena; it gives political interpretation and studies the political aspects of geographical phenomena. Geopolitics...tends to give geographical interpretation and study the geographical aspects of these phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most concise definition of Geopolitik comes Haushofer's disciple Otto Maull:

Geopolitik concerns itself with the state, not as a static concept, but as a living being. Geopolitik investigates the state primarily in relation to its environment---its space---and attempts to solve all problems resulting from spatial relationships...Geopolitik is concerned with the spatial

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<sup>5</sup>Preston James and Clarence Jones, American Geography: Inventory and Prospect (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1954), p. 172.

<sup>6</sup>G.J. Martin, "Political Geography and Geopolitics," Journal of Geography, 58:441-444, December, 1959.

<sup>7</sup>Norman Pounds, Political Geography (New York: McGraw Hill Co, 1963), p. 410.

requirements of a state while political geography examines only its space conditions. In putting geography at the service of space---conscious politics, Geopolitik devotes itself to questions of the future. Are the space needs of a state met? If not, how can they be brought into accord with geographical conditions? In what direction should any change be made? The extent to which these questions are answered determines a state's national and economic structure and influences its foreign relations...Geopolitik...is a discipline that weighs and evaluates a given situation and by its conclusions seeks to guide practical politics.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Political Geography of Germany

Now that a basic idea has been established as to what political geography and geopolitics are concerned with and how they differ, the concepts must be related to post World War I Germany. First of all, Germany is located in north central Europe with borders on the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. Germany is also bordered by the following countries: Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands. East Prussia was separated from the major land area of Germany by the Polish Corridor and was bordered by Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea. Germany has had an advantage by her position as transitland between east and west, and north and south. She has been disadvantaged because there is no convergence of streams upon a single port, no natural focus of national life. The harbors on the Baltic Sea coast are closed by ice for a part of each year while the northwest coast has a

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<sup>8</sup>Norman Pounds, Political Geography (New York: McGraw Hill Co., 1963), p. 408.

high enough mean temperature to keep the harbors open the year around.

Because Germany's heavy industries, agricultural population, and centers of coal production are located close to the frontier, Germany provided herself with two advantages. These were an excellent network of railroads upon her frontier to facilitate troop movements and a highly organized military establishment to defend the frontiers. It has been said of Germany that: In war she may be ringed about by enemies, but in peace she is ringed about by customers.<sup>9</sup>

Germany after World War I had a population of sixty-three million disposed over a territory of only 181 thousand square miles in extent, a density of nearly 350 people per square mile.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the defeat in the war, Germany had lost territory to France, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, and Czechoslovakia (See Figure 1). This amounted to 27,996 square miles of territory with a population of 7,188,755.<sup>11</sup> Included in this territory were valuable deposits of coal, iron ore, and potash as well as productive agricultural land. All told Germany lost 12.4 percent of her former area, about twelve percent of her population, from twelve to fifteen percent of her agricultural production,

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<sup>9</sup>Isaiah Bowman, The New World (New York: World Book Co., 1929), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 10.



Figure 1. Changes in the boundaries of Germany as a result of World War I.

ten percent of her manufacturing, and 74 percent of her iron ore production.<sup>12</sup> It is quite evident that World War I had a great effect on the political geography of Germany.

#### V. Haushofer and Ideas that Influenced Him:

##### Ratzel, Kjellen, and the Japanese

One cannot appreciate the objectives and influence of German geopolitics without understanding something of the career of Karl Haushofer, who gave it the form and substance as it is known today. Haushofer did not invent the name geopolitics, nor did he contribute any of the fundamental studies upon which it is based. Rather, he has been the persistent protagonist of geopolitics. His avowed primary objective was its popularization, through education, among both youthful and adult Germans. In these efforts he was so successful that the world has come to associate geopolitics almost exclusively with his name.<sup>13</sup>

Karl Haushofer was a German geographer and soldier of the early twentieth century. He had been sent to Japan by the German General Staff in 1908 to be a military observer. From this visit he acquired a first-hand knowledge of the Far East and the Pacific Ocean. Haushofer taught geography at Munich prior to World War I. During the war he rose to the rank of major general in the German army. Following the armistice he

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.11.

<sup>13</sup>Derwent Whittlesey, German Strategy of World Conquest (New York: Farrer Rinehart, Inc., 1942), p. 70-71.

returned to Munich to teach political geography and military science. Haushofer was a learned man; he had received his doctorate summa cum laude from the University of Munich. He also spoke six foreign languages including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian.

Haushofer borrowed widely from other writers in forming his concepts. The ideas of Friedrich List and Friedrich Ratzel must be examined briefly before the full meaning of Haushofer's geopolitics and the geopolitical thinking and actions of Nazi Germany can be understood. List urged the expansion of Germany through a customs union reaching from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic, in the 1840's. Though he did not coin the word Lebensraum, he originated the theory of living space. Ratzel was influenced by Darwin's Theory and extended those ideas to political geography. His theories carried political geography to a point where geopolitics could materialize.<sup>14</sup> He viewed the state as comparable to an organism with the biological necessity of growth, that growth to take place, if necessary, by force. Haushofer drew heavily from Ratzel in formulating his concepts of German Geopolitik. He considered Ratzel's statement, "a large space maintains life," as the state-biological rule of life put into classic form.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Lucille Carlson, Geography and World Politics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

\*Haushofer was also influenced by the Swedish scholar, Rudolf Kjellen, who advanced a step beyond Ratzel's thinking. Kjellen was professor of history and government at Upsala and later at Goteborg University. He turned from the study of history and government to geography for deeper insight into world problems. \*Kjellen envisioned the state not only as a living organism, but also as a conscious being equipped with moral-intellectual capacities. He was the first writer to use the term geopolitics which he defined as the natural environment of the state. Kjellen also included the idea of folk. Territory and space are fortified by mysticism, by inclusion of the folk-concept, which, because of its migrant connotation, can be made to cover vast and new territories.<sup>16/</sup> Wherever the folk is found, the parent state may and should follow. Expansion is thusly blessed as a social duty of the state. Obviously National Socialism welcomed such scientific benediction of racial imperialism and invoked the dogma in order to "rescue" Germans and alleged German interests first in Austria, then in the Sudetenland and throughout Central Europe.<sup>17</sup> Kjellen forecast that several great superstates would rise in Europe, Africa, and Asia and that Germany would be that state in Europe.

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<sup>16</sup>Hans Weigert and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Compass of the World (New York: MacMillan Co., 1945), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

Karl Haushofer was the intellectual heir of Kjellen upon the death of that scholar in 1922. In life they had collaborated on their geopolitical ideas, and upon Kjellen's death, Haushofer took over many of his concepts, including his terminology.

Another contribution to Haushofer's cause comes from Japan. When Haushofer had been in Japan as a military observer, he was impressed by the rare national unity where the Japanese was a faithful subject to his god-like emperor, and where the geopolitical instinct of the nation gave the government a free hand. He listened to the claims of the Japanese propagandists that their people required more space and that the mere fact that the population was growing fast justified the taking of more land. Haushofer went on from there adding his own ideas and extracting from a few others, notably Sir Halford Mackinder.

#### VI. Mackinder's Theory

\*Mackinder expounded one famous geopolitical interpretation derived mainly from the physical layout of lands and seas. The underlying premise of such an interpretation is that the configuration of lands and seas provides opportunities and sets limits within which the political relations have evolved and will continue to evolve. Mackinder had the best university education attainable in the Britain of his day. He was trained in both science and in history.

He had a gift for epigrammatic expression, and he presented bold and imaginative generalizations.<sup>18</sup> One finds an element of propaganda in Mackinder as he spoke from the perspective of a successful but threatened imperial system. He sought in geography and in history the ingredients of a national policy for preserving Britain's world position. Mackinder emphasized the military values of space and the strategic principles to be derived from the layout of lands and seas. He used history to buttress his geographical arguments, but for Mackinder the study of history was purely a means, never an end in itself. His main interest was the future. \*He seemed to have regarded military force as the decisive instrument of statecraft. \*He stressed the relativity of power in space and through time. \*Mackinder drew a geopolitical blueprint of the future which for better or for worse still grips the imagination of men in many lands.

Mackinder's geopolitical theorizing seems to have gone through two stages. In the first which extended from the early 1900's until the end of World War I, his main concept was the rapid growth and aggressive tendencies of the German Empire of Wilhelm II. Mackinder first expressed his theory in an address to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904 entitled "The Geographical Pivot of History." His best known book, Democratic Ideals and Reality, originated

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<sup>18</sup> Harold and Margaret Sprout, Foundations of International Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Von Nostrand Co., 1966), p. 319.

as a tract for the peace conference ending World War I in 1919. The second phase extended from the 1920's until his death in 1946. During this period his concern shifted gradually to the developing potential of the Soviet Union.

Mackinder noted that three-fourths of the earth's surface is water while of the remaining land quarter two-thirds is occupied by the continents of Eurasia and Africa. He further noticed that seven-eighths of the world's population dwells on the Eurasian-African land mass.<sup>19</sup> He reasoned that if one power could gain control of this land mass, which he called the world island, it would be in a position to conquer the world (See figures 2-4). Control over the Eurasian-African land mass could be achieved only by a power occupying the protected interior lowlands of Eurasia, stretching from the Baltic-Black Sea isthmus 2500 miles eastward to the Yenisey, and from the Arctic Ocean south to the mountain barriers which extend from Turkey to Mongolia. Here lies an enormous plains area of about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  million square miles with great economic potential in terms of natural resources. The state occupying this area that Mackinder designated as the pivot area and later as the heartland would be virtually invulnerable to attack, except from the west, and would in turn be able to utilize its resources for the development of a strong agricultural-industrial power. With this

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<sup>19</sup>Lewis Alexander, World Political Patterns (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1957), p. 8.

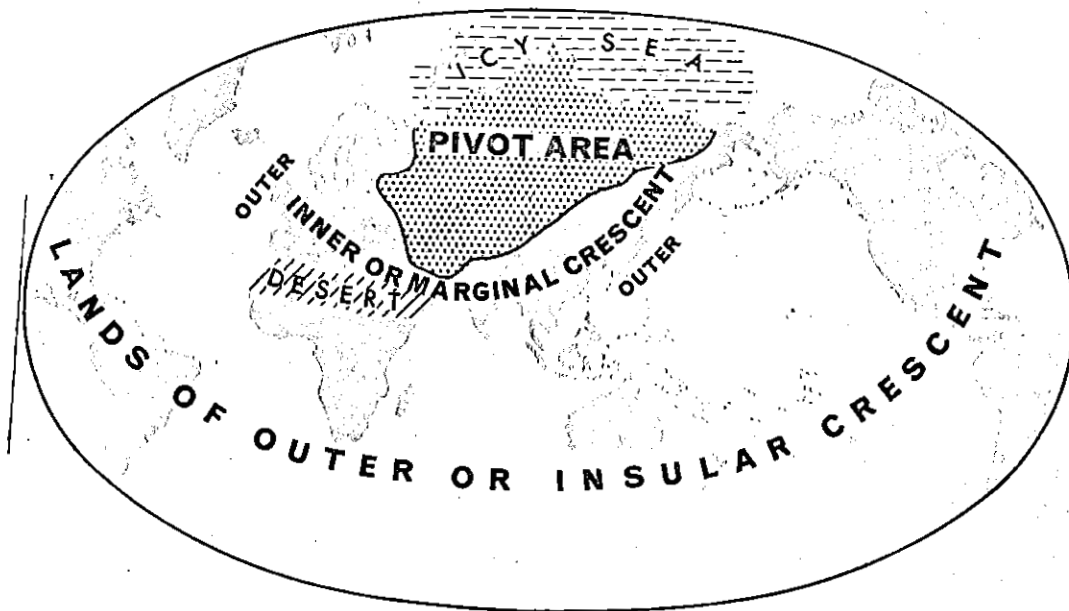


Figure 2. Mackinder's pivot area, based on his map of 1904.